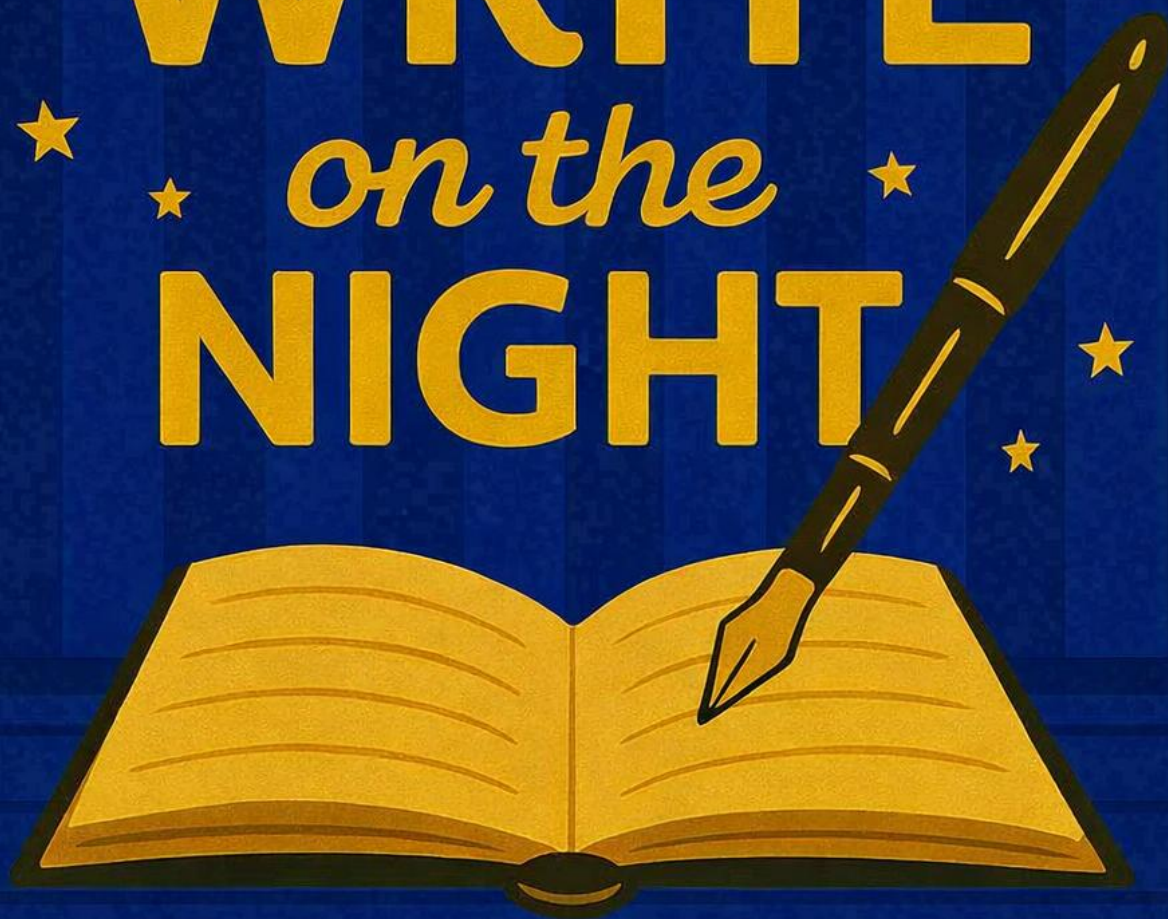


IT'LL BE ALL WRITE

★ *on the* ★
NIGHT



A selection of prose and
poetry from the Arnold u3a
Creative Writing group

Edited by the group

It'll be All Write on the Night

A selection of prose and poetry from the
Creative Writing group at Arnold u3a

Edited by the group members

First published in the UK by Arnold u3a Creative Writing Group

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Introduction

Welcome, everybody, to our new anthology of writing. We are a u3a creative writing group from Arnold in Nottingham and we have been meeting for quite a few years now. We love meeting every two weeks to share our ideas and discuss each other's work and I am always impressed with the warmth and positivity of our group. This is our first anthology and we are well chuffed with it. It contains a huge variety of writing: humorous poems, moving stories, comic stories, lively memoirs and inspiring poetry. We hope you enjoy it!

Mike Wareham

Sandra Cunningham

I enjoyed writing even when I was young. I loved writing letters, then emails. Ideas just pop into my head and I feel I have to write them down

Magnolias

April is the cruellest month, so writers say,
Blustery winds and squally showers,
can devastate all your flowers,
Swirling blooms, land on grey wet ground,
When underfoot they make a squelching sound.

Despite your blooming beautiful glory,
Yours can be a short sad story,
Your praying petals point to the sun,
Is it in fear of what might come?

I also pray, the sun will make you stronger,
so I can see you longer,
I'll try not to be sentimental,
if blooms don't reach their full potential.

I might see your petals crushed, later,
When the wind's been hushed,
I'll look up,
it will seem like you were never really there.

Magic in a Blue Bottle

A little bit of fantasy came in
a blue bottle with a pretty silver top,
She dabbed behind earing- less ears,
she imagined glamour and riches,
but lived with poverty and tears.
'Exciting things happen in an Evening in Paris'
So the perfume promised.
She waited with a stout and ciggie,
propped up against the bar,
She fantasised she was Joan Crawford her favourite movie star.

'In never had it so good Britain',
that left her kids and her sen behind,
not much money for the lecky, or money for the gas.
But she kept them and her sen, clean and tidy,
she was a clever lass,
with her good looks and imagination,
who needs lots of cash?
Her mate was late and she was in a state, she was about to leave
But,
'Exciting things happen in an 'Evening in Paris'!

In walked a handsome stranger,
looking rather dapper
With slick back Brylcreamed hair,
complete with a Clark Gable tache,
And a well-earned Wad of cash.
'The Perfume kept its promise'
it weaved its magic spell!
They looked across to each other
and immediately they fell!
'Exciting things happen in a 'Evening in Paris

Barbara Eustace

I picked up creative writing when I retired, and though having in the past mostly written short stories, I've found that with this group I've written more memoir and to my surprise, poetry.

Swift reflects a time when my then teenage son communicated in grunts until a chance encounter prompted him to actually talk.

Jelly Belly was inspired by the amount of blubber that has gathered round my waist and refused to move following the birth of my two rather large sons.

I have quite a lot of lavender in my front garden, and at its height, it's covered in bees which sometimes get overwhelmed, inspiring **FuzzBuzz**.

I don't smoke, I rarely drink, but I do have a weakness for **Chocolat**, particularly a certain brand.

A prompt for writing a story about who you met in the jungle inspired **The Jungle**.

Swift

'It fell', says my silent son,
'From the loft when I opened it.
I've put it in a box.'
He searches my eyes
for answers.

The few scant inches of your life tremble
in my hand. 'What can we do?'
'Let's find out together.'
And together we search.

Each wing we gently tease, examine.
Then from the highest part of the garden,
I open my hands, draw them down fast
so you feel the air.
You understand, spread your wings and escape
into your element.
You swoop away, swoop back,
swoop low overhead with your thanks
to us both.

Tomorrow like you, the voice
will be a memory,
gone as swiftly
as you, but today
you persuaded my son to speak.

Jelly Belly

This jelly belly is my physiology
I make no excuse, I make no apology
It is what it is, this excess topography

It's what my man holds, what he gets a good purchase on
If he should decide that he wants to carry on
If I should comply and decide that I'll succumb

It's where our seeds joined where they were implanted,
Where over nine months I grew and expanded,
Where my belly really jellied as my body adapted

And now it's a place that's used as a cushion,
Where each of the cats makes it their mission
To see off the others and take sole possession.

Now these extra inches are quite irreparable
Though ripples and folds some find inspirational.
Are they things of beauty? That is debatable.

Chocolat

I never meant for it to happen.
Our eyes connected
and I was lost.
You knew exactly what you were doing.
You followed me home,
I secreted you upstairs from prying eyes,
and when I could no longer resist,
when the anticipation had got too much,
I shut the door wanting you to myself.
I stripped you naked,
Looked on your wonderful form,
Kissed you,
Delighting in that first touch.
My tongue reached out,
welcomed you,
I was filled with sensory overload,
In heaven as you fed my desire, my need.
I make it last for as long as possible,
but all too soon it's over.
You nuzzle round my hips,
settle there.
And now you're part of me,
we are one.

The Jungle

I met a guy called Adam in the jungle. Fit looking, just not much upstairs. He called his place a garden, but it was so overgrown. Basically, he couldn't be bothered to tidy it up; too busy being macho and killing things.

'A guy's got to eat,' he'd say.

I pointed out I wasn't going to hang around if that's what it was going to be like. 'Look, get your act together, and you might get a reward.'

'What sort of reward?'

I showed him, and he decided he really liked that. He still ran round killing things, a girl's got to eat too, but time was spent getting the place into shape.

A couple of kids later and you wouldn't have recognised the place. So much more ordered, so much good fruit to be had. Except for one tree.

'God says we cannot eat from that tree,' he said.

God was our landlord, but he never seemed to eat the fruit himself, so one day, I gave Adam just one apple which he ate with relish. Somehow God found out and we were evicted.

'After all the work I've done around the place as well.'

Before we left, there was just time to grab some leaves. 'Here, cover yourself up. It's cold out there.'

FuzzBuzz

Lavender legless you fell and
buzzed as limbs grasped the air
on the desert path.
Gently I take you in my hand where
you buzz as your fuzz tickles
my palm and I return you to
the oasis of blossom where
your woozy form can rest until
you're ready for one more lavender shot.

Sylvia Hale

I was born and grew up in a small industrial town in West Yorkshire. After living in a few different English counties I eventually settled, with my family, in Nottingham in the 1970's.

Despite spending most of my working life dealing with various companies' accounts I spent the last six years in the Civil Service.

I love the freedom retirement brings, freedom to choose! I chose to join Arnold u3a's creative writing group to enable me to write my life story within the social and economic background I grew up in. The poverty after the war years amid the factories and mills of the north. However, I haven't reached my goal yet as during the sessions with Mike, our leader there are so many aspects of writing to aspire to and inspire me.

Most of the items within this anthology have been the result of our sessions in the group: a conversation, a group discussion, a piece of writing we have been asked to think about.

My piece about Men and Women's roles brought back childhood memories after a discussion of how times and attitudes have changed. Most importantly women's roles in society.

Enjoy

The Piano

Shall I ever master keyboard skills?
As my fingers trace the scales at speed.
Three notes, thumb under fourth note and still
Just for a moment, then back down I lead.

The dream of my heart is to master just one tune
forever engraved: now to bring it to life.
To capture a moment one evening in June
And so for perfection my best I will strive.

But slow as I am my fingers must race
I haven't much time, so more practice I need
The concert is near, I will soon see her face
Forever in time, now I'll play the lead.

To my daughter, the pianist who can't guess my plan
To surprise with music where she once began.

Love

How did my life begin without my love
Whose voice with angels high does nightly sing?
His face with craggy features interwove
My one in tune, my friend is now my king.

His love abounds, I love him with all my soul
Our eyes do lock, a simple gesture made.
The country meadow awaits our gentle stroll
The green grass folds to show where we did lie.

