

The Atkinson, in partnership with The Arts Society Southport, has invited anyone with links to the Sefton Borough to take part in a Poetry and Creative Writing Competition inspired by *The Story So Far* exhibition.

Looking at the theme of storytelling, this exhibition includes highlights from The Atkinson's collection and the Harris Art Gallery in Preston. The exhibition looks at differing kinds of storytelling, from the illustration of literary and historical texts to coastal and rural genre as well as classical and domestic scenes. The exhibition also includes post-war and contemporary works of art, illustrating the galleries' strategies for developing the narrative theme. Other themes represented in the exhibition are Faith and Doubt, and Myths, Fantasy and Dreams.

The competition winners will be announced on Monday 25 September 2023 and awarded prizes donated by The Arts Society Southport. The winning entries will also be incorporated alongside *The Story So Far* exhibition.



THEME: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre
Bird Scaring – March 1896
by George Clausen (1852 – 1944)
Harris Museum & Art Gallery Collection



THEME: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams
Puck, c.1871
by Richard Dadd (1817 – 1886)
Harris Museum & Art Gallery Collection



THEME: Modern Life
Sinn Féiners
by Walter Sickert (1860 – 1942)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



THEME: Faith and Doubt
La Prière du Matin or Morning Prayer, c.1860
by André-Henri Dargelas (1828-1906)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



THEME: Historical Genre/ Literary Genre
The Royal Family of France in the Prison
of The Temple, 1851
by Edward Matthew Ward (1816 – 1879)
Harris Museum & Art Gallery Collection

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

Puck by Richard Dadd

The Story Goes On (poem)

Death Of A Writer (prose)

by Jacqui Henshaw

What happened to the blaze of glory
At the end of a brave, long story?
To clever last words
With a twist to amaze?
Or lines of poignant poetry
To ease our pain.
Did you not prepare a cloth of gold
In which to rest with pen in hand?
Or select your best loved lines of old?
Did you not pave the way
And pen your last words
Before you went away?
What about that final tale
Of fairy glens and acorn cups
Or of distant guns or seashore days
Before that eternal sail?
The pen, the symbol of your life
Indeed there at your final epiphany
Not to write your masterpiece
But to choose numbers for your lottery.



On the death of her father Cecil Robert Wordingham (Bob) whilst filling in his lottery ticket, Jacqueline, who had admired his talents of writing, storytelling, sketching and painting could not easily accept that it had all ended.

She had his life story on cassette tapes, she had note books and copper-plate penned thoughts, and edited drafts but she didn't have him to add to the stories - the laughter and sadnesses.

A memory of his soft Norfolk accent, which did not completely disappear over the years in the South, washed over her as she recalled the stories he told to her and her sister.

Seated on either side of him on the wide arms of his ancient armchair, the sisters shivered in anticipation as he gently wove his inspirational tales of three fairies Amelia, Harriet and Emily who inhabited the woods, drinking from acorn cups, adorned in gossamer wings. His detailed descriptions created the scenes and painted the characters when, even into their seventies, the sisters could still have illustrated the tales.

His children lived in his world of words, of pens and pencils. Teaching them at three to write their long names by copying them on the plastic tablecloth as it could be wiped and done again. Insisting a letter of thanks was sent for each Christmas gift. He could spot a spelling error at a 100 paces.

Jacqueline watched her father write, draw and paint between working shifts. He brought paper home so he and his three children could write and draw to their heart's content.

He wrote poems about his war experiences.

He wrote poems about football, cleaning the chimneys and his beloved Norfolk. He wrote about characters at work or from his childhood. For his granddaughters he wrote 'Ode to a duvet' and 'Ode to a goldfish'. In later life 'Lament of failing to remember' when ageing meant he had to search for the odd word and sometimes had to jot things down.

When his son, went to university in 1965 he delighted in late night discussions with the students. Having left his North Norfolk school at 14 in 1925 he continued to clamour for knowledge and he knew he could have gone to University had it been a different time.

So at aged 58, with no formal academic education since the sparse offerings up to 1925 and the real education of a war, he decided to study for an A level. He had never taken an exam in his life and had no idea what it meant. He completed a night shift, took the train to London to sit the exam having had no sleep. He passed - just, but he had A level English. University here I come!

It took a while. The cost was high, he needed to save up. The Open University refused his application twice. Finally accepted, he spent the next six years studying in every spare moment he had. Reams of lengthy texts were handwritten as he had no idea how to make notes. Piles of books and summer schools took over his life along with hours spent in another room from his wife. She became lonely.

Finally he had his BA Hon. and the fulfilled dream of a graduation. He was 70, his photo and story were in the newspaper. He was proud and his family was proud. Three years later he regretted the six years he spent away from his wife who was dead at 66 years of age.

He was alone for 16 years. He missed her desperately but never stopped writing. Long letters to his sister in Australia, memories, poems, yes and reminder notes as he headed towards 89. His own funeral was full of his own poems, funny, clever and poignant.

He never knew that his clever, and multi- talented son was finally defeated by Parkinson's but who continued to fight with spidery writing to also express himself.

His stories lived on. Jacqueline became a teacher. His grandchildren became teachers, his stories lived on in their drama classes and history lessons and their love of poetry enthusiastically shared. His great grandchildren (he met one) eloquently wrote their university assignments.

This literary inheritance had branches like the family itself. Books filled bookshelves of the descendants but the fungi inspired literary web continued its diverse immersion into the third generation. That first great grandchild worked with the Lowry on the Creative Technology Research labs whilst her final drama pieces from university were being honed for a national tour.

His story continued. Jacqueline moved to Southport and immersed herself in courses on poetry, Shakespeare, Renaissance England, just so she could write. Her spare time spent on Committees writing emails, minutes and agendas. Her writings becoming new stories.

Bob's great grandchildren were already accepting A.I. in their everyday lives and in ways to communicate and tell their stories. Their writing was no longer pen and paper. Arms and hands no longer adapted to write.

What would Bob have made of it all? Would he have made it fit, made it his own and embraced another way to tell his stories? Undoubtedly, but Jacqueline still recalled those three fairies and heard his gentle voice which began this story.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre
Bird Scaring by George Clausen

Winner, 1st Place, Prose

The Bird Scarer
by Carol Whitehead



The winter wheat is sown, and the birds know all about it. A few small birds peck daintily at the earth, I let them feed, they don't take much. After a minute or two, I'll wave my arms and they'll fly away. I can hear the wood pigeons cooing softly, they'll be down next. I stamp my feet, they are numb with cold, have been all morning, I'm lucky to have boots even if they are too big for me and dead men's shoes but I don't care.

I've been in this field before, with brother Tom; sometimes, at midday, I'd take him a hunk of bread with some cheese. Usually, he is sitting under a hedge beside a small fire - like mine, but today he was off to town before daybreak. He told me he should be moving on, that scaring was a job for someone like me, that only kids should do it. I don't care what he says, I don't want his job, I'm just standing in for him today. Anyway, I'm at school 'til I'm eleven.

I wish I'd brought my rag; my nose has been running all day, I swipe my sleeve across it, Tom says that's what sleeves are for. No one's brought me food. There was nothing left this morning, not for me, not for Ma, Tom took it all. Big sister, Lizzie, left last year, she's gone into service. We hardly ever see her but when we do, she always brings a treat, like the pie. Ma said, 'I hope you haven't pinched that.'

Lizzie looked shocked, 'No I haven't, Miss Bradstock sent it'.

Ma coughed, closed her eyes, and leant back on her bed, 'Tell her thank you', her voice was harsh, weariness etched into her face, as it has been since our dad passed away. I close my eyes too, and think of that pie, my mouth waters, meat and potato in thick pastry and gravy running down my chin. My empty stomach groans.

Crows! Oh, those smart black birds, have dropped from the sky, flinging the soil over their shoulders in their frantic search, gobbling down the precious seed. I charge at them shaking my clapper, a right racket it makes, they look up, give me an evil stare, but take heed, and rise in a small dark cloud and fly away, cawing their harsh cry, mocking me and promising to be back.

There is an icy wind, thin and sharp, ripping through my clothes. I may as well be naked like the winter trees, we're both cold and lonely, they offer me no shelter. I gather some more twigs and leaves for my fire, it gives out little heat, nowhere near enough but it's something.

I tighten my muffler, a good red one Lizzie knitted for me. The sack, over my shoulders, is the one I wrap round me at night when I lie on my pallet and I'm grateful for it, even if it is too thin and harbours a fair number of fleas and bedbugs. Sometimes, Tom eats the bugs; I'd have to be starving to do that, he says he is!

I think it's mid-afternoon, my work ends when darkness falls, I can see the sun dipping towards the horizon. I've never been so bored, not much longer to go now. I wish I was at my school desk, my slate covered in chalk. I can read and write, Ma is proud of me, says I could be a clerk when I leave school.

It's dusk; I'm taking giant strides around the edge of the field, I shout to an empty world - 'My-Name-Is-Robert-Banks', over and over again.

'Hello Robert Banks,' I jump, she has crept up behind me, it's Jessie Carver, the farmer's daughter, 'What are you doing?'

'Bird scarin''. I mumble.

'I know that!' Jessie is a few years older than me; she takes a small tart from the pocket in her pinny and hands it to me, I stuff it straight into my mouth, then remember to thank her. It's so good but makes the hunger pangs even worse, I want ten tarts.

I hear them before I see them, a great clacking and calling – the geese! They come from the north, on their way back to their winter quarters, with any luck they will pass over. I have no luck. Like a grey blanket they settle on the field, busy beaks turning over the earth, seeds scooped up in an instant. I am among them, dashing here and there, my clapper going crazy. 'Don't ignore me!' I shout. At last, they take fright at the din I'm making. They rise above the field, form their neat 'V' and fly away, honking into the distance.

'Are you coming every day now?' Jessie asks.

'No, it's Tom's job, I'm still at school.'

'Not Tom's job anymore', she says, 'Dad said he's off to town to find a better living.'

'No, he's only gone for...' Jessie shakes her head and the truth dawns on me, like Lizzie he has left us. We are on our own.

I start to cry, I feel childish in front of Jessie, but I can't stop, the tears are pouring down my cheeks. My thoughts spin – I'll get a few pence for my work today, but there's rent and food and Ma's too sick to do her sewing. 'It's the workhouse for us, then' I swallow and swipe at my tears.

