



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

14-18 Age Category

The 20th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2025

THE RIVER

Whether winding through the great cities of the world, or meandering across quiet country landscapes, Rivers have fascinated writers and poets.

Rivers have always flowed through literature, whether as tributaries representing the journey through life, or as passage to the Underworld. They have served as home to Mr Toad, the lair of goat-eating trolls and have been there to mess about on, as Huckleberry Finn or the three men in Jerome K Jerome's classic story can attest. Today they are at the heart of the environmental debate. RC Sherriff, the author of 'Journey's End', spent many hours on the river. A memorial to his passion for rowing, The Rowing Eight, still stands on the banks of The Thames at Molesey.

To commemorate the Anniversary of the publication of 'Three Men In A Boat', The 20th Elmbridge Literary Competition was looking for short stories and poems on the theme of 'The River'.

Previous Competition Themes:

2005:	Cook Up A Story
2006:	On My Way
2007:	A Life In Colour
2008:	Once Upon A Time
2009:	A Symphony of Life
2010:	The Elmbridge 100
2011:	Breaking The Barrier
2012:	A Dickens of A Christmas
2013:	One Act Radio Play
2014:	Dear Diary
2015:	Flights of Fantasy
2016:	Love
2017:	Luck
2018:	A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
2019/20:	New World
2021:	Music
2022:	Enigma
2023:	The Road
2024:	Fame

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Short Story Category

1st Place: River and Stories

Grace Poole

Twass about a half-month before summer broke, the golden days piling up thick and heavy in mounds upon the uneven hills, and the bells were ringing. Six of 'em, we had in the church, just down the dirt-road past the mill. And you could hear 'em all over the village, a great loud riot of sound clanging through the high street and along the cobbled walks. Could even hear 'em up at the rectory, stranded as we were a good mile from anywhere decent. Kitty, she used to call it our lighthouse. Pretend that the hills that spread around us in a haze of green were our own rolling ocean, that the heavy skeletons of fallen trees in the bowels of the woods were gutted sunken ships, ripe for looting. Must'a played pirates a hundred times in those woods, flying through the air on a ratty rope swing (always one harsh tug away from breaking). She was always captain, cross and stubborn in that way that only the biggest of little sisters can be.

If I had to pick one phrase, just one, to capture every year we spent there, it'd be that. Pretend that. Even now, the words are heavy on my tongue, used so much that they've lost all meaning. Yet still sweet. Beth couldn't yet say it, when we first moved, and she never lost that lisp, so over time it morphed into 'tend that.'

"Lee Lee, 'tend that I'm a dragon, m'kay?"

"Lee Lee, 'tend that we're in a great big house, and this here's our ballroom, and Eddie's gonna dance me all round..."

"Beth, Kit, 'tend that I've got Excalibur!"

That particular heat-drenched afternoon, I must've been, what eleven? And Mama was inside with the baby, keeping outta the heat, and Father had ridden our old horse down to the town to fetch food from the market. We hadn't wanted to move at first, but Father spun great tales about that shutaway little rectory, and the woods beyond, till we were itching to go, and Mama must've fallen in love the first time we walked up the pathway and saw the whole house grown over with rose bushes. Last owner hadn't bothered to cut 'em down before leaving. Grown all over the windows, right up to the balcony. But still flowering. Sorry, I'm distracting myself. That day, the lot of us had tramped down to the meadow, a veritable army of smudged dirt and torn stockings- me and Eddie leading the pack, with 2 Roger and Johnie trailing behind, pockets weight down

by small sticks and interesting stones and bottle lids and smooth glass. Never could stop finding 'treasure', that pair. Kitty and Beth (her little legs could barely keep up) with their hair done up all nice, and a couple'a the kids from down the road too- can't remember their names now. Mama had a lotta us- I'm sure we kept her awful busy. Seven kids by thirty, with a couple more to come- God, looking back now that seems like hell. But that's what they did, round there. Back then. Poor Mama. We found a river that day. I can still hear Roger's delighted gasp, clear as day. A real river all of our own, tucked hidden between two hills. Well, Eddie called it a river, a "great gushing river, packed full with rapids and piranhas and sharp spiny rocks that'd stab out your insides if you took one wrong move,".