His constant love was not just mine alone
Before me he had a different way of living
With someone who showed a deviant way and tone.
With someone who was cruel and unforgiving.

My days once spent in lonely bouts of fog
Now revolve around my lovely rescue dog.

A letter to my daughter

While I was collecting clothes from your bedroom for washing I accidentally came across your favourite cuddly ear bitten rabbit. He was Wobby the Wabbit in your early days until you got the hang of R then he became Robbie. Robbie Rabbit. So many memories. Things you are not aware of yet, but maybe in time you will become curious about and willing to be part of a conversation we must have. I am sitting here on your bed, holding Robbie at arm's length. Did you always know how special he was, I wonder, looking at him. He came with you, all wrapped up in his own little blanket, which I have always kept, it is still in the airing cupboard somewhere.

You know your gran has dementia and didn't mean to upset you the other day when she talked about your early beginnings. Or did she? I know she has always been a mischief maker, gossiping about people and passing on juicy scraps of gossip she has misheard because of her poor hearing. She was always too vain to seek help or admit she needed a hearing aid. Oh I love you so much, please don't withdraw and distance yourself. I know at sixteen you think you are all grown up, but I know you are hurting and you won't let me comfort you.

Do you remember how you used to tell Robbie all your troubles and as I had usually overheard, used Robbie to put your mind at rest or advise what to do when the boys at school teased you about the braces on your teeth, or when your best friend fell out with you.

You have known for a good few years that we adopted you. Oh how we longed for a child but one never came along so we decided to find a baby to adopt. And we found you, our precious little daughter. So tiny and vulnerable, you needed all the love and attention I could give. My mum was dead against it, her favourite saying at the time was, 'If God meant you to have children then he would have provided them for you.'

What time is it? You must be having lunch with your school mates about now. I wonder if you are telling them about our argument. Am I being portrayed as the baddie as in your teenage mind I must be. Why haven't I told you the truth? What is the truth? Your gran's idea of the truth as she saw it even then or what actually happened?

Did mum want to hurt you, when she told you you came from the body of a sex worker describing in full detail your birth mum's profession. I don't want to believe she would deliberately say those things to hurt you as I always thought she cared deeply about you. But then I have always excused her sadistic side. Your dad has always been able to see through her smiley smiley face, but I have always said 'You don't know her like I do'

But I suppose I always knew she wasn't a very nice person, right from being small, when she would try and belittle your granddad in front of his family. And sit there laughing when he tried to smooth things over.

Why did you storm off to your room when I tried to sit down and talk to you last night? You came in full of arguments and recriminations, after seeing your gran, but you know I can't face those kinds of confrontations. I know you were hurting and confused and I was ready to talk everything through with you if you had just calmed down. I have been ready for quite a while now as I knew it would have to be faced. Even when I brought a drink up for you, you refused to answer the door.

Will you be able to understand when I do manage to explain the situation your birth mother was in?

She was the same age as you are now when she gave birth to you.

I wonder if that's why your gran said what she did. I know you are a little headstrong but you do have a good sense about you but your circumstances are totally different from the poor girl who gave birth to you. I wonder if it was because you had been talking about

that boy, what's his name, Kevin, yes that's the one who has been in your conversation lately. Your mother wasn't a prostitute; she just found herself in a situation where she couldn't see any other way. Or she was talked into thinking there was no other way, more likely.

Oh I wish you came home for your lunch. Do you remember, when you first started your high school you always came home as it is walking distance. We had some lovely lunches together, you chatting away about your new friends and all the new things you were enjoying learning. Oh such Happy times. But gradually you found the confidence to mix with your new friends and hang out with them over lunchtime.

I do often wonder what became of that poor girl who gave birth to you, did she find happiness in her new life abroad? I do hope so, but I wish I could tell her how her daughter is, how bright and loving you are. Well most of the time. Oh dear, how I am I going to tackle this.

Do I come straight out with it and say that coming back from holiday her family were involved in an awful road accident? Both her parents died but she was flung clear of the wreckage and although badly injured, survived. She was fifteen years old.

Or do I start off by saying say that both her parents died and she was left on her own at fifteen. No close relatives as both her parents were only children so she had to fend for herself. Yes, I could start off by saying something like that, then that would encourage questions. Good idea. Her foster parents were kind but as they had other children in their care it didn't work out as she needed a lot of attention. If I am a bit sketchy then you will, hopefully, want to know more and it should become more of a conversation. Your dad should be here, so he will confirm everything I am saying.

Right, so that's a start.

The next bit is a bit tricky, but I must be honest and not cover anything up.

When she left school just before her sixteenth birthday she applied for and got a job in an office, but from day one floundered as she had had no training and they expected her to have some knowledge of an accounting system. I think she had basically lied on her application form and at the interview as she desperately needed a job as she had to pay rent on the bed sit she had just moved into.

I do hope you don't think she was a bad person. I have to be honest but I need to be sympathetic without condoning what she did. Oh, I always knew it wouldn't be easy, so I need to stay calm even if you start getting argumentative

I've lost my train of thought Robbie, what happened when she lost her job? Oh, yes, she met up with some of her old school friends and one of the boys told her of this modelling-agency which she was sure to get a job with.

Which she did and everything was going okay to begin with. After about three months the work changed, slightly at first, a sexy pose, a dipped blouse to expose a little more flesh, a little more leg on show. Then came the first full nude, which she wasn't happy about but they said it was the only work they could offer her. Then the sex scenes. She got paid good money and she had her rent to pay. She got pregnant by her boss and he sacked her. She wasn't any good for the business. One of her friends had moved to Spain and urged her to join her to work in the same bar, not knowing she was pregnant. She decided to do that and put her baby up for adoption and that's how we came to giving you a home you could feel safe in and loved.

Now Robbie, it's nearly time so let's put the kettle on and wait for the door to open to welcome my beloved daughter home.

Religion and me

What is religion to me, how do I see it, what does it mean?
It is the physical, the churches, the priests, the vicars and such.
The books, the creeds, the doctrines and things to be seen.
The pews and the icons, the things one can touch.

What is religion to me, how do I see it, what does it mean?
It is the people who look so devout, pious and reverent,
who go to church once a week, for show and to be seen
within the sacred walls of a religious scene well meant.

If you ask what faith is to me, my reply would different be.
Faith is what you feel, a belief, an instinct inside.
It cannot be touched, it's an ever present inner feel
of freedom, of wonder, of an ever present eternal guide.

Faith is always with you: not just for Sunday's to seek,
but all days, the good, the bad and the ones in between.
Faith helps one go on when things are so bleak.
When everything is wrong and times seem so mean.

What is religion to me, how do I see it, what does it mean?
The dictionary defines it as the meaning of faith
all coupled together, and that's what folks see.
But religion is used to split and separate by states
who don't understand the meaning of faith.
They use it for wars, for power and control
in the name of religion they grasp and spread hate.

So religion and faith are to me separate creeds.
Religion is physical, to be seen as you will.
For good or for evil depends what you read.
But Faith is personal, quiet and still.

Men and Women's roles in the early 20th century

I was born in 1942 into a working - class family in a small industrial town in the West Riding of Yorkshire. My dad was unskilled which meant he worked all his life in factories or mills although he did end his working life in a factory office at Dean Clough, the largest carpet manufacturer in the world at that time. My mum did not go out to work, her job was to look after the home and family. Unless they were in the fortunate position to have help in the home it was virtually impossible for women to spend time out of the house working. There were very few household appliances we take for granted today.

For example:-

Monday was wash day. We had a gas boiler in the corner of the kitchen which would be lit before we went to school. There were six of us. Mum, dad my three brothers and me, the only daughter. All the washing was done in this boiler. Washed, wrung and emptied to be re-filled for rinsing and wrung once again. This would be done at least twice for the amount of washing for a family of six. There was a small wringer at the back of the boiler, which was turned by hand. We did have a large mangle outside in the back yard for sheets etc. When I was young we did not have a fridge but we did have a cellar, which was cold. There were two rooms in the cellar, one for storage and keeping food cold and one for the coal for our coal fire.

Shopping was done on a daily basis, there was a family of six to feed, no supermarkets, no fridge or freezer, no car. There was a bank of local shops five minutes down the road where all daily needs could be bought. There was a Co-op a little further down the road, which mum used so she could collect the dividends, she saved these to buy our new clothes at Whitsuntide.

When we were in our early teens mum went out in the evening cleaning factory offices to earn a little money.

Money is and always has been power. Men were the breadwinners so they had the power. Girls and women were never consulted in decision making as they did not have any power. This was never questioned; it was a given. My dad bought a small plot of land, built garages and raised chickens on it. He charged rent for his garages, sold eggs and fattened up the chickens for Christmas and sold them. I don't think my mum had any say in this venture, she benefitted from it as we all did but I don't think for one moment my dad consulted her. He probably told her what he was intending and she went along with it. He did it all for his family. He was a kind caring man who was very family orientated.

When I went to work in an office in a small hosiery factory I was very shy. Therefore I was an easy target for the older men I encountered on the factory floor. We manufactured socks for Marks and Spencer and other large stores . As I worked in the knitting office one of my duties was to print tickets for all the orders and distribute them to the men working the knitting machines. The men worked shifts so there would be a turnover of men at two o'clock.

I can't remember now the comments and suggestive noises they made but their intention was to make this young naive office girl blush. Which I did profusely. It was sport to them, it was never meant nastily. I soon learned how to avoid the ones I felt went too far and started to answer back and banter with the others. In short I learned how to cope with the comments and innuendos, either by ignoring them, pretending I hadn't heard or giving back as good as I got.

As I started going out with friends, new coffee bars were opening up, with Juke boxes for entertainment. And so began the swinging sixties, when more opportunities opened doors for girls giving them choices the previous generation hadn't experienced.

John Heeson

I returned to writing after a break of fifty years only because Mike started the Creative Writing Group, having written nothing purely for leisure since leaving school.

The Villanelle poem is a lament for my home town of Batley in West Yorkshire, having lived in Nottingham for over forty years.

'I feel' was written as an exercise in reverse poetry, a poem that can be read forwards and backwards.

'Death of a clown' was inspired by the thought: 'If people have nightmares about clowns, what do clowns have nightmares about ?'

Reply to 'Things' (a poem by Fleur Adcock)

And I have done those things too, in my youth. Who hasn't? Embarrassing, humiliating things. Things which at the time seemed destined to obtain a hearty slap on the back, or elicit praise from one's peers, or conjure a round of 'for he's a jolly good fellow', but which instead brought only awkward silences, and the desperate longing for some sinkhole to open up beneath my feet and swallow me down, never to be seen again.

There have been things which lay dormant for decades, unrecognised, skulking around in the subconscious, waiting to pop up like a jack-in-a-box with a flippant 'how de do! – remember me?', or occasionally a savage 'Gotcha', like a bear trap in the woods. Things that trigger a sudden realisation that with hindsight, maybe my actions at the time may have been somewhat foolhardy and well deserving of an apology of sorts, but sadly it's all too late now.

There were things that used to make me blush and wince and squirm when recalled, even many years after the fact, so unspeakably gauche and unthinking were they, things well worthy of a visit to confession were I of a religious persuasion. Things with stories attached that no doubt some still dine out on, or regale strangers at parties with tales of 'I knew a bloke who....'.