Jessie reaches for my hand, 'Mother says you're to come to the farm for supper and there's a bed for you and tomorrow, after school, you can help me with the hens.'

'But what about Ma?'

'Don't worry about your ma, our Alice is taking care of ...of everything,' her gaze is steady, her sad smile tells me all I need to know.

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

Puck by Richard Dadd

The Last Faerie Tale

by Alan C. Williams



Once upon a time, faeries lived in the world of Man. They dwelt at the bottoms of gardens, beneath the cover of mushrooms or thorn bushes, tending the flowers. Once upon a time.

However, almost a century ago they left the realm of Man and moved to the lush fields and forests of a sidereal plane close to our own Universe.

And when they left, the world of Mankind became a sadder place.

"Hell," Belinda swore as the plastic bag in her hand tore, spilling her clothing onto the puddles on the garden beds.

"No! My best jumper!" Still sobbing, she gathered the mud-covered clothing against her chest and started towards the car again.

Despite the rains and biting wind, Belinda Turner was determined to leave. Their marriage was finished. Yet, part of her wanted to stay. If he had come to the door and called her, she would have relented ... at least until the storm abated.

Then she heard it. A desperate voice was pleading for help. It was so faint.

"Where are you?" Belinda called. Hearing a reply, she scanned the thick branches of the birch tree. When she saw the tiny figure struggling against some netting, Belinda gasped. It couldn't possibly be, could it? She ran to their home.

"Trev! Come quickly," she yelled.

"You're back!" Was there relief in his eyes.

"You'll need the ladder," she said. Belinda grabbed the flashlight. Her cold, wet hands touched his briefly.

"You're freezing! Here. Put these on and do your coat up, sweetheart."

Only moments before she'd decided that they were better off being apart. Now ...?

The storm had become more intense as they approached the tree. She shone the torch upwards.

"It's a ..." he gasped, turning to face his wife.

"You have to help her, Trev."

He didn't hesitate, clambering up the ladder steps whilst Belinda held it steady against the gusting deluge. Gently, he untangled the netting.

"We have to get her inside ... warm her up," she suggested, viewing the tiny female closely for the first time.

Once there, they placed her on a cardigan. She was too tiny to touch so they could only watch, praying that she would recover. Belinda had never felt more helpless, not since that night they stood by their daughter's bed-side as she finally lapsed into a coma and died. Trevor clasped her hand in his.

Finally, the still figure opened her miniscule eyes. They were saffron yellow. The wings so often associated with faeries were absent though it was clear to her rescuers what she was. Approximately fifteen centimetres tall, she was an adult woman in miniature, clad in a flimsy translucent material that pulsed in the dancing fire-light.

The fae slowly sat up, her tousled copper-toned hair drooping over her bared shoulders.

"Thank you," she whispered into their minds. Telepathy. Belinda was surprised to 'hear' Trevor's thoughts as well. Glancing at him, she realised that he shared hers also. In some supernatural manner, they were all three linked ... their thoughts and feelings mingling together in one delicious, loving intimacy. The sprite was named Tenanye. She began to relate a tale that caressed their thoughts like a cool salt-tinged sea breeze. It was a story unlike any other as they not only 'heard' her narrative, they 'saw' the scenes unfold within their minds.

Their faerie guide 'spoke' about the chronicles of the history of Mankind and their elemental companions; from their initial meetings in the forests of Europe and Nepal, through the epic Pegasus Quest when both fae-folk and humans soared over the Sahara on Sirocco winds, and onto through the Dreamtime of Australia. Trevor and Belinda sat, listening intently to the detailed chronicles. Tenayne's tales continued throughout that storm-shrouded night; narratives of wonder that spanned the development of civilisation for man and woman. The two cultures continued to co-exist however direct contact became rare indeed, the very name Fairy or Faerie was gradually confined to childhood fiction.

The final decision to abandon Earth began at a small township in Yorkshire, England known as Cottingley. Once the closest of friends, the petite creatures of nature felt more threatened and alienated than ever before. And so, they left this earthly plane, returning a few at a time to assess whether it was safe to re-join humanity once more.

Tenanye had been the last to visit. Her reports indicated that no further journeys should be made between the sidereal dimensions as the differences between the Worlds of Magic and Sciences were now far too great.

As she concluded her history, the brilliant morning sun flooded the room with its glow. Tenanye announced, "It's time for me to go."

By now, they had realised that she had never been in danger from the storm. Tenanye was a sprite of nature. It was then that Belinda understood. She'd been about to leave Trev and so Tenanye had concocted a crisis to force them together again.

The past night-time was her gift to the young couple who were now so firmly in love once more. Through the wonders of that darkness, both people had shared a very intimate part of themselves.

"We fae would love for you to tell our story."

They reflected mutely on her words. They would have no problems in recalling every glorious nuance then record it on paper over the weeks ahead.

Tenanye stood up, stretched her delicate arms, then 'uttered' her final words.

"My greatest gift to you and to every child who will read your book; our history ... our lives ... The Last Fairie Tale."

They didn't realise until the book was published just how great was that gift. Although humanity and the Sidhe are now on different planes of reality, reading tales from the book somehow allowed parents and children alike to pass through that astral doorway whilst dreaming, reuniting us and the fae as the companions we were destined to be.

Inspiration: Historical Genre

Victoria

by Pam Lewis

A round squat figure was our queen.
Short and stout in black bombazine
A lace cape instead of a crown.
Her face was glum marred by a frown.
For years our monarch wore widow weeds.
Oblivious to her countries needs
Efforts to please her were refused.
Queen Victoria was not amused.

An untimely death had met her prince
She'd been in mourning ever since.
Albert had been the love of her life.
Victoria the perfect doting wife.
He'd always been at her right hand.
Now without him she ruled our land.
To bad humours she was prone.
Spurning the court-just being alone.

Time and tide managed to ease her pain.
A dutiful queen she became again.
At last she cast away her grief.
The country sighed with glad relief.
Her spirits were no longer down.
Had she found solace with John Brown.
The gillies company wasn't refused.
Queen Victoria was once more amused.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

Southport A Place By The Sea

by Gale Parkinson

For no longer lapping waves, the sand beneath your toes
Of races ran and donkey rides
Skating ring and bathing beauties by the pool,
Pleasureland rides such laughter and fun

Wooden huts for lost and first aid, whilst lifeguards kept watch
The glorious duck to go into the sea its missions not always to be

Courting couples new romances at the floral hall with Saturday dances
Pop groups galore a walk by the shore.

Echoes of music from the bandstand that fill the air, marine lake
Miniature railway, the pier and the zoo, sticks of rock and ice cream too

Changing fashions those were the years the swinging place to be
With famous people too many to name
We even remember the four legged ones who trained by the sea
Now organised fireworks Air displays and Flower Show still

While Southport remains a place by the Sea

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams and Modern Life

Angel Blessings

by Bethan Rose

Is it okay, my Angel,
If I have another baby?
I'm not sure exactly when.
Sometime soon, maybe?
You're irreplaceable, my Angel.
And this will never change.
But being a Mummy, with empty arms,
Really feels quite strange.
So here I am, my Angel,
Asking if it's okay.
I feel like I need your blessing.
As that's the only way.
That I can look forward, my Angel.
I know you'll understand.
And as your brother or sister grows,
You'll be with me, holding my hand.

Inspiration: Faith and Doubt

La Prière du Matin by Andre-Henry and
The Children's Prayer by Arthur Hacker

Winner, 2nd Place, Poetry

The Hidden Lollipop

by Phil McNulty

It must have been Lent, but we were sent there
With no adult understanding, just a child's awed
obedience
And medieval fear of not going, straight from
school on that Friday.
With such a sense of smallness. Lost amongst the
other tiny penitents
In our shapeless grey jumpers, gape-legged shorts
and grassy knees.

The men and women had such purpose. Knew the
words, heads bowed,
Towered over our observance, or knelt, huddled,
in heroic piety.
We looked around with hooded eyes, through
lattice fingers,
At polished wood benches, green kneelers,
The red of the Sacred Heart, the immaculate blue
and white of the Virgin.
The harshness of stone columns stretching away
To the altar cloth, gold candles and vested
priest.

We moved as waves, standing, sitting, kneeling,
genuflecting,
Eyes shut, eyes open, mumbling the Creed or mute
in fear and reverence.
I failed to follow the words in the brown prayer
book.
I felt bad about myself.

I should never have escaped into the corner shop,
Never have bought the ice lolly and secreted it in
my pocket.
My offertory penny was spent and was cold in its
paper wrapper against my leg.



Through the arch at the end of the aisle, I glimpsed
the horrors of Christ's torture.
He had died for me. Was beaten, lashed and
crucified.
Suffered bloody indignity and pain.

I felt the icy raspberry trickling towards my grey
sock.
This was my passion, my torment, my deserved
punishment.
It was a sign.
I knew, now.
I truly believed - that He was watching me.

Inspiration: Modern Life

Pets Know Best

by Joe Gallivan

He knocked the budgie over
He caught him such a clout
From Southport down to Dover
You could have heard the shout

His little wings were broken
He lay there in a heap
No words that could be spoken
Not even one small cheep

Just then the heavens filled up
With birds of every hue
The leader of this build up:
A budgie, six feet two

"I'm a top notch feathered Beak
This court is now in session
Despite your crime we'll let you speak
We'll all hear your confession"

"I never meant to hurt him much"
The man said to the sage
"I wanted just to shut him up
By rattling on his cage"

"You swine! Not a single doubt
You murdered him, you brute!
Your sentence I must now give out
A punishment to suit"

"Peck him! Scratch him! Throw some stones
Dig a hole and fill it
With flesh and guts and human bones
All mixed in with our millet!"

Above the din the Beak boomed "No!
For *civilised* are we
A fitting way for him to go?
We'll drop him in the sea"

And so they grabbed the hapless chap
They carried him up high
Said Beak: "You have no wings to flap?
Oh dear! Tough luck! Goodbye"

Down he plummets, full of fright
Quite sure his life has ended
Bracing himself with all his might
As sky and vision blended

He came to with a sudden bump
His head had hit the floor
A wine stain spread along his rump
And legs wrapped round the door

Across the room pet Benny
Looked down at him and squawked
"Dad's had one too many"
You're right this time he thought!