We'd been reading, one of the old books in the dusty damp-ravaged library, 'bout explorers, and the Amazon. So that's what it was- the Amazon river, stretching through the treacherous jungle. 'Tend that I'm a conquistador. Thinking back through that rose tinted haze, I'm sure it was little more than a creek. But we followed it all the way down, as far as we could, through the hills and the little patches of trees, barefoot and dripping, in and out of the water. Shorts and dresses soaked, hair in rat tails plastered to our sunburnt faces. Fighting with sticks and sinking grabby hands into the mud to yank shining pebbles from the darkness. Once, it got deep enough to swim, so we sat Beth on the bank with a fat caterpillar to keep her busy and dived in, feet scratched up by the rocks, floating on our backs in the sun-warmed muddy water and little grey fishes darting around us.

(Incidentally, she ate the caterpillar. No ill effects to this day, as far as I'm aware. We all ate our fair share of bugs back then, whether by accident or as 'survivalism' or as a stupid bet. Didn't stop Roger from wailing "Lee, Lee, she's gonna die, you've gone and killed Bethy-" till Eddie kicked him in the shins.)

Boys down the road- they were a bit bigger. Farmer's sons. So we fought and splashed each other, and Kitty held their heads under till they gasped out apologies for callin' her a girly girl. ³ We were searching for El Dorado, for Atlantis, for buried treasure and the Romans and panthers and tigers. (Even at a young age, I had a stunnin' knowledge of geography, I know.)

The sun had eventually started to sink low, setting the clouds aflame. We weren't worried- so long as we were back by twilight Mama didn't mind- and it was still plenty warm. Hottest summer on record, they said. Kitty brought out handfuls of hard biscuits and dark sickly sweets from her pockets, nicked from the kitchen behind Mama's back.

Tend that it's explorer supplies. Amazon food. Always the smartest of us. Naughtiest, too, though with her big brown eyes and doll smile she got away with anything. Not me- Eddie and I always got the back of a hand for any misdemeanour we happened to get caught in the middle of. The oldest, Father said. Had to be responsible.

Didn't stop us. Just made us sneakier. We trooped back at sunset, sweaty and scraped and sneezing from the meadow-pollen. Kitty clung to the farmer's girl, their dresses drying slowly in the evening heat, begging to let her sleep over. Eddie went bright pink- think he mighta loved her even then, lookin' back. Ida, I think her name was. But everything's a little fuzzy now, the gold memories gettin' paler, moment by moment.

"Come back tomorrow," Mama had said, "Going to be even hotter. I'll take you down to the village green, we can get ice creams and play football."

I remember looking at Eddie- only a year older, yet practically on a pedestal for me then- as he grinned, eyes glinting, mud smudged across his brow. A dandelion clutched in nail-bitten hands, a present for Mama to put in pride of place beside the roses.

"Nah, tomorrow we're gonna follow that river all the way to the sea. Get a boat, take the girls over to France!"

I think of that day an awful lot, now. I'm Lester now; no-one's called me Lee in- God, not since Eddie died. He did get to the sea, in the end. Followed that goddam river all the way to a dreadnought and a telegram that made Mama cry. 4 And France? France ain't everything it's cracked up to be. Only rivers here are mud, snaking under gray skies. Soaked through, all the time, and there's no thick August sun to dry the damp, no trees to hide behind. No sunken ships. No Amazon. Guess it's lucky Roger and Johnie never even made it this far. I'm pressed up against Samuel cause it's cold enough to hurt, his blue hands wrapped in mine and I'm talking just to fill the silence, tryin' a paint the darkness golden. Runnin' outta memories by now, but I saved the best till last. Gotta keep warm. We're shivering- he's worse- and I can feel his breathing cold against my neck. Good guy, Samuel. Met him when we moved out here. Damn miracle we've both survived this long, but we swore we'd get out one day. Him back to London, me back to the rectory: back to Kitty, strutting about in her men's trousers, and Beth in her nurse's uniform with half the village boys chasing her.

"Lester, tell me 'bout those games you played."

He never had a brother or sister. Told me last night how he'd play on his own though, marching fleets of wooden battleships across carpet seas and chasing pigeons through the London streets. Caught one once, he said. Put it on his shoulder like a parrot.

"M'kay, well, 'tend that you were warm, back home and safe..."