I long ago made a mental list of these things and set them on the fire, thereby exorcising the bedside demons, commanding them to go and haunt elsewhere if a place could be found. Best not to dwell on these things and be thankful that they were conceived long before the age of social media, contenting myself with the notion that they live on solely in the memories of the ever-dwindling handful of people present.

You never know. Buy me a drink or two sometime and I may tell you of such things....

Villanelle

Drifting through this land where I played free
Echoes of friends I knew haunt every turn
The streets have names familiar to me

For forty years I've been an absentee
And every step I take on my return
The place that was my home I cannot see

My childhood in this town was so carefree
Now vanished classrooms, schools where I would learn
The streets have names familiar to me

And silent mills, where once was industry
Remembered views, I now fail to discern
The place that was my home I cannot see

A ghost ship on a dark satanic sea
My eyes begin to moisten, then they burn
The streets have names familiar to me

I'm grieving for a thing that used to be
A hazy, distant age for which I yearn
The streets have names familiar to me
The place that was my home I cannot see

Paradise lost

The town of my youth inhabited a long, straight valley, a couple of miles across, which had a dog leg at its eastern end. Atop this bend in the landscape sat an area optimistically named 'Mount Pleasant', its only redeeming feature being the views afforded of the whole town, and beyond, from a desolate, windswept football field perched on the valley's edge, high above the houses. From here as a child, you could contemplate pretty much the extent of your world.

Straight ahead, over the rooftops far below, in the valley bottom was my first house, one of row upon row of dark coloured brick back to backs, arranged in blocks of four, like dominoes waiting to be toppled. Just to the side, the allotments, full of forage most of the year, and the pale sandstone infant school with its large gable roof, barely a ten second sprint and a vault of the school wall for a nipper, once the nine o'clock handbell rang. Further on up the other side of the valley and the urbanisation abruptly gave way to rising green fields, which yellowed with wheat in the summer; watched over by the ruins of Howley Hall on top of the ridge, a country house which saw fighting in the civil war. It was inherited and abandoned by some toffs soon after, who presumably thought it beneath them to set foot in a place as common as Batley. Consequently, it was gradually demolished for them by the locals, likely to produce some of the grandest barns and outhouses for miles around. Just a couple of lonely weather-beaten stone walls barely ten feet high the only proof it ever existed.

Away to the left on top of the far side were the three schools: boys' grammar, boys' high school and girls' grammar, all in a line. The high school a monstrous, three storey, sixties behemoth dominating the skyline, visible from pretty much anywhere in the town. Closer on the left, nestled the huge biscuit factory, which effused wonderful, sweet smells of baking, day and night, probably the most welcoming thing about the town. To the right, you could look down on the huge railway viaduct and watch the occasional commuter train gradually pick up speed as it left the station and disappear round the valley bend, and further right, nestled in the bottom was the Variety Club, with its huge neon frontage and sparkles, looking like it had been wrenched from the Las Vegas strip by a tornado and unkindly deposited in the most incongruous place on planet earth. In its heyday it hosted well known stars, household names that you would see on telly at the Palladium or Royal Variety show - it was rumoured at one point they were negotiating to bring Elvis to the club. My abiding memory of it was one of nearly being knocked down, aged four, when I slipped my mother's hand and dashed across the busiest road in town to see the foundation stone being laid.

The whole vista was peppered with factories and mills, which if not satanic, were certainly dark from countless years of their associated chimneys' output, testament to a bygone age of wealth for some. The local beck which wound down the valley regularly ran shades of purple or bright green from waste dyes, easily disposed of from any number of cloth finishers with no thought for the environment in those days. I always thought it fitting Batley was the place where 'Shoddy' was invented, a type of recycled woollen cloth which made the town rich during the Napoleonic war, the word still mockingly proclaimed in dulled white paint writ large on the top of various establishments that had seen better times.

You could pinpoint houses of playmates and enemies. 'Tuppenny Cannon' (named after a firework), 'Chubb', 'Glass Eye Eddie', and gaze on proper Yorkshire placenames, 'Carlinghow' (no aitch), 'Hanging Heaton' (no aitches), 'Soothill' – anyone who pronounced it 'Soot Hill' immediately betraying themselves as being 'not from round here'. I could trace the route of my paper round, starting with the banks and shops on Commercial Street, they

always had the more serious and weightiest publications. With the bag quickly lightened, it was time to meander round the houses. Memorably there was one with the outside toilet splashed in blood red paint, which in the meagre glow of a cycle lamp on a dark winter's morning looked convincingly like a scene from a Hammer House of Horror film. I hated that one.

And there was danger everywhere you looked as a young lad. Disused quarries and railway tunnels, whole streets of derelict houses and mills awaiting demolition – many still with working machinery, no fences, no warning signs, just an invitation to come on in and have an adventure. The site of every scar earned, every stolen kiss, every window smashed, every telling off lay all before, just a finger-point away. The place was a shit hole, but as a playground for a young boy it was a paradise.

I went back to the football field a few years ago now. I was just passing through, having left the town in the early eighties, just to once again reconnect with the view of my youth, only to find an act of eco-vandalism which saddened my heart far more than any Sycamore Gap tree felling.

The whole hillside had been planted some years before with a plethora of trees, since matured, such that the only thing you could see from the football field now was a lush green canopy just a few feet away. The view of my youth lost forever.

Maybe one day before I die, I'll return with a chainsaw.

I Feel

(to be read forwards and backwards)

I feel young

Each new experience enhances my outlook which confirms

Life is for living and

You should find enjoyment in every day because

Time is precious and not to be wasted

And soon you realise all too late

In the blink of an eye things will change

As the years race by

Thoughts of the past give me comfort

They are all I have left and

My memories sustain me for

I feel old



Death of a Clown

Joey leapt out of bed, gasping heavily, his eyes wide open. The rocking of the trailer stirred his wife and she turned towards him.

‘What’s the matter love, did you have that nightmare again?’

He had been having the same dream on and off for months now, each time ending with an overwhelming feeling of being asphyxiated, before he was jolted awake.

‘Maybe it’s time to see someone about it’ she said, seemingly unconcerned, before turning over. ‘Yes, maybe I will’.

Joey had been a clown all his adult life, more than thirty years, having been born into a circus family. Carol, his wife for most of those years was a trapeze artist, a ‘swinger’ as they were jokingly called in the trade. They had been with Dangerfield’s circus for a while now and whilst the money wasn’t great, clowning was the only skill Joey had. He lay back on the bed and tried to get back to sleep.

The next day he was heading to the big top when Mr Dangerfield called Joey over. ‘Joey – this is Tyson, our latest recruit. I want you to take him under your wing and teach him everything about clowning’.

He eyed the grinning youth. He reminded him of himself years ago, before all the hotdogs and doughnuts had taken their toll – slim and athletic, not that that counted for much under a clown’s get up.

‘You done any theatre work before?’ sneered Joey ‘Because clowning is pure theatre!’.

‘We did a course at stage school’ the grinning youth replied.

‘Stage school’ he muttered to himself. ‘Come on...’

Days later, Joey peeked out of the curtain in the big top.

‘Looks like a decent crowd tonight, Tyson. Try not to be nervous, or they’ll pick up on that straight away., and just remember everything we rehearsed’. Tyson’s, ever present grin widened and he nodded.

The act was going well. Joey had completed the comedy car sketch and was taunting the audience with fake buckets of water. He had just bent double for a deep breath before miming a riotous laugh when Tyson unexpectedly hit him from behind in the face with two custard pies. Instantly he knew something was wrong. He had accidentally inhaled pie foam before many times, and a quick cough had always cleared his airway, but this time the foam was thicker, more cloying. The crowd laughed harder, completely unaware, believing it to be part of the act, as he struggled for breath and then collapsed. They were still laughing when the strongman ran into the ring, scooped him up and carried Joey off behind the curtain.

The inquest was held a couple of weeks later, returning a verdict of accidental death. It turned out Tyson had misunderstood the custard pie formula, making it up with ten times the gelatine that should have been in the mix, and in his eagerness to make a good impression, forgot the routine and just happened to catch Joey unawares. The funeral was well attended, with not just the troupe from Dangerfield’s circus, but acts from other travelling fairs as well. Joey had circus life in his blood and had been a master



of his trade, working for several establishments. Carol cut a slim figure by the graveside, all in black, head bowed, her blonde bob covered by a black veil.

After the coffin was lowered and the minister said his final words, the crowd began to disperse, heading off to the pub for the traditional wake. She stood motionless peering down into the grave as Tyson approached, still full of remorse.

'I'm really sorry Carol – it was just a stupid accident. I've never been good with numbers and stuff and I was just so excited with it being my first performance I forgot what we had rehearsed and just let Joey have the pies when he wasn't ready'.

Carol turned and took hold of his hands

'Don't blame yourself love. I guess it would be every clown's dream to go the way he did, with laughter ringing in his ears'.

She smiled a thin smile, then she leaned in close to Tyson and whispered 'Well done love, I'll be waiting for you back at the hotel.'

Cathy Parfitt

After a career in the Health Service, in retirement I've taken up several new activities, including Creative Writing with Arnold u3a.

As one of a large extended family I wanted to write about some episodes of family history, primarily for my grandchildren. However, as well as that, over the last four years we have written very varied pieces, some deeply personal.

The three pieces I have submitted reflect my experiences of travel, social history and family.

My Ageing Hands

My four-year-old granddaughter examined my hands intently
Seeing the wrinkled skin and prominent veins.
'Granny, you are old' was her pronouncement.

Knuckles now gnarled, hands well used
For so many activities, still supple, still active.
Cutting, creating, mending, soothing and so much more.

They too have been cut & scarred by injuries & surgery.
Fabrics cut, clothes & wedding dress made.
Educational dissection in the Anatomy room,

Skilled skin incisions for episiotomies, lifesaving Caesareans,
Careful suturing to minimise scarring and pain.
Threads cut for surgery, embroidery & mending.

Compassionate cutting of tiny toenails, and incising abscesses.
Cathartic pruning of plants, precise & anger releasing.

How many thousands of meals have these hands prepared,
Slicing & chopping, happily feeding family & friends?

No medical usage now but newly found artistic skills
Cutting for collage, more time in the garden,
Craft with my grandchildren.
I smile 'Yes, my darling, my hands and I are old'.

Post War diet

One summer evening my husband and I started reminiscing about the food we ate as children. We were both born soon after the Second World War. That afternoon we had been to multi award-winning Welbeck Farm shop near Worksop. The produce was eye wateringly expensive but locally produced and of excellent quality including exotic jams, cakes, fruit and vegetables, fancy breads and a vast range of meat and delicatessen items.

Our musings wandered back in time to memories of post war rationing, 'awful offal' and how markets and farmers' markets have evolved in the last seventy plus years. We thought about our post war diet and how dietary tastes and fads have evolved in our lifetime. My family were middle class, my father being a GP, but there were six of us children to feed. My husband's family were working class, his father having been a Welsh valleys miner till he moved to Bristol to find work. Offal was staple food in both our families, ranging from the delicious to the inedible.

Hereford, where I was born and brought up had a huge, noisy cattle market. Wednesday was the main day when farmers came from many miles around with their animals for sale at auction. There was also a large daily indoor 'butter' market where local farmers, gardeners and gypsies brought their produce to the long wooden trestle tables and stalls around the perimeter.