Inspiration: Historical Genre/ Literary Genre

The Royal Family of France in the Prison of The Temple
by Edward Matthew Ward

Winner, 1st Place, Poetry

Dans la Prison du Temple, 1792

by Pam Armstrong



Dust collects in the corner of the cell.
Dust made from our skin shedding.
Dust collects everywhere.
It makes the Dauphin cough. Dust, the constant.
Dust that will remain here after us. Dust the unfearful.
Dust. Dust the ignorer, insensitive to the taunts
of the sans culottes who make Maman cry.
Dust. Bored. Dust. I watch it like a hobby.
Dust becomes my inner world.
Sunlight.
Sunlight. A beam of sunlight in the corner
catches dust stirred up by the swoosh of our dresses.
I watch specks of it floating in air currents.
Dust floating up and up past the crucifix
up, up to the draughty window and out.
Dust floating. Dust escaping floating in the breeze
if only we could with such ease.
I cling to my faith, pray and think this is my
God's message of hope that we will be freed.

*Postscript: Madame Royale Marie-Thérèse was the only
royal prisoner of the Temple to survive*

Inspiration: Faith and Doubt
The Word by Keith Henderson

The Word
by Margot Mains



Friday night. A few pennies in their pockets and the lads were making for the key side inn. All thoughts of the grinding daily toil left their heads as they fell across the threshold like puppies let off the leash.

They clasped their brimming pints and buried their bronzed faces in the foaming brew. Drinking deeply, they came up for air, gasping. Grinning at each other, they surveyed the room.

The prime seats by the fire were taken by the grizzled denizens who had earned their roosts through age and custom. Briar pipes were firmly clenched between teeth and brackish smoke filled the alcove. Rheumy eyes glared balefully at the young men, daring them to usurp their rights Tom nodded briefly in their direction, acknowledging their status.

His attention slid towards the bar and the buxom barmaid. Grinning cheekily, he leant over the bar blowing kisses in Megan's direction. Smirking, she looked over her shoulder while pulling a pint. She was used to Tom's flirtatious ways but immune to his charm. She had seen him in action too often in the bar, chatting up every pretty girl. Comforting weeping damsels, Tom's rejects, was all too familiar. She was not about to have her heart broken by this handsome rogue, despite his blandishments.

Regretfully, Tom took his pint over to where Ben was patiently waiting for him on the settle near the door. Their conversation drifted towards their next voyage on the Islay Maid which was to take them to the fishing grounds beyond the Outer Hebrides the following day. Neither lad relished the hardships of such a sailing, but they liked the money and trusted their skipper. As they raised their pints once more, the door opened, bringing a blast of winter with Annie, laughing and rosy cheeked. Annie fell onto Tom, throwing her arms around him, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. He responded with a kiss and held her tightly, grinning impishly.

The door reopened slowly, revealing the hunched figure of Mother Maud. In her outstretched hand she proffered a black book to Tom. "Save your soul, young man, and avoid the sins of the flesh before it's too late!" she warned him. Tom and Annie stared and giggled at the old crone. Her piecing gaze was unsettling however and they cast sheepish looks at their mates who were open-mouthed with incredulity. Her gaze swept the room as she intoned, "The hour cometh sooner than you think! Prepare your souls to meet the Lord!" Gathering her basket of bibles to her chest, she turned to leave, fixing Tom with an earnest look.

Unsettled by this encounter, Tom rose, kissing Annie lightly on the nose, signalling to Ben that it was time to go.

Tom pulled on his heavy boots and donned his sou'wester and oilskins. He pushed his way out onto the glistening cobblestones. It had rained heavily overnight and the sky was still grey and louring. A brisk northerly wind whipped round him as he made his way to the quay side and on to the Islay Maid. The skipper nodded and looked at the sky. "Rough weather," he grunted laconically. "Tie everything down tight." Tom set to work and was soon joined by Ben who laughingly reminded him about his immortal soul. Tom thumped him playfully on the chest. "Anchors away!" shouted the skipper and the lads jumped to their stations.

Seagulls screamed and swirled above the trawler, greedy to share in the spoils of the sea. The vessel bucked and rolled in the roiling swell, sheets of icy water crashed onto the deck, blinding the crew. In the wheelhouse the skipper clung grimly to the wheel, screwing his eyes to see through the spray battering his screen. The stoker blackened and sweating, shovelled coal into the boiler to enable the trawler to make headway. The fishing nets and tackle swung perilously in the wind threatening to break away from their rigging.

There was a sudden ominous lull. The sky darkened and huge clouds were illumined by jagged forks of lightning. The thunder roared overhead as the wind direction changed and craft was tossed like a paper boat swirling in a gutter. The deck lurched to one side, propelling the helpless deckhands into the railings. They grasped hold of the icy rails, endeavouring to bring themselves upright. Making their way hand over hand towards the hatches, blinded and deafened by the ferocity of the storm, Tom and Ben grabbed hold of the hatch, making for safety. As Tom was poised to drop into the hold, the vessel gave another huge lurch and a vast metal cleat broke free and swung across the deck, lifting Tom off his feet and over the side of the boat. As Tom flew through the air towards the sucking surf, he heard Old Maud's words ringing in his ears as the waves closed over him.

Inspiration: Literary Genre and Ponting Exhibition

Daffodil's (Pastiche)

by Christopher Coxhead

I ambled amongst ice so fresh,
With icy winds, so cold and strong.
Espied ahead, a mighty creche,
Emperor Penguin father's throng.
Each with a child upon their feet
Throughout Antarctic's wintry beat.

Each penguin pair shuffles all night,
A self-heating raft what a sight
Like a huge ball, of wool drawn tight.
Those Emperor Dads doing what's right.
Chicks protected and fed alright.
Through Antarctic Winter's cold night.

Mums fast feet propel her ashore.
She's full ready, to feed her chick.
Follows the trail of those before,
Her wonderful waddle's quite quick,
She cries out very shrill of voice.
Winters gone mum is here, rejoice.

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

Pygmalion and Galatea by Ernest Normand



Strange Events: A Point Of View

by Jan Hill

Arrius shuffled painfully down the stony track that led from his little house to the agora. He'd been careful to bring his staff to help on the steeper sections. It was a useful thing, no doubt about it, but he had used it long before his old knees needed help. It had been hand-crafted by his eldest son, not simply any old stick that happened to naturally form the correct shape.

He came to a thicket of ancient olive trees and paused, hoping that the agora was less busy today. Yesterday, he had heard, the place had been alive with the buzz of unsettling events. He listened intently before moving round the last bend, shielded from the impudent gazes of those who sought news and would press him for it. It seemed quiet now though. Offering a silent prayer of thanks to any of the gods who would hear him Arrius saw that there were only a few people enjoying melon slices outside Crantor's little shop. He moved slowly to the edge of the market place to a spot that overlooked the wide turquoise bay below the village. He leaned more heavily on his staff now. He was relying on the ancient stone seating to give back the heat of the day and ease his joints. He settled with a sigh and stretched out his legs. He'd chosen the right time after all. Everyone was going about their business elsewhere for once.

He nodded to Crantor and his guests. It was no use going to the agora and being aloof. Maybe they'd give him some peace, maybe not, but it would be rude not to acknowledge their presence. Arrius had come to see the soothing, pellucid waters where Poseidon lurked and feel the lift of the Amenois' winds as they cooled his hilltop. His mind and heart were troubled and needed respite. There are some things he thought he would never see, things no one should ever see.

He watched the painted boats pulled out onto the strand below. There were more than usual – no doubt drawn here for gossip. Denial or confirmation of the strange news up at the palace probably. How he wished he had been absent from his duties yesterday. His faithfulness had not served him well.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the evening scents of oleander and rosemary. Reaching gently forward he felt he could almost touch his wife's hand, rings glinting as she made garlands of jasmine and sweet herbs for Aphrodite's temple. But she dwelt in Hades now, with the Unseen One.

Arrius became aware of laughter and music drifting over from the far edge of the village. Reluctantly opening his eyes he could see that a procession had formed and was winding its way up to the temple on its herb-strewn headland. No wonder that the agora had been so empty. Musicians were leading the way followed by maidens carrying platters of fruit to offer to the goddess. Children scampered about, their blossom coronets bobbing along as they skipped their way upwards. So they, at least, were celebrating the arrival of

new and impossibly beautiful member of the village. Arrius pondered his own reluctance to agree with them. After all, who was he to dispute Aphrodite's benevolence?

He realised with a start that Crantor was standing right in front of him.

"You aren't joining in with the celebrations then, Papu?" he asked.

"No more than you are, nor your friends come to that," Arrius replied tartly.

"Well I for one don't buy the nonsense that's going around. You should have been here yesterday – statues coming to life? I ask you! That lot will believe anything."

Arrius shook his head ruefully. He couldn't really blame Crantor. If he hadn't been there himself he wouldn't have believed it either. But he *had* been there and he couldn't deny the long days when all he could hear was the tap, tap tapping of chisel on stone and the night cries when his master, Pygmalion, had worn himself out entreating Aphrodite to send him a wife as beautiful as the statue of his own making. The arrogance of the man! He shook his head again trying to rattle his disjointed thoughts into some sort of order.

Crantor's eyes narrowed as he took in Arrius' silence. "So it's true then, you don't deny it!"

"How could I? You'll no doubt see her yourself if you join in with the rest. She'll be up at the temple by now I should think."

Crantor's eyes nearly popped out of his head and he ran quickly back to his companions waving his arms in excitement. Glad to be rid of him, Arrius returned to his musings, deeply troubled. A statue come to life indeed! It seemed wrong yet it was sanctioned by a goddess! His master named her Galatea, she who is white as milk. Appropriate enough for sure. But could she speak, have thoughts of her own, love and hate in equal parts? Or was she only to fulfil *his* ideal as a wife and mother?

He thought of his own dear Rhea, named for the mother of gods. Nut brown skin, little as a honey pot, spicy and opinionated, clever, temperamental and loving. Would he have swapped her for white skin, a generous mouth and tall beauty? Maybe, if he was honest, he might have been swayed as a youth by such things. But he had never regretted choosing Rhea nor begrudged any of the years they had had together.

He closed his eyes again. The distant jangling music seemed appropriate somehow.

Inspiration: Modern life

Sinn Féiners by Walter Sickert

Winner, 2nd Place, Prose

Two Faced

by Sue Belcher



I had managed to carry two memorable faces from Ireland back with me to England. The weekend itself had been a disaster and my friend had been apologetic, but the fact remained we had not been able to step outside his estate grounds the whole four days I was there because of the local situation. I had heard stories before I left England; Churchill and Beaverbrook had warned me against going, and I was soon to see the sense in what they said for myself. However, at the time, as far as I was concerned, we were celebrating the wedding of my god-daughter, and that was all there was to it. Once there however, it was impossible to ignore the comings and goings, the furtive looks of surprise if I appeared unexpectedly, or the muffled shouting and slamming of doors downstairs in his elegant home.

The woman who ran the kitchen and cleared the dishes was forthright and strong, with no sense of delicacy, and it struck me that her face and hat were always of a combination that were never seen apart. Her apron wrapped around her substantial waist, she had fixed me with a glare when she saw I had left meat dishes uncovered one breakfast time. She was clearly in charge, despite her lowly position. My host told me that although he had hired extra help for the wedding, she was the person everyone knew was going to make it a memorable occasion either for all the right or all the wrong reasons. When I asked him what he meant he looked aside and whispered 'Sinn Feiners' in my ear. At that point I did not know what he meant, but now I do.

My second day there, I had been waiting for my host to in the beaters from the pheasant shoot, and to be given refreshment after our morning on the marshes. The woman was in the back entrance hall, near to where we off-loaded the guns, and I could not help but watch her berating a young lad who had been with the beaters. He had brought his own gun, which at the time I did not pay much attention to, but I realise now was unusual. He was sat on a wicker chair, looking quiet and somewhat dejected as she carried on in a sharp voice. Her words were indistinct, but her manner was anything but, as she was laying into him with a stream of words that were harsh and unforgiving. His face struck me with a sensitivity of emotion etched on it which was quite at odds with the abuse he was receiving, yet he sat silent, hunched a little with his rifle propped against the table. Finally she stopped and he now looked at her, his face streaming with tears, and she continued to stand with her hands now returned to her hips as he rose and picked up the rifle, slowly making his way outside. What had I just witnessed? Her seeming anger was not directed at him entirely, but appeared to stem from something he must have told her. Possibly something that had happened that morning which had had an effect on the boy... maybe someone they both knew had suffered in some way? She was now moving towards me and I put out my hand as if to momentarily touch her arm, although naturally I did not.

"Is something amiss?" I asked quietly but firmly, looking directly into her troubled eyes.

"No", she added "Sir". "There is nothing to concern yourself. It will soon be clear to everyone, There, I've said enough now". She wrung her hands briefly into her apron and turned, almost ran, into the kitchen.

Later that day, as the gas lamps were being lit, I chanced on the lad again and this time he appeared to be flushed and excited, but as I watched his face in the soft light, he began to talk under his breath to himself, muttering something to help him remember some numbers. Over and over he repeated them, and I slowly began to realise they were not just random numbers, but sounded to my ears like the battalion numbers of English soldiers that were arriving that weekend from England. But Churchill had told me before I left that their arrival was being kept top secret. "Could it possibly be this lad was learning them, may be so he could repeat them to someone else later on?" I wondered to myself.

I joined my host later that evening after dinner, and we sat together in a quiet corner of his study. Over dinner I had finally decided not to mention to him anything of what I had witnessed. After all, what had I seen really? His only daughter was to be married the next day, and as his oldest friend I did not want to spoil the evening with any vague conjectures of wrongdoings.

The next morning I woke to brilliant blue skies and a warm breeze. As I dressed I studied the brief sketches of the woman and boy that I done the night before. Suddenly, the bell on the stable began to ring, over and over again, as if it was calling for someone. I did not know if this was to summon people to the wedding or to give alarm, and as nothing else stirred outside, I decided it must be the former, and to spread the good tidings. As I stepped onto the gravel outside, preparing to walk to the little chapel for the ceremony, there was a huge explosion further along in the same direction. People running and screaming and mayhem broke lose. Alarmed but not flustered, I could see I had not a moment to lose. I ran back for my case and sketching pads before taking the path around the back of the house that led to the short walk to the nearest town and station.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

Bird Scaring by George Clausen

Bottled Love

by Susan K. Stacey

Love tossed aside by wild tempestuous sea,
Words left unspoken, desperate to break free.
As wind and rain knock fiercely at its heart,
Two lonely souls drift gradually apart.

As spring announced rich blessings on mankind,
They fell in love, a meeting of two minds.
By summer he had gone down on one knee,
And asked his sweetheart '*will you marry me?*'

When conflicts rose in countries far and wide,
She knew she'd have to wait to be his bride.
By autumn, as the leaves had left their trees,
He'd also left to travel overseas.

At first she couldn't wait to read each letter
His loving words would make her feel much better.
But when the seasonal snowflakes began to fall
The letters ceased and fear rose in her soul.

Despite all efforts it was plain to see,
No one had found him, reported '*Lost at Sea.*'
A year went past, she got on with her life,
but dreaming all the while of being his wife.



Then out of the blue, a bottle had been found,
On Southport beach, just hidden in the sand.
A message from a sailor lay scrunched inside,
With words to find his love, his precious bride.

She recognised the writing straight away,
His ship was named, which sank near Colwyn Bay.
Some sailors had been saved and he was one,
Recovering in a home in Caenarfon.

She took the train to be right by his side,
And when she saw his face, filled up with pride.
He'd rescued other sailors from the sea,
And had received a medal gloriously.

As soon as he was better they were wed,
In Southport, where the letter had been read.
They built their lives together by the sea
and raised a precious loving family.

Inspiration: Historical Genre/ Literary Genre

Awaiting Publication of 'Le Moniteur' for News
of the Arrest of Robespierre by William Henry Fisk

The Wait

by T.H. Robinson

We wait here for news of deliverance,
from the tyrant who has oppressed us,
Outside the glinting guillotines stand,
Waiting for their next purge of blood,
the blood that taints our land.

They have basked in luxury
Lavish and opulent, fine and fancy free.
while the peasant's wrath fermented,
the results now plain to see.

Echoes of frivolity and foppery,
resonated through the country
ground swell of fury springs forward in a flood,
now society has paid the price,
a fee soaked in death and blood.

Wrongs and evils,
founded in your name,
now blood and justice mingle
your life will never be the same.

Kings and men of power
tumble into the mire
consumed by execution
and a slow descent into fire.

The price you pay is very high,
anarchy and chaos rule here
but some hope offered to the rich
by the planned arrest of Robespierre.



Freedom, fraternity and equality
run deep in this country's veins
but now indulgence and indifference
are torn down where only death remains.

A blade falls
Proceeded by a cheer,
the purging flames of retribution,
lessons writ in death and fear.

Saw the savagery of mob anger
parade before your children's eyes,
but in the scatterings of violence,
the brooding truth of freedom lies.

Fury and vengeance bubble hot,
spill into molten hate,
the seeds that you have sown here
are reaped in a dark fate.

So they sit here waiting
nerves are ready and taut,
but out upon the streets of France
our battles have been fought.

Inspiration: Faith and Doubt

Morning Prayer by André-Henri Dargelas

Life Is For Living

By Julie Phillips

Life is for living,
Love is for giving.
There's joy in receiving,
Letting go and grieving.
In feeling my Being,
Instead of fleeing
Into distractions
And using abstractions.

Life is This Moment,
The vital component.
Of Being Aware
That I'm actually Here!
Enjoying my breathing,
My smelling and sneezing,
Hearing the birds sing
The bees buzzing,
Church bells ring.



To bask in the Beauty,
Is more than a duty.
So I indulge in Spring flowers,
Dance through April showers.
To absorb the sun's warming rays.
On bright sunny days
And the wind's gentle touch
Is never too much.

Each moment so precious,
Always capricious.
With freshness anew,
A self rendezvous!
Life is for Living
Love is for Giving
There's Joy in it All
Life's Great Dancing Hall.

Inspiration: Myths, Fantasy and Dreams

Puck by Richard Dadd



The Story Of Hepsdown Village

By Kathy Cowan

It happened one autumn when leaves were gold tinted and the wild mushrooms were sought in the fields. It was then that it started

The village of Hepsdown was cosied in a valley surrounded by undulating hills each capped with a copse of deciduous trees. The old oak in the field at the edge of the village no longer grew tall, but branched outwards inviting local children to climb. Brambles were tangled around the edge of its field where blackberries were sought, the best bushes kept secret by the pickers. Rivalry arose from this hunt for wild food of cob nuts and berries as winter was on the cusp and food needed collecting and storing to swell the poor harvest that year. Neighbours, normally friendly, snapped at each other and then at their children. Hungry, the young were sent out to scavenge what they could from hedgerows, taking the babies with them, while harassed mothers did their best with meagre stores.

Neighbours stole from each other, rifling through the clamps of potatoes, carrots and even the pears that were supposed to feed the pig through the winter. Doors were slammed voices raised. This Hepsdown village was not a happy place to be. The children hated it and said so to each other as they traipsed in search of late berries and mushrooms. After hours of hunting they stopped in a field to rest and nibble the shared crust that they had been given. The babies cried and sucked their thumbs.

'What are we going to do' said Tom, putting down his trug of blackberries. 'My parents are raging with each other and at old Mr Pike next door. They said he had picked some of the mushrooms from the field that they had mentioned to him a few days earlier.

'They should not have told him then' said Adam, a slight boy with a red nose and scabbed knees.

'I just wish they could all be happy and share what they have, just once!' Sarah chipped in, her untidy plaits tied with rags to hold them in place, 'Let's hold hands and make a wish'

What! sneered Tom, 'Why should we?'. The other boys looked sheepish, but acquiesced as they were desperate for a change too. They made a circle clasping each other's berry-stained fingers putting the babies in the middle.

'Please let them all be happy just for once' they said fervently with closed eyes.

'What will you give me if I make it happen,' piped a fluty voice. Startled the children scrambled to their feet looking round.

'I'm here said the voice and a small figure with sly eyes stood before them.

'Who are you?',

'Do you not know?', came the reply, 'I am Puck and I can grant your wish if you lend me a baby'.

The bemused children leapt to their feet. Tom stepped forward warily,

'Lend you a baby?', he said incredulously, 'why ever would we do that?'

'How desperate are you', came the reply. 'I promise you no harm will come to him, but I will bring peace to your village. All you need to do is go home, and tell them that Puck has baby Peter, for that is the child I need

for a few hours. Tell them they need to come to this field at sundown, all the village, mind you, or I will take him forever’.