The delicious offal included stuffed sheep's hearts, kidneys in pies or suet pudding, liver and bacon and faggots. I now know faggots were herby 'meatballs' made from whatever fragments of meat, etcetera, were left over at the butcher's and wrapped in pig's omentum, the lace like fatty membrane lining the abdominal cavity.

The inedible included fish roe, also sheep's brains (a Saturday evening favourite at my first serious boyfriend's home). Nothing about them was remotely appealing. My father loved tripe and onion but even before I knew what it was I found it impossible to swallow! (The lining of a cow's stomach, cooked in milk).

Other more edible items were tongue, (ox, pig or sheep's) either served hot in sauce, but more often cold and sliced on bread. It had a peculiar soft texture and was moulded into a large round cylindrical shape and tasted good. It was a favourite of my husband's until Covid closed the delicatessen counter at the local supermarket. Brawn was made from pig's or calf's head, cooked and pressed in a pot with jelly which made it edible. Ox tail and neck of mutton were tasty once you'd managed to dissect the meat from the many bones though neck of mutton was rather fatty and tough. Trotters and bones from the butcher were cooked for the dog. Pork or beef dripping on bread was very tasty. A favourite of mine was lentils, cooked with onions and bacon rinds for flavouring. Nothing was wasted! Tinned Spam wasn't too bad but had a high fat content. I enjoyed opening the tins with a little key that removed the top section of the tin.

Roast chicken was a birthday treat only. We occasionally had broiler hens that had finished laying, which were cooked in the pressure cooker and seemed to consist of stringy ligaments with small amounts of tough meat attached. My mother wasn't a natural cook!

Regular Sunday roasts, beef, lamb, or pork were a great weekly treat! We didn't eat pork in months without an R in them as we didn't have a fridge & pork sometimes contained the parasite trichinosis. Anything needing to be kept cool went down to the coal cellar. The larder was north facing so fairly cool. As we lived in the middle of a farming county, the joints were relatively cheap especially when compared to today's prices for locally produced organic meat.

At Christmas I used to love accompanying my father to the poultry market to bid at auction for a turkey. One year we chose such a whopper it had to be partially dismembered to fit in the oven.

We had another irregular treat every year or two, when a school friend of my father's who had fishing rights on the Wye brought us a large chunk of fresh salmon that he had caught. Sadly the River Wye is now so polluted that few salmon are left.

Sid the fishmonger used to turn up at the kitchen door on Fridays at breakfast time. The front door was only locked at night. Notepad in hand he would tell my mother what fish was available that week. Which port it came from I have no idea as Hereford is far from the coast. Cod, cod's roe, smoked haddock, plaice, kippers (Dad's favourite) and mackerel were regular fare. Whatever fish and vegetables Mum ordered would be delivered later that day. As we had no fridge the fish had to be eaten Friday or Saturday. On Winter Sunday evenings we had tinned sardines in oil or pilchards in tomato sauce, on bread toasted by the open fire.

Sour milk was made into scones. Excess milk made blancmange, or junket using rennet, a digestive enzyme from the lining of unweaned mammal stomachs (calf, lamb or goat's kid). The rennet, with sugar, separated the heated milk into a semisolid layer above sweet liquid. A dusting of nutmeg on top made it a tasty desert.

Fruit.... Autumn was apple and custard season. Daily. No scrap of windfall apples was wasted. Damsons, plums, gooseberries, strawberries, blackberries, pears, rhubarb were made into jams, and jellies, or bottled in Kilner jars ready for Winter. Now I can freeze them, but I too cannot waste the tiniest scrap of edible fruit from a windfall apple, pear or plum. I've got a very large bag of damson plums I picked today from my son's garden, in the fridge right now waiting to be dealt with this afternoon! And yes, I do look in the mirror sometimes and seem to see my mother cheering me on!

Flamingos

We stand awestruck in the shadows
Sheltering beneath the spreading trees
Atop the ancient cliffs
Of Kenya's Rift Valley
Created at the Dawn of Time,
Overlooking the Lake -
Shimmering, beautiful,
Hazy in the morning heat.

It's toxic waters
Home to legions of coral pink
Flamingos
Turning the shallows into an
Ever changing
Shifting pattern,
Wonderfully adapted
To that harsh environment.

Flying in formation
Waves of colour rise up
And swoop around.
Manoeuvres completed.
Landing so gracefully
Once more they join the dance,
Long spindly legs
Stepping precisely.
Sinuous necks bend to feed,
Bills perfected
Sieving the toxic waters
For hidden nutrients,
Their bodies adapted to thrive
Where others
Would perish.

We drive down nearer
Where the road winds crazily
Down into that ancient rift.
We walk along the barren banks
Hearing their cacophonous
Goose like calls
Smelling the miasmic gas
Sweltering in the intense heat.

They are unafraid
Those lanky red legged dancers

Moving in harmony.
Their nuanced pavane
Mesmerises, amazes
Such beauty
Such grace
Such superlative choreography.

Protecting their young
They prepare them for the
Cycle of life
Continuous throughout
Innumerable millennia.

Another signal
Unseen
Unheard by us
Another wave of
Multihued pink feathered
Winged beauty
Sweeps and swoops
Before our eyes
The cobalt blue sky
Perfectly contrasting
Offsetting their magnificence.

Did all this evolve
Merely by chance from
That primordial swamp
Unorchestrated
By a Master Craftsman?

We turn away
Continuing our journey
Never forgetting
This marvellous
Mysterious encounter.

Lake Nakuru Kenya 1974

Viv Purkiss

I've been writing for many years now, and while I've had a few professional publications, sadly I haven't had any success in getting fiction published. But I carry on!

"Look me, I'm wonderful" was a response to a poem we looked at in one of our sessions. I'm no poet and I don't like poetry, but somehow I managed to write one.

"A journey" was inspired by a session we did on memoirs, and this experience came to mind ...

"When I am big" was inspired by a picture that Mike handed out - the whole group got different pictures and mine was a painting of three people. I looked at the picture and wondered about the characters portrayed, and hence a backstory for one of them was created.

Look at me, I'm wonderful

You don't like my grey hair?
Don't look.

You don't like my small tits?
Don't look.

You don't like my brown eyes?
Don't look.

You don't like my hairy legs?
Don't look.

But if you do look, you'll see
My soft animal body –
Nurturing, digesting, sleeping, walking, resting, reading, breathing.
Being.

And when I look at you
I'll see who you are
Not a collection of undesirable features
But a whole person
The synergy of your parts.

A Journey - Prague

I got fascinated by Eastern Europe when I was at University – I'm not sure I was even aware of Eastern Europe before University (I was a mature student). We were fed the propaganda of life under the Soviets and I wanted to see it for myself. So after finals, and before graduation, I arranged a trip with my friend Paddy. Too old for the Student Railcard to tour Europe by train, but young enough for another card which gave us subsidised travel, we arranged to go to Prague, capital of the former Czechoslovakia, at that time still within the Eastern bloc of Soviet influence. We booked a ferry from Harwich to Hamburg and planned to go by train to Berlin, visiting East and West, and then onward to Prague.

Harwich to Hamburg is a long ferry journey and I learned during it that I have a pretty strong constitution. We'd booked the cheapest cabin accommodation we could, essentially wooden shelves masquerading as bunk beds with a thin mattress and access to washbasins and toilets, shared by many. I couldn't settle down to sleep, though usually I can sleep on a clothes line, because the sea was rough and most people were vomiting. As I wandered around the ship at night there were neat packages of vomit all over the place. Surprisingly, mostly people had managed to use a sick bag, folded the top over and deposited it on the floor. I didn't use the bathrooms that night.

The ferry carried loads of different types of passengers – tourists and families and business people I suppose – but notably there was also a group of German Hell's Angels and some Scots men. What the Scots were doing became apparent as we sailed into Hamburg, the group appeared on deck dressed in kilts and playing bagpipes, piping us into dock. The German Hell's Angels were grouped on deck too, then disappeared below and we watched from the deck as they disembarked on their Harleys and sped off into Hamburg, the bagpipe music accompanying them.

There were other remarkable experiences on that journey. Going from West to East Berlin through Checkpoint Charlie. The stark difference between the two, West Berlin full of bright lights, shops, and dynamism, East Berlin quiet and sedate, everyone holding a carrier bag. There were a few cars pootling about, little Trabants sounding like sewing machines. And the first person we talked to there, an older man, turned out to be a Professor at the University, wanting to talk politics. Paddy engaged him in conversation, I was too scared to (needlessly, of course). The Berlin Wall, Unter Den Linten where we had coffee, the Reichstag. Paddy much more knowledgeable about modern history than I. Then onward to Prague by train from West Berlin. As we travelled by train through East Germany I glimpsed armed soldiers stationed at intervals along the route, guns at the ready. Hard to say if they were preventing people from leaving the train or getting on it. It was another overnight journey in a 'smoking' carriage. And everybody smoked, continually, as they did then. The thick atmosphere was leavened by the couple sitting opposite us. Their body language told us that they had never met before that evening. But they soon overcame that hurdle and in no time his tongue was getting to know her tonsils pretty well. Paddy and I did not dare to catch each other's eye, though there was much hilarity later.

The railway went along the valley of the river Vlatava, dramatic mountains rising on either side of the route. I was so impressed, we didn't have any mountains in Peckham and I'd never even been to the Lake District. When we arrived at Prague Station, I said, 'Paddy, I'm so glad we've come!' Czech script is entirely different from Latin based script so looking around the station I had no idea, and could not guess, what any of the signs and notices meant. I needed the toilet and went to ask directions from the information desk. The lady pointed and I read 'dheckuyi' (thank you) from my hand where I'd written it the previous evening. The information lady thought this was hilarious and obviously asked

me, 'Have you got thank you written on your hand?' I responded, in Czech, 'Yes,' which led to more gales of laughter.

I must have had a good accent when I spoke the very few words in Czech that I had learned. Ready for lunch, we found a restaurant and I told the waiter, 'Dva,' holding up two fingers so that he could not misunderstand. He showed us to a table for two and came back shortly with his order pad. The exchange went something like this:

Waiter (in Czech): 'What can I get you?'

Paddy (in German): 'We'd like ...'

Waiter (in Czech, looking at me): 'But you speak Czech!'

Me (in Czech, shaking head): 'No.'

Waiter (in Czech, sighing heavily and leaving): 'Fucking tourists!'

We had a long wait until the waiter gathered enough strength to return to our table and take our order in Paddy's schoolgirl German.

We'd booked our accommodation in Prague through a state-run travel organisation called Cedok. Little known in the West, it allowed you to stay with families for the equivalent of pennies. We had a massive room in a massive house in one of the suburbs of Prague where we'd travelled with the help of maps (remember those?) and the Prague underground system. Exhausted, that first night we slept until about 9.30 the following morning. Leaving our room to use the bathroom, the old lady who was the only one at home during the day scolded us. We were mystified as to the reason why until we went in search of a meal and entertainment that evening in the City Centre. We looked for a recommendation from Fodor's where we could eat, drink and be merry. At about 6.30 pm we found the place and walked into a pleasant courtyard furnished with chairs, tables and parasols. A fair few of the patrons were exceedingly drunk at 6.30 and the place was more or less empty by 9. We came to the conclusion that Grandma had been scolding us for being so lazy and sleeping in until 9.30 in the morning.

I was stunned that people were still following that lifestyle in the 80s. The train we'd arrived on had loads of people getting on it at about 5.30 in the morning so it wasn't such a leap to think that, at the time, Czechoslovakia followed a dawn til dusk pattern – dare I say – a peasant lifestyle. Maybe that was one of the differences between East and West that I was looking for.

I visited Prague 30 years later, in 2004. Many more people spoke English and indeed there were many more Brits in the City, which had gained a reputation as being a good place for stag weekends. It was still relatively cheap, though not, of course, as cheap as it had been on my original visit. It had moved, I think, into the modern world.

When I am big

When Daddy has tanned my hide for being naughty and answering back, and sent me to my room, I go upstairs but I go to Mummy and Daddy's room. I sit in the wardrobe. There isn't much in it, but Mummy has a nice dress and Daddy has his suit. I lay my cheek against the soft material of Mummy's dress and its smooth coolness sucks the burning away. I sit in the bottom of the wardrobe with the dress to my face. It smells like flowers, like Mummy. Daddy's suit smells of tobacco and sweat. I sit there breathing the dress in until I hear Mummy shouting, "Chrissie, come for tea." That must mean Daddy has gone wherever he goes. He wouldn't allow me to eat after I've been naughty, but Mummy does. I see her sometimes, after Daddy has tanned my hide, her eyes wet and her hand covering her mouth. But she doesn't say anything to Daddy, just shouts, "Go to your bedroom" at me after he's finished. That's when I go to their bedroom to cuddle Mummy's dress. It's nearly as good as a cuddle from her.

I don't know what I do to make Daddy tan my hide. Knowing that he will shout at me if I drop something, or knock something over, makes me more nervous and I might shake so much I drop things. And I don't know what things will make him tan my hide and what won't, because sometimes he stands up and shouts at me to clear it up, and sometimes he hits me and shouts at me to clear it up. He asks, "What did you do that for, you little fool? Eh? Eh?" If I start to stutter a reply that makes Daddy worse, that's when he smacks me across the face, makes my cheeks burn. He hits me if I do answer him, that's answering back, and he hits me if I don't answer him, because that's insolence.

When he goes out Mummy cuddles me and kisses my cheeks. I ask her, "Mummy, what does he want me to say? I don't want to be naughty, I can't help it."

"I know, Chrissie."

"Why does he hate me, then?"

"He doesn't hate you. He just thinks you need to be taught a lesson."

"What lesson, Mummy?"

She doesn't answer that question, but she tells me that he's a good provider, not like some of the other men, and she gets her housekeeping money and he doesn't drink alcohol. So we can pay the rent and the bills and we can eat. "He's not so bad, Chrissie. He's a good, God-fearing man and he wants you to grow up to be the same."

He's not mean to Lizzie, my sister, but on the other hand she's not as clumsy as I am and when she collects the plates they make their way to the kitchen all in one piece. After I break something, after Daddy has tanned my hide, I'm not allowed near breakable things until Daddy thinks I've learned my lesson. Instead of helping Mummy, Daddy says I have to read from the Bible.

When we go to church, I don't think I am a sinner. I don't know what sin is, but I know I must repent it. But I don't know how I can do that, because I don't know what repent means, either.

I hate Sundays. Maybe that's a sin and maybe I need to repent, but I do, I hate Sundays. We have to get up and wash in cold water and dress in our Sunday best, shirt buttoned up to the neck and then a tie, a scratchy wool jumper, shorts and socks and best shoes that I have to clean until they shine. Daddy inspects them. Hair that sticks up

combed and flattened with water. School raincoat on, line up in the passage for final inspection, so as not to show Mummy and Daddy up. March to church.

The preacher is called Mr Melton. I don't like him. He scares me. He talks, well shouts, a lot about the fires of hell and how they will consume our flesh and we will be in everlasting pain and it will never go away so we better not go to hell and so as not to go to hell we'd better repent our sins.

Mummy and Daddy stare up at Mr Melton, in the pulpit, and nod when he shouts about sinners and fires and pain. They nod when he asks whether they are sinners and if they have repented, eyes wide, looking scared. I wonder what they have done. What their sins are.

Mr Melton is up on the pulpit like a big black angry bird. He raises his arms when he shouts so that his cloak flaps like wings. He spits and froths, his nose runs, he roars, he stares into our eyes. My eyes. All in the Lord's name, all to tell us to be good.

Lizzie stands next to Mummy who puts a hand on her shoulder. I stand next to Daddy and I wish his hand would fall on my shoulder, but it never does, unless it's to tan my hide. I'd especially like his hand on my shoulder when Mr Melton comes down from the pulpit and wanders round the meeting, asking people if they have sinned. When he gets to me my chest feels tight and he stares into my eyes. I look into his, blue with red veins all around the whites, crusty eyelashes. His breath washes over me, smelling like a burning fire.

"And you, young man. Are you a sinner?"

I can't speak.

"Are you? Are you?"

His bony finger pokes at my shoulder. I want to cry.

"Answer me, boy!"

I can't breathe. Nothing comes out of my dry mouth. It happens every week. He asks if I am a sinner and only moves on when he frightens me. He knows when this happens. I feel the warmth as I piss my pants. When I am big I will not come to this church. I will not bring my children to be frightened by this horrible old man. When I am big.

Jenny Seaton

Arnold u3a Creative Writing Group really got me going with the Poetry!

Briefly, 'Damsel fly' is a mixture of remembrance and imagining.

'Freesia is an attempt to broaden the sensory experience of a flower's fragrance.

'My Mother's Eiderdown (A/F)' Is a childhood memory of discovering my Mum desperately trying to transform imperfect, damaged and discarded scraps into something unique and beautiful.

Damselfly

On that day when heat pressed in from
all sides

I dropped onto the spikey grass.
Everything full everything green
lemon green olive green pea green
layer upon
layer of burgeoning nature unable
to contain

her bang jam full of juiciness

On that day all vegetation
made double by reflection

lay on that deep darkest pool
whose cooling calm seemed to serve as a
brake

On all that bursting power

then and as if the Artist had loaded
the brush

for the last time (being hesitant to proceed)
an impatient Damselfly skimmed past
at speed and with ultimate surety
and grace

made the final stroke complete

Jennifer Seaton 2023



Freesia

Sunlight sparkles the glass vase
holding the water
nourishment to make the drenched
Scent.

Painting the senses
Purple pink and gold
Dolly mixture sister, Parma Violet
brother

Honey for the mother.

Genuine Section
2025



My Mother's Eiderdown



Her art was individual
like the turquoise chiffon
residual striped school dress maternal
Shiny satin pink cense
chopped from the curtain skirting
the defunct kidney shaped
dressing table faced
silver lunex, ~~like~~ her
ice topped head
— the defining factor
as she lay on her bed.

Deanne Seaton
2025



Denise Swain

I've always enjoyed writing but since retiring I've had more time to explore different aspects of the craft.

In this supportive creative writing group and under Mike Wareham's excellent tuition I have learned about many styles of writing and poetry, most entirely new to me.

VE Day (*a stream of consciousness*)

Nostalgia

Right as Rain (*free verse*)

Talking Through the Night (*a villanelle*)

About the Boy (*a misspent youth*)

Escape (*short story*)

VE Day



The news is announced on the wireless, its official, rumours confirmed, Germany has surrendered. At last, the war is over. The war is over. The war is over. There isn't room in my head to think of anything else. I race down the stairs, my heels clacking and skidding on the lino, and out into the street.

There are people everywhere, laughing and talking in high excited voices, heading for the buses, the trams, some on bicycles giving their mates a croggie or girls perched on the handlebars, skirts flapping recklessly. I jump on the first bus which is already crammed full and head into the Old Market Square.

Thousands of men and women, some in uniform, most in civvies, are dancing, singing and laughing in a mesmerising murmur, and before I have time to think of decorum, before I can hear the disapproving voice of my mother, before I have a

change of heart, I join the throng and submit to the madness of relief and sheer joy. I'm being twirled round, swung round, I'm laughing and I can't stop. I have never felt so happy, so exuberant, so young, so hopeful, so grateful for this outcome. I will never be sad or unhappy again. Not ever, not if I live to be a hundred.

Immediately my treacherous mind presents the fleeting glimpse I had of Mrs Meakin, her pale face blank behind net curtains. Her boys won't be coming home. They won't plonk their kitbags down on her doorstep and plant a kiss on her smiling face. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

I pause, solemn, until a lanky youth with brylcreemed hair grabs my hand and waltzes me round and round until I am laughing again, gazing up into his velvety eyes. He smiles, and says something I can't hear above the racket surrounding us. He pulls me closer and I smell the cigarette smoke in his warm breath. We're dancing and dancing closer and closer and time isn't moving and I'm glad because I never want this night to end.

The crowds seem far away now. The noise quiets right down. I lift my face to his and my eyes close and I disappear into a soft kiss, his lips full and gentle and oh, just perfect. As we drift away from the crowds I look back at the people, exuberant, elated, alive. Men and women are clambering onto the backs of the lions standing guard on the Council House steps, and grown men are splashing in the fountains.

Hand in hand we walk back to my home in the Meadows, and I'm a different girl to the one who clattered down the stairs a lifetime ago. This night my life has changed. One day I will tell our children about this, the night we celebrated Victory in Europe in the Old Market Square - and I fell in love with their father.

Nostalgia

Looking back down the years with a secret smile
A whirling kaleidoscope of the best times
When every day was lived in technicolour

Listening to the soundtrack of times long gone
The half-remembered exquisite perfection of youth

The sheer hypnotic excitement of independence
In the suspended sepia time
Where we are forever young

Laughing in the face of danger
And dancing to our own tune

Every crazy risk worth it
To fly
Invincible
Through the days and weeks

To laugh and cry and love
And truly live
Throwing casual glances at the future

Right as Rain

He's propped up on pillows
Leaning forward
Hands outstretched
His face scrunched up
Like crumpled foil

'How are you?' I ask
And he nods, and nods again
I take his hands in mine
'You're fine,' I say
'You're doing fine'

This man, this Jack of all trades
Who has fixed leaking taps
Laid patios
Wired in wall lights
Grown countless tomatoes
Whisked the cream for a lifetime of trifles
Made a thousand cups of tea
And laughed the infectious laugh
Of a man at ease with life's vagaries
This kind man, beyond rescue now
Drifting
So very far away from shore

I look into his eyes
The sparkling blue faded and red rimmed
Shrunken under wild eyebrows
Tired, far away, seeing the unseen

'I'm scared' he says
I squeeze his hands
'Don't be' I say
Because I don't know what else I can say

'Last night,' he whispers
'Tony came into the ward
Sat on my bed
I couldn't believe it
I hadn't seen him for years
I said 'What are you doing here?'
'Then, suddenly we were in the underground car park
of the Royal Hotel
Chatting like old times
Long ago old times'

He locks watery eyes with mine
'But, I couldn't have seen him could I?
It didn't really happen, did it?
I'm scared' he says

'Don't be' I say
'You're not well, that's all
You'll soon be better
Right as rain'

'Right as rain' he says

He nods to the visitor's chair
'Look at her taking it all in'
A huge smile lights his face
I follow his gaze to the empty chair
'She's a little madam' I say
And hold him tight

Talking Through the Night

Remember when we talked throughout the night
When we were young, and only others old
And slept like babies in the morning light

Forever you are precious in my sight
More so than sparkling diamonds or fine gold
Remember when we talked throughout the night

In my mind I can see your eyes so bright
We wrapped quilts around us against the cold
And slept like babies in the morning light

My spirits lifted like a soaring kite
A cliché of all stories ever told
Remember when we talked throughout the night

The times we spent together felt so right
In one another's eyes we gazed so bold
And slept like babies in the morning light

That love and friendship rose to such a height
Deep in my truest heart this gift I hold
Remember when we talked throughout the night
And slept like babies in the morning light

About the Boy

When I met Clive I was just a girl
As innocent as could be
He squeezed me tight and kissed me slow
And stole my heart from me.