The ragged group of fearful children huddled together. With hushed whispers they considered their options, ongoing battles between parents, with their old friends, hateful words and even fights, or peace. They were left with no choice, so home they went leavening Peter happily sitting in the grass circle being fed honey by Puck.

With trepidation they knocked on everyone’s door and told them that to get Peter back all the village needed to go to the field by the old oak. The villagers looked askance at the quaking children, but the look of fear in their eyes said it was true and had to be done.

Pots were taken off fires and animals penned as the villagers streamed down the lane across to the field just as the moon was rising. To their amazement there sat the baby Peter, but on a giant mushroom and he had grown to an unnatural size. He gave a sly smile and picked up some pan pipes. The music he played enchanted the villagers in such a way that they cheerfully threw off all their clothes, Clasp hands and naked, the previously squabbling adults began to dance and cavort around Peter in the moonlight. The children stood aghast as parents and grandparents alike were trapped in the enchanted music. Eventually the music stopped and the exhausted folk sank to the grass. Baby Peter, far too young to talk, opened his mouth and with a gurgling chuckle said,

‘Thank you all for coming to rescue me and dance so beautifully around me, now listen, if you do not stop your fighting, you will remain in this field until you drop. Your bones will be covered with leaves from this oak leaving the unhappy children alone. Be kind to each other, share your food and help those in need....or..... I will come back...you know who I am’.

Stunned silence until suddenly clothes were grabbed and hastily put on over perspiring bodies and very red faces, not from the exercise either. Embarrassment hidden with covered heads looking at the ground.

‘We will, we will, we promise’, came a unanimous chant, ‘we promise’. At that Peter started shrinking down and down until he was baby sized again. His mother seized him and ran for home with all following, except for the children. The slight figure of Puck stood before them and laughed,

‘Well, that was fun, maybe I’ll do it again sometime, go home children and help your parents to behave’.

Winter came as winters do, followed by warm springs. Villagers were indeed helpful and sharing and even kind to each other. Baby Peter grew into a lively child and just sometimes he gave a sly smile if he saw the slightest hint of an argument.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/Seaside Genre

Bird Scaring by George Clausen



The Lark Ascending

by Kathleen Smith

'Tommy, get up now! Mr Anderson wants you on that field before the sun is up.' Tommy moaned. It was too dark and too cold to get out of bed but they needed his penny so he had no choice. He pulled his trousers over his shirt, stuffed his feet into his boots, tied an old blanket round his shoulders, grabbed a piece of bread and left the kitchen.

Out at the barn, he picked up the wooden clapper and the flint box and made his way to the fields.

The sun wasn't up yet and it was still cold and dark. If he ran up and down enough, he could stop his toes from freezing.

'George, why don't you go out for a walk? You've been at those books for a long time now! Go off out onto the common and get some fresh air.'

George moaned. He enjoyed reading and writing his poetry and he didn't really want to go out but perhaps he had no choice. He grabbed his jacket and scarf and left his cosy sitting room for the windswept common.

'Ralph! What are you doing? Why don't you take a break and go to the park? You know you write better when you've been outside.'

Ralph moaned but got up from the piano. He'd been trying to capture the music in his head for a while now but it refused to lay down on the page. He grabbed his hat and pipe and strode down the street.

The spark from the flint lit the leaves and Tommy set about trying to keep warm. Once the sun came up, he'd soon be too hot but, for now, he kept his blanket tightly round his shoulders. The field had been ploughed and the corn had been sown. As long as he could keep the birds away from the precious crop all would be well.

Unfortunately, it was nearly impossible to stop the birds. No sooner had he run down to one end of the field and scared everything away there than they had all flown up to the top of the field and he had to start again. It was very hard to keep the corn from being eaten. Still, that was his job, so he started his run clapper in hand.

There was the threat of rain in the air, but George walked on determined to reach the coastal path. Ahead of him, the sea rolled and strained against the sky. Kicking the seed heads into clouds of dust, George stopped. To his left, something rose vertically into the sky. Its wings were beating rapidly as it soared higher and higher....and higher....and then stopped. Hovering, hovering, hovering.....before parachuting back down to earth.

Life was very unsettling just now. The storm of war was approaching and Ralph felt unease creeping into every home and hearth. He walked along the path out of the park towards the farm and turned down the lane between the fields. There was solace in the countryside in these last few days of peace. The poem Ralph had been reading came back to him and with each step came the notes of a violin soaring until it merged with the sky and disappeared.

Something on the ground made Tommy stop his run. He bent down and touched the soft lining of the hollow. Leaves, grasses and hair cradled six beautifully spotted grey-white eggs. A bird nearby rose shouting into the wind. The protector of the eggs began a display of sight and sound to distract Tommy away from the nest. Tommy stood transfixed. His clapper lay silent at his side.

George settled down at his desk. The fire crackled in the grate and he was glad of its warmth and light. How could he capture a bird's flight and song in mere words? He closed his eyes and remembered the "chirrup, whistle, slur and shake".

Ralph settled down at his desk. The fire crackled in the grate and he was glad of its warmth and light. How could he capture the words of a poem in musical notes? He closed his eyes and remembered the "silver chain of sound" and the "quavering up the chord".

Mr Clausen had been too old to serve in the Great War but the anguish of the times had still touched him. The death of his daughter Kitty's husband in battle had caused them all terrible grief. There were many things that he wished he could forget. Walking in the countryside helped to settle his nerves. The light as it dappled over barns and stables lifted his spirits. He reached the field and stood for a moment. This was where he had first seen Tommy with his clapper in his hand. The young boy was keeping warm at his fire with a blanket over his shoulders. Clausen had quickly sketched the scene and he'd been pleased with his final painting, 'Bird Scaring'. He'd often thought back to that time. A few minutes later, the boy had set off with his clapper scaring all the birds as he ran. George Clausen had watched in wonder as the boy suddenly dropped to his knees and stared into the majestic sky towards 'The Lark Ascending'.

George Meredith put down his pen. He was exhausted but pleased with the words he had chosen. The poem was complete and it captured that day when he had watched the bird rise into the sky. He finished the poem and added the title - 'The Lark Ascending'.

Ralph Vaughan Williams added the final corrections to his score. The violin and piano parts swooped and soared against each other just as George Meredith's poem had described. War was coming but this piece of music spoke of freedom and light. He finished his score with the title 'The Lark Ascending'.

Inspiration: Faith and Doubt

Morning Prayer by André-Henri Dargelas



Make A Wish (A Child's View)

by Jenny Parr

It's my turn today! I have waited so long and now I will lift the taper high, but I'm afraid to knock over the candle like Helen did yesterday. It fell off the shelf and landed in the flower vase beneath! Sister Mary Magdalene said it was lucky that Jesus was watching because he made the flower water put out the candle.

We all get a turn every morning to pick flowers for Our Lady and light a candle for Jesus. We have to pray for good things to happen for the world, and to keep us good and kind children.

One day when Isabella lit the candle she prayed for her cough to get better. I said, "We have to pray for other people not ourselves" and she said that she wakes us up every night coughing so it was for everyone. I think she was right, but she is still coughing every night, so maybe Jesus didn't think so.

Emily, my best friend, did it so wrong. She wished for new shoes as her brown lace ups have holes in the bottom and her feet are always wet. I am worried about her getting into trouble but as she is only little, I don't think anyone will punish her, especially Jesus who is always kind to children. I have seen pictures of him sitting while talking to them.

Ruth said a prayer last Sunday that was the best one ever. She prayed that nobody would fight anymore, and that all animals would go to heaven. I wished I had thought of that one because it made Sister Mary Magdalene very happy and she smiled and patted her on her head.

When I grow up I want to be like Sister Mary Magdalene; she has a beautiful face and is kind and gentle. Maybe someone said a prayer for a lady to take care of poor children so she came straight from heaven.

Sometimes I don't want to get up so early to say prayers; it's so cold in the mornings, my toes and fingers turn blue, but today I will light the candle and feel its warmth.

I've picked my flowers this morning and they are white ones, always white as white is for a word called purity. I like the red ones but they have to stay in the garden; only the ones with purity can stand in the vase by Our Lady. The flowers are on the bench now; when I light my candle they will replace the dead ones.

The clock has struck eight o'clock now; it is time! I lift up the taper. The light glows orange and yellow like the sunlight shining through glass. Tipping the end towards the wick of the candle, it catches and shoots up like a beacon. Now to say my prayer.

Dear Jesus, please could you use my little candle to light all the candles in the world, so they will light up the darkness, Then everyone will find their way back to Heaven.

AMEN

Inspiration: Faith and Doubt

Morning Prayer by André-Henri Dargelas

Winner, 3rd Place, Prose

Creatures Of Habit

by Emily Parr



Pillowcases made excellent wimples, Doreen had discovered, having been typecast as the nobly enduring Mother Superior more times than she chose to remember. Whether prison drama or madcap murder farce, she would be raising a disapproving eyebrow and grappling her rosary beads, sermonising on suffering as the path to serenity, wistfully looking up to the lighting rig and emulating those stained glass window saints, despite taking to the stage in a distinctly spartan Methodist Church Hall.

The location was perhaps the reason they chose nun plays, not just because recycling witch cloaks for habits was less likely to cause offence to those already averse to Catholic costumes. Nun plays could be wholesome morality tales or harmless comedies, perfect for the permed white heads who attended religiously. For the smallest fees, such plays were sent out in dusty bundles from bewildered companies with Dickensian names, who thought they'd confined them to the archives. I imagined bells ringing for the first time in years in a cobwebbed warehouse, stirring the crow atop the books to wake the owner of the stamp we always had to credit, though we never met or knew them...

"You want the other one with the pun title?..The one written in the 50s?..The third in the series?..Where the ghost of Ethel is mistaken for Edwin and the gentle Irish nurse turns out to be a jewel thief from Tennessee?...Really?"

Given the amount of business we gave them, perhaps the only drama group who did, they could have made the effort to visit to watch their most loyal customers perform, or at least joined us for a piece of Sheila's legendary tiffin on our tea break. They could have witnessed the careful censoring of swearing in light pencil, when 'God!' became 'Damn!' and the necessity of certain 'b' words in context was debated. They could have marvelled at the rigour of the audition process, when the heavy head whose turn it was to wear the director's crown wearily and warily told everyone in the circle which role they were playing without hearing anyone read. Having chosen the play only on the basis of who was available and few male parts, it would be cruel to pretend we could affect the decision. As for the content, as long as it wouldn't alienate the older generation, anything went.

Yet somehow, it worked. We trusted our director to choose simply because they knew what everyone was capable of. Having known each other for years and seen each other through grief and illness and joy and pain in this one constant comfort blanket chance to escape, we all knew what everyone could do. In stalwart and infinitely patient Doreen's case, she just oozed nun. If she had missed her vocation by opting for the civil service instead, she could at least indulge the fantasy in the safe space onstage.

The boxed worlds were constructed at one end of the hall twice a year, regardless of the inconvenience it caused the Nifty Fifties aerobics class and Coffee Morning, never mind the retired gents too proud to admit the strain of assembling the blocks and flats which covered the serving hatch. Decades of paint undoubtedly added weight as there was a new layer daubed for each play, albeit always a variation on a theme of brown

or green. The staple sofa was hauled out of the garage by the scout hut and props were sourced from charity shops.

It always astounded me how the flick of a switch changed everything (providing Eric remembered his cues and the fuses didn't blow), as the drab shell with buckled and patched walls became a cosy room. Releasing the plush velvet curtains added to the magic, though by the end, they edged towards each other in staccato jumps rather than sliding together smoothly, as Norman tugged at the ropes in the best way he could, with a method similar to milking a cow. The lights usually went off during the curtains' slow progress across the front of the stage, to spare us too long a freeze-frame trying not to blink after the dramatic end line.

I was most excited being behind them and hearing the hubbub of the audience before the show began, thrilled that they didn't know I was there, pacing the thinly carpeted boards above empty space. During the play, looking out into darkness beyond the dim front row, sensing them listening as the sweet wrappers stopped crackling. Sharing the stage with faces I'd known all my life, including the one I'd seen first of all and watched rehearsing from the back of the room between bouts of colouring in. She'd brought me with her to share in the experience which helped her to fly so I could eventually try too, with the same table at the back for homework, then years later, marking.

No other space has felt so like home since; no company more like family. So many have taken their last bow and been called to the wings, but we hold on to those golden worlds at the end of the hall.

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

Puck by Richard Dadd

Dreams, Fantasies, and Cold, Hard Memories

by Phyllis Brighthouse



Steve tucked *Paris Match* under his arm, turned away from the evocative portrait of Puck and scanned the gallery's wonderful display.

Greta had hired a terrific venue. But he wasn't here for the art. He scanned the guests. Where was she? The men wore evening dress, the uniform of 'jet-set man' at play, but it was the women who were on show. The young were committed to the latest, stern geometric styles of Mary Quant. The older ones rustled through the room in Balmain gowns, their faces content for the most part. After all, Steve thought dryly, they already have their diamonds. They spat you in the eye as they caught the light of the crystal chandeliers.

He plucked champagne from a tray and strolled to the door, glad to leave behind the odour created by a cacophony of competing perfumes. He hated powerful smells. Stink was stink, never to be forgotten, however it manifested itself. She was on the terrace.

'Stefan. 'You made it'. The Marlene Dietrich voice was as rich as he remembered.

'Just Steve now'.

This made her smile. 'Ah. You have finally mastered the accent. No-one would ever take you for a German.'

He just shrugged. 'Not everyone's got a Swiss passport. Or forgotten the war.'

They looked each other over in silence, noting the changes the past year had made. Balmain suited her, and the diamonds and pearls in her hair were as discrete as the rest of her adornments. The massive diamond on the third finger of her left hand, though, wasn't discrete at all. *Paris Match* was delighted their star attraction had snared a major industrialist.

A quizzical smile indicated she forgave him. 'How did you slip in this year?'

'Easily', he answered. 'I'm the caterer.'

'A remarkable achievement.'

That made him laugh. He tapped the magazine's cover. 'If I'm remarkable then you're extraordinary'

She raised her glass. 'To my caterer.' She paused. 'How?'

'I'd washed enough dishes in enough restaurants, including Marcel's. When he went broke, I bought the place, and his contracts. Courtesy of Monte Carlo.'

The smooth curve of her eyebrows rose a fraction. 'Child's play, I suppose, compared to finding the money to play poker with the American occupying army.'

He shrugged. 'The trick was to win just enough that some of the Yanks didn't mind losing.'

'You'd always have survived. Yet - you never abandoned me.' She sighed. 'Two street urchins.' He noted her shudder. Old memories cast long shadows. Fascism. The knock at the door in the middle of the night, running, hiding. No home, no family, no food, no clothes, no "anything".

She looked him squarely in the eye. 'It took us a year to get to Switzerland.' She paused. 'You were all I had. You could have pimped me across Europe.' She interrupted his protest. 'Why didn't you?'

He was silent for a moment then touched her ring with the tip of his finger. 'You're beautiful,' he countered. 'You could have seduced and married an American. I've never asked, but - why not?'

The answer surprised him. 'I could trust you. But Americans. Trust them! Marry one! ... I saw the bruises!'

That ring seemed to cast an aura that made them talk about subjects they'd never wanted broach again. It was the first time she'd acknowledged the cost of some of those poker games.

'So' she demanded, 'why?'

Numbers were so much easier to deal with. 'The other side of that coin is that you were all I had. What we went through. It binds you, tight as the skin of a drum. You don't throw it away lightly.'

She was solemn now. 'We've caught up every New Year's Eve ever since we went our separate ways, but...'

He nodded at the diamond on her finger. 'Yes. But. That changes everything. The annual get-together. Seeing if we're still OK...' He paused. 'Is this our last?'

She turned the ring so it flashed in the ornamental lighting. 'Everything's changing for me, yes. But not the way you think. I saw you admiring the *Puck*.' She nodded towards a plump duenna. 'She has a similar one. Not as nice, but expensive. Does she like its beauty? No. It's all about how rare it is, what it's worth.'

She pointed again. 'That one there. I was her guest once. She dressed up in a flamenco dress and danced for us. A baroness imitating a gypsy. Like Marie Antoinette in a bergère gown pretending to be a shepherdess.' Greta pointed. 'She's never lived a gypsy life. Thinks it's romantic. We did.'

She closed her eyes. 'Before you arrived, here I was, in a room full of people, talking to them, listening to them and yet ... it's always the same. In my head I'm all alone.'

'Me too, same reason.' Steve examined the crowd around them, thoughtfully 'Can you be happy? With them?'

She pursed her lips. 'For now.' She flicked an all-encompassing gesture. 'These women. Do you know why they do it? To be free!' Greta's voice was impatient. 'They live in a mythical fantasy land, like Puck. A dreamworld. But here, men live for money and marry beauty. And women marry these men as a career move.'

Steve winced. 'And that's the world you want to marry into? Are marrying into. To be free?'

She grew impassioned. 'You can fight your way through a world where very few women can earn their own living.' She tapped her ring. 'When my looks fade, I'll still have my diamonds.' She paused. 'I have to get back to my guests.'

'And me, my crew ... Next year?'

Greta's smile dazzled brighter than any ring. 'Why not.'

Steve kissed the ring lightly. 'Meantime', he added softly, 'When you're all alone in your head. Just remember. You're not alone. Not while I go through it too.'

And, as her fiancé walked over, Steve returned to the reception hall.

Inspiration: Historical Genre/ Literary Genre

Awaiting Publication of 'Le Moniteur' for News
of the Arrest of Robespierre by William Henry Fisk

Report

by Adrian Cannell



I am reporting for the Southport Visiter on the 10th day of Thermidor, live from the offices of La Gazette Nationale Ou Le Moniteur', the newspaper of the French Revolution.

Hordes of people have gathered here having heard rumours of the arrest of Maximilien Robespierre, Deputy of the National Convention. I have been interviewing some of them, to find out what they know.

A portly gentleman told me that he had heard Jean-Lambert Tallien speaking out against Robespierre at the Convention and demanding his arrest. He decided to come here to see the publication of Robespierre's prison mugshot in the newspaper.

I managed to interrupt a tall, rather smarmy, uniformed officer who was chatting up a young woman. He told me that he has been a supporter of Robespierre from the beginning. He had read about Robespierre's reaction to being accused of conspiracy on the deputy's own social media site, Truth Social. The officer came here to insist that Le Moniteur publishes Robespierre's denial or else there would be rioting outside the Hôtel de Ville.

A middle-aged woman carrying baskets of fruit and vegetables had seen pictures of marching soldiers on Facebook and came here for clarification about what is going on.

A fashionably dressed woman informed me that she is an Instagram influencer and needs to share the news with all her followers, as soon as anything is announced.

Beside me a small group of people are discussing the trending tweets on Twitter, or X as we now call it. Apparently, Tallien's supporters have been trolling Robespierre's ally, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, for some time, calling him some names that I cannot repeat to you.

Hang on, there is a piercing cry from a small boy in front of me. He is screeching that he has seen TikTok videos of the guillotine being prepared in the Place de la Révolution and a line of prisoners being marched there.

The people here are now shoving their way out of the newspaper office doors. If I can escape without being crushed, my next YouTube Live bulletin will be from that historic site where King Louis XVI himself was executed.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

Bird Scaring by George Clausen

Eden Oaks

by Mel Owen



The Great Oaks of Eden have myriad tales to tell
Standing for over a thousand years
They could describe the invasions of
Viking and Norman
Of the struggle between Monarch and
State, when Englishman fought Englishman
and the State was victorious through the Interregnum.
They stood tall during the following years of relative peace,
Witnessing many births and deaths.
When 'Boney' decided he'd like to conquer us,
They laughed silently at his arrogance
And smiled after Waterloo.
Victoria brought a hundred years of peace,
Until the Huns thought that they would try
Where Boney was defeated – twice.
The great oaks stood strong, knowing Britain
Would never fall.
They have so much that they could tell us,
If only they would talk.

Inspiration: Modern Life

Dorette's Sister by Gerald Brockhurst

Dorette's Sister

by Julia Clayton



Sisters. He's got a thing about sisters, says Kathleen, when I go round to see her one afternoon at that flat he rents for her. She is in one of her mischievous moods, lounging on the bed in a satin kimono, propped up on her elbow.

'Did I ever tell you about the time that stupid French bitch caught him in bed with her sister?'

'You shouldn't call her that, it's disrespectful,' I say, but my curiosity overcomes my scruples and I find myself asking, 'So what happened? What did Anaïs do?'

Kathleen throws back her head and laughs, in that rather unsettling way she has.

'She made Gerry promise that he would be a good boy, and that he would never, ever do anything like that again. He reckons, though, that she actually *wanted* him to sleep with Margeurite – she was always leaving them alone together, apparently. I think she just fancied a threesome.'