Steve arrived one winter's day
He made my heart beat faster
He kissed me quick and pinched my bum
So that was a disaster.

Nigel was a southern boy
And called a glass a glarse
We travelled back and forth on trains
Till it became a farce.

Next came Paul my Liverpool lad
Who sang to me in the street
He wrote me letters and made me laugh
And made my life complete.

The one I'm sad about is Mike
Who loved me to distraction
Heaven and earth he'd move for me
But there was no attraction.

There followed Martin, Pete and Stu
All in quick succession
And boys too numerous to name
They made quite a procession.

The years flew by and then one day
A man arrived at last
Who squeezed me tight and kissed me slow
And made my heart beat fast.

He wrote me poems and made me laugh
And sang love songs in key
And loved me to distraction
And moved the earth for me.

He bought me flowers and diamond rings
And warmed my feet in bed
I'd tell you what his name is
But it might go to his head.

Escape

I might be locked up but I've still got my wits about me.

Food is delivered through a hatch and I'm supposed to be grateful for the same old thing day after day.

Sometimes, for whatever reason, I get something more nutritious, fruit or vegetables, or maybe a bit of cheese if I'm lucky.

I exercise religiously, as much as I can and I admit that I also feign sleep much of the time, huddled up in a corner of my prison. Toilet facilities, if you can call them that, are in another corner.

I am one step ahead of them though and wait patiently for the smallest mistake which offers me the chance of getting out of here. I'm not averse to drawing blood if I have to.

The chance comes at last. The door is left ajar and I'm away like a thief in the night. Good job I'm agile. I leave my bed clothes ruffled so they'll think I'm still sleeping.

Where to go now though? I've been locked up in there so long I can't remember. Nothing looks familiar.

I take a right, then a left, then run like crazy keeping close to walls until I come to a possible hiding place where I can take a breather until the search dies down.

Suddenly I hear that the alarm has been raised and the sounds of footsteps and raised voices warn me to retreat further still into the very recess of a dark corner. My heart is pounding but I must keep still and not make a sound.

Hours pass and night falls. All is quiet so I venture out in search of food.

All I can find is an old potato but I'm desperate so I eat some of it. It's not good though, I can tell you that much. It gives me stomach ache. Now hunger is gnawing away at me, I think longingly of the same old same old food shoved through the hatch every day. Perhaps it wasn't so bad after all.

Finally, my heartbeat slows and I find a place to sleep.

I wake up to the sounds of shouting. The half-eaten potato has been discovered and, damn and blast it, they realise I can't be far away.

I hear things being moved out of the way. Then I hear the cry, 'Here he is'

My heart sinks but I have to admit I am escorted with gentle words and gentle hands back to what I have come to think of as my home.

Such is the life and dreams of a pet hamster.

Gary Swain

Apart from the odd Council committee report, which in themselves can be quite creative, I had not written anything for myself since leaving school. After joining this group, I have re-discovered poetry, prose and so many different writing techniques new to me. A big thankyou to Mike for his leadership and to the group for their support. If you ever get the chance to join a Creative Writing class, my advice is do it! It's great fun.

My pieces are: -

The Fatal Wall (*A Villanelle*)

Faces Old and Grey (*A poem about dementia*)

The Coffee Cup (*Based on the works of Brian Bilston*)

Where Has the Year Gone (*A poem about how time flies*)

Penny's Pencils (*Writing for children*)

Brotherly Love (*A story competition entry*)

The Fatal Wall

Slumped against the cold stone of the wall,
He sits alone, through endless night and day.
Take pity. Hear the sadness in his call.

This crumpled figure, once stood proud and tall.
But life was cruel, and now he's lost his way.
Slumped against the cold stone of the wall.

Through hunger, cold, he struggles to recall
Those happy times that seem so far away.
Take pity. Hear the sadness in his call.

With painful hands, he lifts the begging bowl.
But they just look, stare at him with dismay.
Slumped against the cold stone of the wall.

Think hard on this, could you not spare at all
A single coin, a meagre price to pay.
Take pity. Hear the sadness in his call.

Be ashamed. You did not care at all.
Feel remorse as you pass by every day.
No longer slumped against that fatal wall.
No pity for the silence of his call.

Faces Old and Grey

I stare across the crowded room
At faces old and grey.
If I sit here all quiet and still
Perhaps they'll go away.

An old man sits, his head is bowed
such sadness, such despair.
A woman tries but cannot stand
as if shackled to her chair.

I do not know why I am here
I have done nothing wrong.
I must find my way back home
Get back where I belong.

I look around for my escape
Doors on left and right.
The nearest one, I'll make for that
I stand and then take flight.

'Where d'ya think you're off to Bill?
You leaving us again?'
His firm hand on my shoulder rests
I struggle but in vain.

'Your family will be here soon,
Let's get you in your seat'
Family, what's he on about?
I slump down in defeat.

Moments pass, it seems like hours
I stare out at the door.
It opens and the people wave
Have I seen them before?

The boy and girl shout out to me,
'Hi Grandpa, how are you?'
Grandpa indeed, God what a cheek
I'm only 22.

These people seem to know me well
And one sits on my knee.
A tender kiss placed on my cheek
Are they here to rescue me?

'How's he been?' the woman said
To the brute who'd blocked my path.
He looked at me, smiled ear to ear
Well I'll have the last laugh.

'He's been fine, behaves himself
He's a really lovely bloke.
I'm afraid he hasn't spoken though
Not since he had his stroke'.

The other man said, 'How are you Dad
Is there anything you need?'
Yes a bloody lift home, out of here
Calling me Dad, indeed.

But they don't hear, the words don't come
they're just thoughts inside my head.
My mind says go, but my body says no
It's worse than being dead.

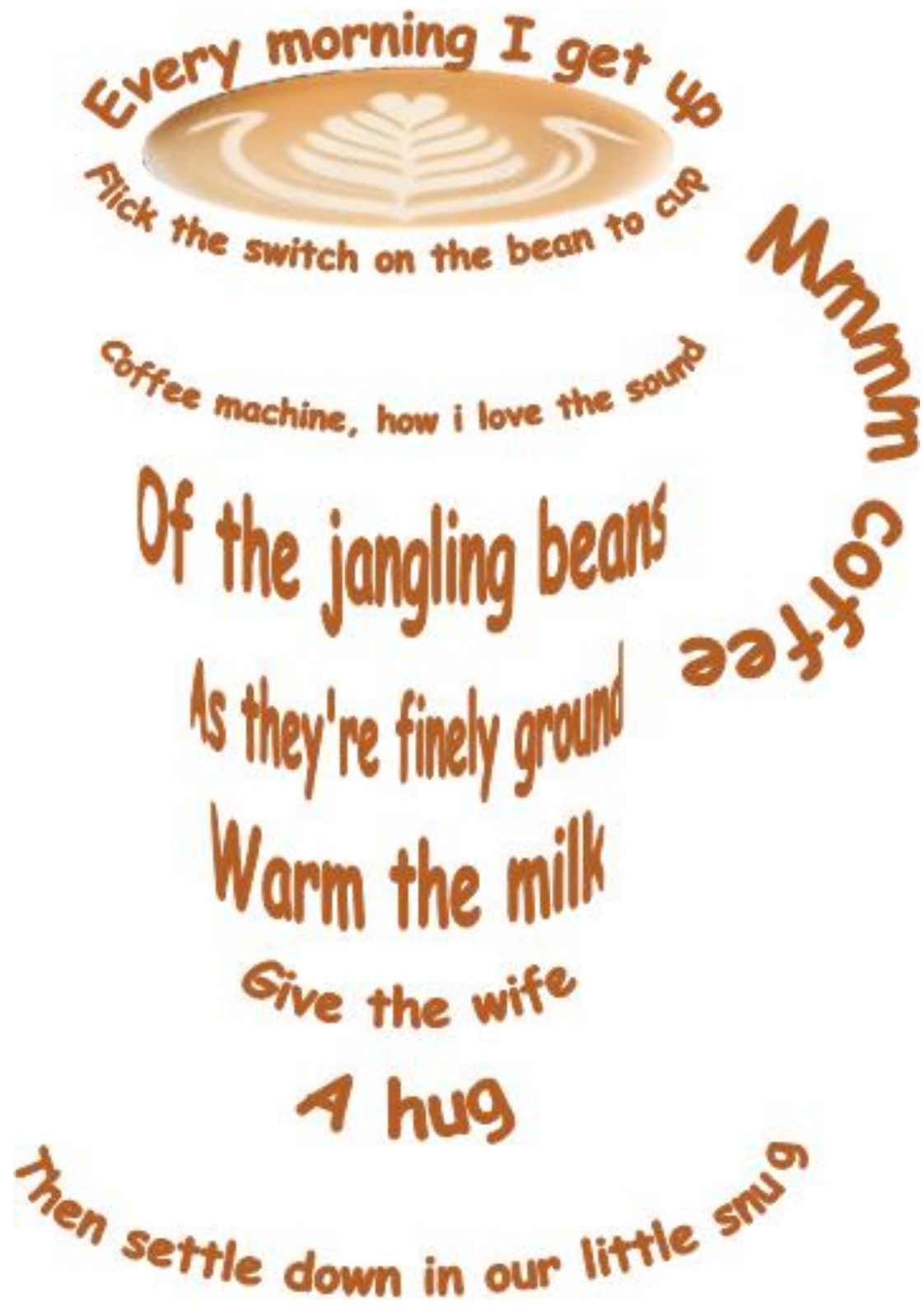
The strangers talk to me at length
about things I do not know.
Then the brute appears and says
'Dinnertime, you'll have to go'.

A kiss on cheeks from boy and girl
They're sweet, and seem so kind.
I'd thank them both, but I can't
So I hug them in my mind.

They're gone and all is as before
The woman still cannot stand.
The man, his head bowed even more
Tears falling on his hand.

I stare across the crowded room
At faces old and grey.
If I sit here all quiet and still
Perhaps they'll go away.

Coffee Cup



Where Has the Year Gone?

December the first, up in the loft
Getting the decs and tree.
Pour ourselves a small sherry
Listen to carols on TV.

Christmas morning, stuff the bird
Eat and drink the whole day long.
With one full month of planning
Two days, and Christmas gone.

Happy new year on Jan the 1st
Let's hope it's full of cheer.
We start our diets 'lost three pounds'
Then February's here.