'What's a threesome?'

'God, Bernadette, you're so naïve. What do they teach you at that convent?'

'You should know, Kathleen. It's the same convent you went to, if you remember.'

'Perhaps I don't want to remember. And stop calling me "Kathleen". You know everyone else calls me Dorette.'

'But Gerry broke his promise to his wife, didn't he? I mean, you and him ...'

'Oh come on, Bernadette, don't be such a little prude. Yes, of course Gerry and I sleep together – we've been sleeping together since I was sixteen. Anyway, Gerry says that you can't expect artists to be constrained by the normal sexual mores of bourgeois society.'

'That's a bit rich, coming from somebody who paints duchesses for a living.'

'Well, Gerry doesn't want to paint duchesses at the moment. He wants to paint you.'

'What? Well, you can tell him from me that I'm not prepared to take my clothes off for him, like that drawing where you're sitting looking at yourself naked in the mirror.'

Her eyes are flashing now, like they do when she's about to throw one of her tantrums.

'Don't be ridiculous. He doesn't want you to take your clothes off. He says he wants to paint your purity, your virginity ... I mean, you *are* still a virgin, aren't you?'

Now it's my turn to flush with anger. 'Very well, but I'm not prepared to do stupid things to my eyebrows, or anything like that.'

I know she is touchy about her eyebrows; she has plucked them so often there are no hairs left, just a shiny ridge of skin where her eyebrows used to be. Now she has to draw them in with a pencil, but she doesn't draw them in with a natural curve, but in a diagonal line from the bridge of her nose up towards her temples. She thinks it makes her look 'sophisticated', to use one of her favourite words (although she didn't even know what it meant before she met him), but I just think it makes her look sinister, like a Demon Queen in a pantomime.

She scowls. 'Gerry says it makes me look like the *Mona Lisa*. But I still can't believe how awkward you're being. Don't you realise what an honour it is to be painted by Gerry? Lots of women would jump at the chance. And his paintings fetch a packet now – have you any idea how much he got for that portrait of me that he did last year, the one that was in the Summer Exhibition?'

'You mean the one where you're wearing the brown silk dress and you look like you've got five o'clock shadow?'

'It's called *chiaroscuro*,' she says, 'but I wouldn't expect you to appreciate that. Anyway, some provincial museum in Preston paid £750 for that painting. Can you believe it? Apparently this soap manufacturer was so angry that he'd missed out, that he told Gerry that he'd pay him £1,000 if only he'd paint another portrait of me.'

And so I agree to model for Gerald Brockhurst, because I'm fed up with always being introduced as 'Dorette's sister' at parties and gallery openings. Even when Kathleen and I are out together, sitting on the Tube or going shopping in town, I can sometimes see people pointing at us and I can overhear them saying, 'Oh, that's Dorette – and that's Dorette's sister.'

Dorette, you see is quite famous, especially since that interview she did for the *Sunday Express*, where they called her a 'teenage temptress' and a 'femme fatale'.

I was sixteen at the time, working as a model at the Royal Academy Schools, and Gerry was one of the visiting Tutors. I know he was nearly forty, but he was so handsome, and well ... yes, I suppose it all caused a bit of a kerfuffle.

Perhaps, if I let him paint me, then I won't be Dorette's sister any more.
I'll be Bernadette Woodward.

*

Dorette says that he wants me to wear plain clothes, like a schoolgirl might wear, or a secretary going for her first job interview, so I'm wearing my favourite grey top with the pink trim, and a plain black skirt and my black gaberdine and my black school beret.

'That's perfect,' he says, as he opens the door. 'The picture of innocence: exactly what I wanted. But I think we need a dash of colour – and perhaps just the merest suggestion of a serpent in the Garden of Eden.'

He goes over to a vase in his studio – Dorette says it is always filled with expensive hot-house flowers, to convince his wealthy clients that he's a proper society painter – and selects a showy red flower, nothing I recognise, it's too exotic. He tilts my beret to one side of my head, and he pins the flower onto it.

Later, he will add a background to the portrait, a landscape of rocks and distant hills, so that it will look as if I am in Italy, like the *Mona Lisa*.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre
Bird Scaring by George Clausen

A Boy To Scare The Crows
by Celia Gentles



Poor ragged boy, paid a pittance, or less
to frighten the crows off the farmer's land -
dragged out of childhood by hardship and debts,
waving his clappers with red chilblained hands.

To frighten the crows off the farmer's land
he trips over roots of skeleton trees.
Waving his clappers with red chilblained hands
he stumbles on weak and rickety knees.

He trips over roots of skeleton trees,
alone in the chill and damp farmer's field.
He stumbles on weak and rickety knees,
prays for good crops and a rewarding yield.

Alone in the chill and damp farmer's field
he builds a fire, rubs fingers together,
prays for good crops and a rewarding yield,
dreams of green corn and warm summer weather.

He builds a fire, rubs fingers together,
begging the wind not to blow out the flames.
Dreams of green corn and warm summer weather
mingle with memories of playmates and games.

Begging the wind not to blow out the flames
he slings pebbles, and oaths. Blasphemous words
mingle with memories of playmates and games.
From dawn until dusk, he chases the birds.

He slings pebbles, and oaths, blasphemous words -
dragged out of childhood by hardship and debts.
From dawn until dusk, he chases the birds -
poor ragged boy, paid a pittance, or less.

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams/ Sculpture

Winner, 3rd Place, Poetry

Euriphes

by Bob Eccleston

I languish in this corner of heaven
set aside by our eccentric Greek Gods
for men of distinction, who lack due praise
from those who have inherited our world
(the Gods claim our whinging makes them weary
and have given us our separate space
a no-exit mutual moaning zone)

I am surrounded by noble comrades
whose petulant whining deadens my brain
Achilles, greatest of our warriors
mainly remembered for his one weakness
so feels decidedly down at heel
Archimedes, brilliant scientist
philosopher, teacher and engineer
but known as the original stalker
These and others bemoan fate's needlework
Consider their reputations tarnished
But they have little reason for complaint
their names known, recorded in history
capable of earning veneration
Foe me not a solitary footnote
on the parchment recording our pageant

I am Euriphes, greatest of sculptures
(yes I know that you've never heard of me
I wouldn't be stifling here if you had)
I died too early, with my fame still-born
A victim of my youthful appetites

Helen was beautiful, too beautiful
(far lovelier than her harlot namesake
Whose Trojan tryst led to deadly horseplay)
From the day I met her I desired her
Unfortunately she had a husband
Hector was foul tongued, foul tempered and large
Very large and extremely possessive

I desired her as model and woman
(woman more than model if truth is told)
I enticed her with ladled flattery
Promised her God-like immortality
(she was as vain as she was beautiful)
Persuaded her into my studio
when Hector was safely away at work

As a model she was pure incitement
My chisel performed in frenzied worship
The marble hastened to release her form
and then it stood in final perfection
eyes and lips ready to spark man's desire
her arms beckoning her lover forward
While for me Helen stood in echoed pose
senses inflamed by her marble double

We had barely finished our passion's play
when ignoble Hector burst through the door
carrying hammer, scowls and dark intent
Two blows and two marble arms were shattered
Another blow and poor Helen was gone
His next blow missed me, I ran for the door
until he smashed my head with the backswing
I died a victim of his selfishness
(I only wanted to borrow not keep)

My statue stayed abandoned, forgotten
till, discovered by men of perception
she was given proper recognition
In a foreign temple she is worshipped
the supreme example of sculptors' art
but I, her creator, am not honoured
Lesser works glorify their artist's name
Michelangelo's insipid David
Rodin's thinker, Donatello's Saint George
But no-one praises Euriphes' talent
recognises the greatest of them all
They have even got her wrongly titled
It's Helen, fools, it never was Venus

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

Wood Nymphs

by Sue Griffiths

The wood nymphs are here!

Oh no not that again my dear

They are, they are dancing free and light around the trees

My dear please

The heavenly bodies are floating with joy and no cares to worry, how I envy thee

Darling whatever next, a giant baby looking vexed?

Yes That's true I'm so comforted you see it too.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

Bird Scaring by George Clausen

My Grandfather - March 1896

by Deborah Lund



Gentle-grey, the sky beguiles the onlooker -
Casting a web of translucent tranquillity
Across the patient fields - awaiting the first glow of morning.

A bitter, biting cold is barely kept at bay
By a smouldering fire, its fragile smoke-tendrils,
As frail as a brittle Autumn leaf swirling into the delicate almost-dawn.

The bewitching silhouette tree
Unleashes its eager guests to shatter the still, silent strata
Of the approaching dappled daylight.

The stumbling boy rises to the interminable task ahead.
Limited by the farm horizon, clacker in hand
He defends his land from the cacophony of crows.

His exhausted dreams are folded and forgotten
Into the rough sacking hanging from his defeated shoulders.
Poverty steals his future as inevitably as the crows steal the seeds.

Inspiration: Myth, Fantasy and Dreams

My Best Friend

by Richard Baker

The shutters of my eyes slowly creak open
My fingers achingly begin to unfurl
My brain slowly, painfully, begins to raise my conciseness
And the first thing I think of, is....
My Best Friend.

I rise, with horrid stench of stale body smells following me from my bed
My clothes grimly hang on to my now skeletal frame as I shuffle to my mirror
I look deep into my unlooking eyes and a stranger stares back
But today is going to be a good day, as soon I, ll be visiting.....
My Best Friend

My filthy room is behind me as I shuffle down the stairs
I open the door to the street and the cold air whips my rib laden frame
My breath it is laboured, my brain it is spinning, my eyes seem to hurt
But I'm sure I'll feel better when I'm with

My Best Friend

He stands on the corner, He's waiting for me
I take him in my hand and we turn back to my filthy room
My pulse is now racing, my heart is afire
I now skip up the stairs, with

My Best Friend

I release him from my hand and encase him on a spoon
Slowly I heat him and he melts before my now sparkling eyes
My syringe sucks him up
It wont be long now and I'll soon be with.....

My Best Friend

I take him in my hand and we try to find an unused vein
I squeeze the syringe and he's with me now
As he slowly sends me to oblivion I think of him
I need him, I want him, I love him, but above all I hate him

My Best Friend

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

The Back Parlour, Café Loos, Étapes, France by Nora Cundell

Café Loos In Étapes

by Hilary Benson

The smells of coffee and fresh baked bread
drift into the parlour here.
The mood's been fed by long worked hours
from the first morning's light.
A moment held
like the knot caught tight
at the nape of the infant's neck.
Soap and towel and the bowl on the table
await the little one's grime,
the luminous apron laundered clean
smooths a lapful of motherly time, but
strings attached keep the offspring close
to serve the café at Loos.

The boy, disgruntled with his lot,
leans heavily between the rooms,
smelling coffee and the fresh baked bread,
wanting more than a fisherman's grind.
His grandfather, full of long years of wind and salt,
sits heavily on the solid chair,
recalling nights on the roiling waves
spent for a catch for the stall in the square.

How artists taunt with a life *en plein air*
unhooked from the hazardous sea,
to observe and fix a safe sight of that,
but on canvas.
How good it would be to be free.



Inspiration: Faith and Doubt

Morning Prayer by André-Henri Dargelas

Goodbye To The Circus

by Nicola Coakley



As sure as night follows day, Ceci knew the minute she stirred that it was that time of year again. It was no different to any other morning; the wheels still rumbled beneath her, the curtains swayed slightly at the window and as Ceci popped her unruly black curls out from under the patchwork blanket, she could hear the familiar clip clop of Banjo's hooves as he drove them steadily forwards. The difference was subtle, they were now travelling alone towards the Convent School. Gone were the other caravans and wagons including the delights contained within them. Carlotta and Lorenzo the acrobatic trapeze artists, Coco and Bozo the silly clowns and Little Blue the enormous elephant were probably a hundred miles away by now. Sadness unfurled itself in her tummy as she hopped out of bed and shook her little brother awake.

"Percy, its September already" she whispered, and sure enough it wasn't long before Banjo ambled through the imposing gates that signalled the end of another joyous summer travelling with their Ma and Pa and the other circus folk. Long happy days of freedom now behind them, all she and Percy had to look forward to were prayers morning noon and night, followed by tedious lessons and bland tasteless food. Food very different to the plump juicy sausages currently sizzling merrily in the blackened frying pan sitting on the hob. Ceci's tummy rumbled urgently, so woes temporarily forgotten she tucked in greedily. It wasn't all bad, she figured. At least she had Percy to keep her company. Percy with his soulful eyes as chestnut brown and just as shiny as the conkers she knew they'd find in the convent grounds later in autumn. He was only thirteen months younger than her and of a gentler, trusting nature. She couldn't remember a time before him. He'd just always been there, looking up to her and following her lead like a little shadow and she loved him dearly.

This would be their second winter at the convent school. She had few fond memories of the time before, although she hoped Sister Bridget would still be there. She was kind and gentle with a soft spot for Percy. Some of the other children were not too bad either. Maybe Betty and her younger sister Jean, two other travelling children they had met last year would be back too. They had become firm friends and had stuck together. It was the other nuns she feared, particularly Sister Ursula who had hard hands. She could be mean and cruel and far too handy with a slap around the legs if you so much as looked at her the wrong way. Ceci knew she was going to find the next few months challenging but it was her parents wish that they got an education.

She and Percy had run wild all the summer months and were not used to discipline or routine, which didn't bode well. They loved their exciting life travelling with the circus where no two days were the same. Ceci dreamed of flying high on the trapeze in the big top just like Carlotta or riding bareback round the circus ring on Bobby's mare Beauty, feeling the wind whipping through her hair. They were not used to regular bathing

either and Ceci shuddered as she remembered last year's baptism in the convent's rusty tin bathtub. She could almost smell the carbolic soap and feel the scratch of the cloth as it scrubbed roughly against her skin. Banjo neighed comfortingly as they drew to a clumsy stop at the top of the long, bumpy driveway. Ceci gathered her small, felt bag of belongings and stepped down onto the slate grey driveway. She gazed forlornly up at the dismal building standing imposingly above them. These goodbyes were best dealt with quickly, so she briefly hugged her Ma and Pa and strode confidently up the steps without even glancing back. Percy stumbled up the steps behind her just as the ugly, heavy doors swung open to reveal a dark shadowy hall and Sister Bridget. Ceci's heart swelled with a combination of relief and familiarity, reassured by Sister Bridget's warm smile of recognition. Thank goodness it wasn't Sister Ursula. Silence, the citrus smell of polish and musty old books greeted them as they stepped into the cavernous vestry.

"Well, aren't you a pair of lucky bairns, you're just in time for morning prayer," she trilled in her lilting brogue as they trotted behind her. They followed Sister Bridget as she floated serenely along the corridor. She led them into a quiet, shadowy room lit only by four tall candles balancing precariously on the fireplace and pale light peeping in through a cloudy rectangular side window. The gaping hole of the fireplace was filled with a dusty basket of dried, faded flowers. As if the previous summer months had been nothing but a dream, Ceci and Percy joined the other children gathered on the floor, put their hands together in prayer and bent their heads in reverence. The rituals of morning prayer all flooded back to her and without even thinking she started to repeat the mantra-like words in unison with everyone else.

It was then that the idea began to form. Ceci ignored the words being murmured around her, squeezed her eyes tight shut and wished with all her might for the autumn and winter months to pass quickly so that she might be back in their jewel-coloured caravan. She determined that each day at morning prayer she would secretly pray for spring and her return to the circus. No one need know, especially the nuns. All the sisters required was participation; enthusiasm was probably a bonus as far as they were concerned. Then hopefully May would arrive without delay, and they could rejoin the circus and return to a life of roaming and adventure, falling asleep in one town followed by the joy of waking in another.

Inspiration: Rural Genre/ Seaside Genre

Fish Fag by William Fortescue

Eyes Of A Child 1888

by Linda Seal



His feet were cold. He'd spent too much time in the water, his sand sprinkled toes curled with each step as he walked slowly along the seafront. He had no need to be barefoot; brown boots slung over his right shoulder with laces hurriedly tied together complemented his bottle green vest, white shirt, and brown knee length trousers. On his head he wore a simple white cloth hat. Tucked under his left arm he carried a small wooden masted hand built, white sailed fishing boat, one which had seen many visits to this beach and had many stories to tell. He'd named the sailboat Lizzie, after his eldest sister. Lizzie was his favourite; he missed her a lot. She was seventeen now, a grown woman. She worked away from home following the fishing fleet from harbour to harbour, gutting and cleaning fish. Life was all about fish.

He wasn't alone, a small figure walking the length of a small beach. Seven-year-old Thomas was with his mother Annie; this was a Wednesday and the middle of May though it could have been any day of the week, month, year. Annie was working. Today had been a good day's catch and the creel she was carrying was full of fresh fish. Nine days ago, Annie had given birth to Robert, her seventh child; today was her first day back at work. Her heavyweight cotton apron strained under the weight of her post pregnancy stomach and her grey smock dress felt uncomfortably tight. The day had dawned with a promise of warmth but had turned out to be showery and dull; carrying a seven stone basket on her back supported only by an attached length of rope which she held in place across her forehead was not an easy task. She wore a wool shawl across her bodice held in place by a pin. The pin was special; handed down generation by generation of Fishwives. Life was all about fish.

For seven-year-old Thomas life was as full as for any seven-year-old. He ate, slept, and played with other fishermen's family. He got up to mischief and caught a cold and survived it. He loved his parents and siblings. For Thomas, the early evenings were his favourite for then his mother and other fishwives would gather and sing, customs handed down through legend, poetry, and song. Pride accompanied tradition. It was said 'Annie has the voice of an Angel'. Thomas didn't know much about angels. His Father had told him once he had thought he had seen an angel on a night when a storm had raged when he was out fishing. It was true Annie could sing but she could also shout. Thomas was sometimes scared when his mother called out selling fish; she had a very loud voice. Life was all about fish.

Annie's husband John was a fisherman, his father was a fisherman, and so was his grandfather and great-grandfather. The work was long and hard, but he didn't complain. His sons would take over from him, it was expected. Already John Junior and James accompanied him on his trips and eventually both Thomas and Robert would join him too. Annie and the girls played their part. They had cleaned the lines and attached bait in readiness for each day's catch. They repaired nets when holed and attached hooks. Laterally they sold fish. Annie was proud she could carry the heaviest baskets up from the shoreline to the village. She could shout

other fishwives. Folk said she had a soft heart and would occasionally hand back a penny or two wrapped with a fish to a child from a struggling family. Life was all about fish.

When Lizzie was home for a week or two, Thomas was happy. After all it was Lizzie who had brought him the sailboat and had told him stories of fishermen at sea. Lizzie cleaned a lot of fish each day in icy water and her hands were often stiff and sore. The money was good she said, and she was looked after. Thomas wasn't sure. Lizzie cried at night sometimes. Thomas loved to hear her tales of visits to houses of the wealthy, how she would stand on the doorstep and clean the fish of choice. Thomas suspected the doors were perhaps not always the front doors. Lizzie wore brighter clothes these days and a stripey bonnet. She was dating a fisherman from Newlyn and was hoping to be married before the year was out. Life was all about fish.

While Thomas was walking, he was thinking. He thought a lot about this and that, that, and this. His older brothers would soon become fishermen. His younger brother just nine days old would eventually become a fisherman. What would happen if he, Thomas, decided he didn't want to become a fisherman?

He put this question to his mother –

'Mother?'

'Yes Thomas'

'What if I don't want to be a fisherman?'

'All little boys in our family grow up to be fisherman, Thomas'.

'But Mother, what if I don't want to be a fisherman when I grow up?'

'Thomas let's have no more of this, we are late already'.

Thomas wanted to be an artist. He could draw and he could paint. What's more, he wanted to save people at sea, and he had heard of the lifeboats. There was one just down the road from Newlyn where he lived. He could both paint and save fishermen, couldn't he?

Life was all about fish.

Inspiration: Modern Life

My First Love

by Patricia Howard

I am nearly twelve years old, this is my story of MY FIRST LOVE.

It was a lovely snowy day and I was walking home. Then there he was, I can't explain how I felt, those enquiring soft brown eyes that made my feelings explode.

We seemed to bond immediately, going for long walks in the countryside and along the canals, happy in each others company. No need for conversation, just being together was enough.

No what is happening, he has gone. My whole being has broken. Each day sadder than the day before.

Then suddenly he was back, those beautiful soft brown eyes looking into mine,

We once again walked in the countryside and strolled along the canal.

Your home again
MY DOG SHEP!