Toss the pancakes 'I'll have three'
No sooner made then gone.
Here's your Valentines card my love
It better be your only one.

March springs in, new life appears
Some longer days ahead.
I don't like March, the clocks are changed
I lose an hour in bed.

April can't come quick enough
Easter eggs and hot cross buns.
April fool's day, trick the wife
But blink and then it's gone.

Next comes May's bank holidays.
With June the summer's here.
July, grandkids break up from school
August and autumns near.

Holidays are over now.
September shows its face.
Trees once green show branches gold
Time's going at such a pace.

October and it's Goosey Fair
The smells, the sounds, the lights.
November mists and foggy days
And bonfire night, what sights!

But all too soon December comes
Cold days, a touch of frost.
Time to get the trimmings dear
And I'm back up in the loft.

Penny's Pencils



Penny loved to draw. Everywhere she went, she would carry around her pad and her pencils. She took them to school in her new backpack, she put them on the table when she was eating her dinner. She even took them into bed with her. Yes, Penny kept those pencils with her, wherever she went, because you see, they were magic pencils.

Mummy and Daddy had bought them for her for Christmas. They didn't look any different to other pencils but there was one for every colour that she could imagine, and the magic part was that everything that Penny drew, came to life.

At first, she was a little scared. Well, it was a bit strange that when Penny drew her first picture, which was a dog, it started barking at her from the page. But it was a friendly bark. More of a 'Woof, Woof come and play with me'. Then when the dog jumped out of the drawing pad and started wagging its tail, and licking Penny's hand, she wasn't scared any more. The dog was very clever and would sit, roll over and fetch things for her. She decided to call him Sketch. She didn't know what it meant, but daddy had taught her that it was one of the words on the cover of her drawing book, Sketch Pad.



Penny and Sketch played together all morning. She drew him a picture of a juicy bone, which he picked up off the page of her book and sat on the floor happily chewing and chomping on it. Just then, mummy called upstairs to say that lunch was ready. My goodness thought Penny. What will happen if mummy sees Sketch. She will wonder where he came from. She might think he belonged to someone else and take him to the police station and she would never see him again. Sketch heard Penny's mummy as well, and being a clever dog, he knew exactly what to do.



He grabbed the bone, ran towards Penny's book, and jumped straight into it. And there he was. Back on the page just where Penny had drawn him. 'Phew', she said, looking down at the picture. 'I hope you will come and play another day.' Sketch gave a woof woof in reply and winked his little brown eye. What adventures they would have together.



Penny to the rescue

Penny was an extra special little girl. You see she had a set of magic pencils. and everything she drew came to life.

One hot summers day, Penny was playing in the garden when she saw Mrs Watson from next door, coming up the path. Mrs Watson was crying.

‘Hello Mrs Watson. What’s the matter?’

Mrs Watson wiped away a tear and gave a rather loud snort on her handkerchief.

‘I’ve lost my cat, Tiddles’, she said. ‘She didn’t come home last night, and I have been looking for her all morning. Have you seen her?’

Penny shook her head. ‘No sorry, I haven’t. But I will help you look for her’.

Penny went into her house and explained to mummy what had happened. Mummy said she could go and help Mrs Watson as long as she stayed with her and didn’t wander off on her own. Penny nodded and ran out to start the search.



They looked everywhere. In the shed, around the dustbin. Mrs Watson even knocked on a few doors to ask if anyone else had seen Tiddles, but no-one had.

Just then Penny heard a very faint meow which seemed to come from up in the sky. She looked up, and there right at the top of a very tall tree sat Tiddles. She must have climbed up and then couldn’t get down again, and the poor thing had been there all night.

Penny thought quickly. What was needed was a very tall ladder, so Penny reached into her little pinafore dress pocket and took out her little notebook and a pencil, which she always carried with her, because they were magic. She drew a ladder, but it was too small. It would never reach the top of the tree. So she carried on drawing on the next page in her book and the next, until the ladder was huge. It popped out of her book and rested against the garden wall. Just then Mr Jones came by.

‘Hello Penny. What are you doing out here?’

‘Oh I am helping Mrs Watson look for her cat, and I have found her. She is stuck up this tree.’

Mr Jones looked up and saw Mrs Watson talking to a neighbour. Then he spotted the ladder leaning up against the wall.

‘Well, that’s a stroke of luck’, he said. ‘This must belong to the window cleaner at number 27. I wonder why he has left it here?’



He propped it up on the tree and started to climb up.

'Oh do be careful' said Mrs Watson, who had come down the path and could see Tiddles sitting on a high branch.

Mr Jones was careful and when he got to the branch, he picked up Tiddles in his arms and started back down the ladder. But he was only halfway down when the ladder began to slip. Penny thought quickly. She took out her pad and drew a new branch for the tree. Mr Jones was clinging to the ladder so didn't notice it suddenly appear. And Mrs Watson was so frightened she had her eyes shut. Sure enough, the ladder hit the branch and stopped slipping. Mr Jones climbed down to the ground and handed over a very hungry Tiddles to Mrs Watson.



They all went round to Penny's house and her Mummy made them a cup of tea, while Penny told her all about the adventure.

Penny smiled to herself. She wondered what Mr Jones would think when he went to take the ladder back to No 27. You see it was now back in Penny's book. Oh well, at least Tiddles was safe.

Brotherly Love

Roger reached out and slapped down on the alarm clock. 5:30 am. Just 4 hours of sleep and another day was about to begin. He lay back for a minute and tried to focus, tried to persuade his tired body, and mind, to get up. His eyes closed.

This job will be the death of me.

The alarm sounded again. Thank goodness for snooze control. This time he reacted more positively, threw back the bedsheets and ambled to the bathroom. A glance in the mirror showed that he looked exactly as he felt. Exhausted. He wondered if he had made the right decision when he had taken this high-flying job, but there was money to be made in property development and he was good at it.

A few minutes later, washed, shaved and suited, he took another look in the mirror. A different reflection this time. Confident, capable.

Today's deal is in the bag.

The intercom buzzed.

'Good morning, sir, it's Norman in reception. There is a taxi waiting for you.'

'I'll be right down.'

He grabbed his briefcase and overcoat and went down into the lobby. Norman held the door open for him.

'Thanks, and again, please don't call me sir. I've not had the call to the palace yet. My name is Roger.'

'Right you are sir, er Roger. You have a good day now.'

Roger smiled, went outside and got into the waiting cab.

Not a word was spoken on the journey, until on entering the airport drop off zone, the driver said, 'You wouldn't get me up in one of those things.'

Roger thought what a strange thing to say to him. Someone who is just about to take a flight to Glasgow. He looked up and was about to reply, when he caught sight of the driver's eyes, staring back at him in the rear-view mirror. They were different colours, heterochromia, just like his brother had.

'Safest way to travel,' Roger said. He looked at his watch.

'Anyway, I'd better dash. It's 7 o'clock and the company jet takes off in 30 minutes.'

Roger sat in the private lounge, waiting for his call to board. He thought back to the cab driver, and to his 'brother's' eyes gazing back at him. He hadn't spoken to Reece for a few months now. It was Roger's fault. He had been so busy, he had forgotten his father's birthday, and Reece had had a bit of a go at him. Roger regretted his words to Reece, saying that he was always the family favourite, and no-one gave a damn about Roger. This wasn't true. Their parents had always treated the brothers equally, and Reece being slightly older, had always looked out for him.

I'll get in touch as soon as I get home.

Roger's flight was announced, and he made his way to the aircraft. A stewardess was waiting to show him to his seat and as he approached her, he did a double take. She had different colour eyes, just like the cab driver. His brother once told him that only 1 in 20,000 had this condition, and that of course, made him special. What were the chances of meeting two people in the same day, with the same condition? A voice called out to him.

'Hello Roger, old chap. You ok? You look like you've seen a ghost.' It was Malcolm, his arch nemesis. One position below him in the company and always angling to be two above.

'Oh, hi Malcolm. Didn't know you were involved in this project?'

'Head office contacted me last night. Thought you would need all the help you could get, and from the look of you, they were right.'

'I'm fine. It's just that... Oh forget it, it's just a coincidence.'

'Well I'm here for you Roger. If you find yourself getting into deep water during negotiations, I'll help pull you out.'

More like hold me under until I've drowned. Better go through the proposals again, just to make sure I can 'swim' without Malcolm's help.

Just then, Roger's mobile buzzed. He looked at the message in surprise. It was from Reece, his brother. Months with no contact and now a text from him. It read:

'Sorry to bother you Roger, but there has been a terrible accident. I need you to come home immediately. I cannot say anymore. Please try and make it home.'

There is no inference from a text. It's just words without emphasis. But somehow it gave him a feeling of desperation, and utmost importance. He rang the number back.

'The mobile you have called may be switched off. Please try later.' How could that be. He'd just had a message from it. He tried his dad's number. No reply.

What the hell do I do now?

He rang head office. 'Can I speak to Sir Bernard please? It's Roger Davis. I am due at a meeting in Glasgow with him later this morning.'

'Of course, Mr Davis, I'll connect you.' The booming voice of the CEO came through. 'Roger. Thought you would be airborne by now. Nothing wrong, I hope. Very important deal today, worth millions to the company.'

'Yes sir, I know. The thing is I have just had an upsetting message from home. Something serious has happened and I wondered, is there any chance you and Malcolm could broker the deal?'

'I'm sorry to hear that. What happened?'

'I cannot get through to them, so I have no more details at present.'

'Hmm. Well as I say this deal is vital. I'm sure your family crisis can wait until you get back tonight. I expect to see you at the meeting later. If not, well let's just say that new promotion coming up might have to go to Malcolm. He's a reliable sort. Anyway, got to go.'

There was an abrupt click as the phone was slammed down. The death knell on his career perhaps. He had to think fast. Should he keep his job, the lifestyle he'd come to enjoy? Or rush home to see what the fuss was about, even if it meant working for Malcolm, perhaps losing his job altogether. He tried the phone again. Still switched off. Almost instantly, his phone pinged. Another message from the same number.

'Roger, please. There's not much time.'

How is this possible? The number was unavailable. The decision is made for me.

He begrudgingly wished Malcolm the best of luck with the deal and rushed off the plane, much to the surprise of the stewardess.

Roger pulled up outside his parents' house and was met at the front door by their neighbour Mrs Wilkins. She was in tears.

'Oh Roger, I'm so sorry about your brother. Such a terrible accident. He is at the hospital with your parents.'

She must have it wrong. Overwrought perhaps. My brother has texted me earlier, twice.

Roger didn't question her and made his way to the hospital.

He found his parents sitting by Reece's bedside, his mum weeping into her handkerchief. There was an array of wires and tubes coming out of Reece's body. His father looked up as he approached.

'Roger, what are you doing here?'

'I got a text from Reece, saying there had been an accident. He didn't say it was him though. God, he looks in a bad way.'

'A text? That's impossible. A lorry driver had a heart attack and ploughed straight into his car. Happened this morning at 6 o'clock. Reece hasn't regained consciousness since.'

'But I had two messages from him, telling me to come home. Look it's his mobile number.'

'Well they weren't from Reece I assure you. His phone was smashed to pieces in the crash.'

Roger shivered uneasily. He walked over to his brother and took his hand.

'Don't know if you can hear me bro, but I am here.'

He looked down at him and could swear Reece's mouth curled slightly into what might have passed for a smile. Then the alarms went off, doctors rushed into the room and called for the crash team. It was no use. After several minutes, the doctor signalled to stop and all that was left was the monotonous tone of the flatline. Reece was gone.

Later, Roger and his parents were sitting in a private room waiting for the hospital staff to guide them through the next steps. The TV was on in the corner. No-one was paying much attention until a newsflash appeared.

'A private jet has crashed on its return flight from Glasgow. There were 4 people on board but unfortunately there were no survivors'.

Roger stared up at the screen, straight into the faces of his rival Malcolm, and the stewardess. It was the company jet that had crashed. The one Roger should have been on. Roger's mobile buzzed. He felt an icy chill as he stared at the screen. A message from Reece.

'Glad you made it brother'.

Hazel Ward

Dearest gentle reader, I never dreamed of being a writer – but now I'm playing at being one, as I love sharing snippets of my life and my imagination, mostly to amuse my family.

'What If' is a poem inspired by the selfless act of my son and his wife who shared their home for almost a year with a family of four, who fled from war in the Ukraine.

In Creative Writing we were tasked with writing a narrative as an alternative to a traditional fairy tale. 'I'm a Very Fine Owl Indeed' is about Squeak, a melanistic barn owl (dark coloured: the opposite of albino). In the wild these 'different' baby owls are usually thrown from the nest and killed.

'In My Small Voice' is purely fictional.

'Milk In Mind' is a piece of prose I wrote as a 'stream of consciousness', which may take some of you back to your schooldays.

Milk in Mind

'Judith. Are you listening to me?' I sit up straight.

It reminds me of Mam sometimes calling me Judith instead of Judy. I must be in trouble.

'Yes Miss,' I reply. Well, I am listening to some of what she's saying, so it isn't really a fib. I listen carefully for a little while then my eyes wander - again - to the clock on the wall above Miss Ashcroft's head. You see I can tell the time - and not just the o'clocks. It's

twenty-five past ten - and it's very hot today - and my tummy is already starting to wobble.

Then my eyes can't help slipping sideways, over to the crate, by the classroom door. It has rows down and across of shiny tops - and every one of those metally tops is on a bottle - and one of those bottles will be for me. My tummy wobbles some more.

I know what Miss Ashcroft is saying is very, very important, it's just that my eyes can't help doing this dance, from Miss' mouth, up to the clock, across to the crate, up and down the rows of shiny tops - and back. Then start all over again.

Then the bell rings. It's just the bell for the end of the lesson before playtime but this bell makes me jump. It sounds louder than normal. More scary.

It's not my turn to be the milk-monitor. Today it's my friend, Sandra who's doing that job.

'Sandra - Quickly now, let's give out the milk' says Miss Ashcroft in a strangely happy voice. It's almost as though she thinks we're getting a treat.

Yes, milk is a treat at home. I think about picking up one of the big bottles from our freezing cold pantry floor. The first taste is so cold and so yummy. It just slips down. You have to drink it quickly if you're going to drink it out of the bottle, when no-one's looking. And woe betide you if you get caught. Anyway, you can't hang around when you're standing on the pantry floor in thin socks - you'll get chilblains or even worse - you'll catch your death of cold.

Sandra is nearly up to my desk.

It was very hot in class yesterday as well. I remember what happened then. It was so terrible when I took the shiny top off my bottle and breathed in. I thought I was going to be sick. I think I was being sick but I stopped it when it got almost as far up as my mouth. I don't remember getting through the drinking but I suppose I must have done. There was definitely a nasty taste in my mouth through most of playtime, until I could get to the sink and twist my head almost round the wrong way to get my mouth under the tap for some water.

I wish I was two years older. My big brother gets orange juice in his class. He never stops telling me how special it is.

Sandra passes me my bottle. 'Thank you' I try hard to smile. I like Sandra and I don't want her to see I'm upset. I try to pretend it's scrummy orange juice, but I know that isn't going to work as soon as I feel the bottle - lukewarm in my hand. I tear off that shiny top - and breathe in. It's getting even hotter in this classroom. I put the bottle down with a clunk and try to think what to do.

I think about 'accidentally' pushing over the bottle and spilling the milk - are least some of it - but I know that would be wrong. I'd have to go and fetch the mop and bucket



and clean it all up - and I'd miss play time. I don't want to miss playtime - and I'm not a naughty girl.

I'm going to hold my breath. I'm not going to taste it going down. It can't taste worse than that cough mixture we have to have sometimes. I'm not going to let it jump out of the bottle and bite me today. I'm going to think about going out to play afterwards. Today, I'll go and drink some water from the sink as soon as break starts. Here goes!

Refuge

What if their green and pleasant land
was suddenly attacked by an unjust hand?

What if their home was forever destroyed,
losing all within that they'd enjoyed?

What if their way of life came to an end
and they'd despair it could ever mend?

What if they'd said their heartfelt goodbyes,
to people they loved, with tears in their eyes?

What if some folk, from across the sea,
offered them refuge in a foreign country?

What if they'd needed to find work and schools,
adopting the culture and learning new rules?

What if they'd settled but for home they yearn?
When the war is over could they ever return?

What if the place attacked by the unjust hand,
was instead our own green and pleasant land?

I'm a Very Fine Owl Indeed

I peck away at my shell until light and noise enter my world. I push my bedraggled body through the jagged opening and fight my way towards the light, tumbling out into the noisy nest.

My instincts kick in as I mimic my siblings, squawking to be noticed, craning my beak towards mummy to beg for food but food never comes my way. When will my turn come? I chirrup louder but no food finds its way into my beak. I'm hungry and my tummy growls at me but mother ignores me and passes by me again and again with her bounty. What's wrong with me?

The noise abates and the feeding frenzy seems to be slowing. Oh joy! mother is coming towards me. It must be my turn now but instead of lowering chewed-up food into my mouth, she starts to grab me around my neck with her very sharp beak. How can this be happening? There is nowhere to hide from this onslaught. I fight for my life to get away from her as she gouges into my soft flesh. What else can I call it but a vicious attack? She starts to drag me towards the side of the nest. None of the others try to help me. Surely they can hear my cries. They must know about my distress. I cry even louder and my heart beats so fast that it hurts. Why am I being treated like this?

Then – just like that – a hand reaches into the nest and scoops me out. It is pink and soft and gentle and belongs to a mighty god. I am stroked and petted and hear gentle murmurs, so unlike the trauma of the nest. I am finally able to breathe without having to fight for every breath. At last, food is pushed into my beak. I can feel it going down. It reaches my tummy. Yummy, this feels good. I feel safe for the first time in my short life. This is living.

As I grow I've come to know that I'm different but different can be good. I'm darker than all the rest. I hear it's called melanistic. I'm so very rare and these humans treat me well; almost reverently. What does it matter that I'm a different colour?

'I'm a very fine owl indeed'



In My Small Voice

I shout 'Help' in my small voice
but you choose not to hear me.
I shout louder
but your response is a deadly silence.
I beg you for help to get relief
but the pain he causes continues to pierce me.
I beg louder
but when I tell you what's happening to me,
you tell me it is all in my mind.

You shout 'Help' in your small voice, now you are in your nineties
but I chose long ago to separate our lives.
You shout louder
but now my response is a deadly silence.
You beg me to excuse what dementia robs you of remembering
but – it might excuse you now and for the future – not for the past.
You beg me louder to relieve your pain
but I can never forget my pain from years ago,
so I can never forgive you now,
Mother.

Mike Wareham

Ever since I was a teenager, I have loved poetry and literature — that's why I became an English teacher in East Midlands comprehensive schools for 33 years. When I retired, I completed a degree in creative writing at Nottingham University and started to write my own poetry and short stories. Much of my poetry is inspired by the countryside in North Wales where my mother's family come from.

The Striker's Wife

It's 84 and a lovely summer
But strike goes on forever.
The Tories won't talk and we won't give in
An' I'm at end o' me tether.

My Ron he stands by union
And me I stand by me man.
I stand by him on picket line
Shout 'Scabs' as loud as I can.

I march on demos, cook in soup kitchens
Collect cash till feet are sore
But there's one thing an' it's a big thing
That really sticks in me craw.

'Cos family next door, we've knowed 'em forever
Their Bill's not striking you see.
They have roast dinners with all of the trimmings –
Our kids have spam for tea.

They go Spain on holiday, go to flicks
All we do is go down park
Or maybe go down Welfare
And Ron'll have a swift half.

I hate 'em all now, I've cut 'em right off
And Ron he calls Bill a scab.
But there's summat inside o' me don't feel right
'Cos once they were best mates we had.

But what can I do? I'm a striker's wife
An' I'll fight with him till the end.
Even though in this struggle an' strife
I've got to lose all me friends.

'Cos Notts lads are all back at work
We're only ones stickin' it out.
Ron'll never go back an' I back him at that
But I wonder if it's all for nowt.

But what can I do I'm a striker's wife
I'll stick with him yes I'll tough it.
Even though for the rest o' me life
I'll wonder – well – were it all worth it?

How Green Was My Valley

How green was my valley, then
when white clouds scudded the mountain backs
and housemartins cheeped in the cottage eaves.

How yellow the marsh marigolds that
gemmed the bog, and red the ragged robin.
I wove them into a posy for you.

How golden the eye of the mountain hare
that loped to our porch that winter's day.
We saw in his eye the Lord of Hosts.

How brown the peaty pools where we swam
white-limbed beneath the white waterfall
and green the maidenhair fern on the black rocks.

How blue the blue of the bluebells
shimmering in drifts on the forest floor
and the blue of your undone dress as we lay.

How black was the stormy sky
and the rain that fell pell-mell
on the long black car that took you away.

A Boy's Song

Where the hills are gently green
Where the trout flicks in the stream
Up the nant and into the lea
That's the way for myself and me.

Where the puff balls puff their mist
When I swipe them with my stick
Where the swallows dip and fly
That's the way for myself and I.

Then I meet Ira from the farm
With laughing lips and girlish charm.
We play together all the summer
Together watch each long day shimmer.

Where the bracken's at its densest
Sniff the scent delight the senses
There we make our secret den
That's the place for me and my friend.

We chase the geese by the farmyard pond
We leap in the hay in the big old barn.
We tickle trout at the river's bend
That's the way for me and my friend.

But the long hot days they come to an end
And there's a shiver in the evening air
Swallows twitter on the telephone wires
The time has come to say goodbye.

Her hazel eyes and auburn hair
Her quick neat step and careless air.
I'll never forget that summer's end
The way it was for me and my friend.



Hen Harrier

As I climb to the moor
from the winding path of Cefn Hir Fynedd

I search for its shape.

Grey as a ghost, made of mist,
wings taut and still
quartering the heather,
two feet below –
I always saw it here.

An apparition.

Not for the hen harrier
the stop-the-show stoop of the peregrine
or the stop-the-breath air-riding of the windhover.

No, only the steady measured
moth-glide
the silent searcher.

Yes I always search for its wraith shape
when I climb
to the moor.
But in vain, now.

The gamekeepers of the corporate grouse-shoot
have long ago shot it
so a plutocrat can bag a brace of grouse
to carry back to his boutique hotel.