2nd Place Story: A Button In The Void

Emily Peters

“Good afternoon, or evening. I’m not too sure. Pardon me but what is the time?” The man merely blinked at her in confusion, it had been many years since he had encountered such a polite child. Whilst she waited for a response she gently lifted up her frilly little dress and stepped into the boat. But there was no reply. “Do you not have a watch? I suppose you mustn’t, otherwise you surely would have told me. You seem like a gentleman. Oh well, we’re both in the dark then.” The man’s stoic face slightly grimaced at this and turned to face the water, which he was ferrying the boat across. “Oh I beg your pardon. I didn’t mean it as a jest, certainly not at your expense either. I meant we both don’t have the time”, she beamed up at him. There was silence for quite a few moments. It wasn’t as if the little girl hadn’t been immersed in silence before, but it was comfortable then- it was around family or understanding friends. This man was altogether quite odd. Therefore she decided there was no other possible choice but to fill the silence until some other ,more cheerful, person arrived. “I don’t know how you manage down here all on your own, especially with the lack of light. You must be incredibly malnourished.” At this, the man turned again and dryly looked back at her. He was beginning to lose his patience. She ,however, took this to mean he was unfamiliar with this long word and smirked to herself at her immense intelligence. But, she took pity on the poor man and explained, “it means lack of proper food, or in your case vitamins. Let me see, lack of sunlight... of course! You are in dire need of some Vitamin D. I suspect you must be awfully pale under that cloak.” The man thoroughly disliked this remark and she could sense this and began to worryingly backtrack, “not that that’s a bad thing! Why, my mother says it’s quite becoming for a young lady!” She herself grew quite pale at that, then swiftly changed to deep red. “Not that you are a young lady! I am so sorry, sir. I will hold my tongue in future. Lord, you must think me such a silly little girl with my talk of vitamins and whatnot. I just get awfully excited about what I’ve learnt at school. I mean, even the other day Miss Newburry told us...” And, the girl ,who had previously been quite relaxed in her seat, straightened right up and adopted quite a nasally voice. “Ahem. Class today I will teach you about- now James sit up straight. And Lucas stop hitting Bertha- that is not the way to woo a woman! As I was saying, I will be teaching you about the different capitals. Lewis if you blow your nose with your tie one more time”, and the little girl

erupted into a fit of giggles. He did not. To him, there was nothing remotely funny about this situation- it was just his job. But he couldn't say that he wasn't slightly amused by the way she practically fell off her chair in laughter. He had been working this job since... well forever. And yet it had been so very long since he had met this type of girl. He was unsure how long as there was really no way to tell the time and he had given up counting a long time ago. But there were usually waves of fashion and mannerisms of the people on his boat, and he could see how they developed over time. Luckily for him, it was becoming rarer and rarer for him to have to escort children across the river, especially fewer infants too. The children who sat on his boat now were always dressed in a wild variety of clothes ,all quite informal, but with rather scared dispositions. This girl seemed to not have a care in the world- or question where she was. It seemed as if she was very familiar with this place. This made little to no sense to the man as no one but him stayed in this place for more than five minutes. They would all just merely appear on the bank, wait their turn in line, then hop onto the boat and climb out at the other side. Perhaps, she was waiting somewhere else for some other boat- he wondered. But looking around, unsurprisingly, there was nothing. Just the river. There was no bank to the side of it, no light, no darkness, no nothing. Just the river. He often wondered if he could jump out, and swim all the way across to that strange void. Perhaps then he would be free. Perhaps then he wouldn't have to ferry these strange people till the end of time. But then who would ferry these people? And where would they go? He had questioned this nearly every tenth person ,as he didn't have days to measure by- just people, and came to the conclusion that the queue of people would merely grow and grow. That wouldn't be efficient at all. And anyway, sometimes it was interesting- this job. Sometimes, he would meet people like this odd little girl who sat gazing into the void- just like him. "I don't know when I was last in school", she mused to the emptiness. "It must have been an awfully long time ago as I can't remember what I had for lunch on my last day. And lunch is my favourite meal. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure where I have been." She paused for quite some time, staring into the void as if an answer would shine back at her. "Ah yes! I remember a sign.It said 'queue here'. And I thought that was awfully rude- no please or thank you. I mean, there seems to be no manners down here! And I do so terribly hate queueing. So I just had a look around." The man grumbled slightly, that answered his question. "Although I don't remember for how long. I get quite distracted on my walks. You know once I- oh that's beside the point. Anyway, I eventually made it back to the

line and there was this odd woman there. Brace yourself, she was wearing trousers! Well I have never seen such a thing” The river bank was now becoming increasingly clear and the man sped up his ferrying. He was quite anxious to get back to peaceful silence . “ So I rightfully told her so. I said ‘that is quite unbecoming to wear trousers’. And she scoffed and asked me what year I was from. Well, there was no doubt at that that she was crazy! So I said 1932 and she grew quite pale. You must admit that was quite strange.” But he did not admit anything. He just steadied his oar and brought the boat steadily up to the river bank, for he was very well practiced. The little girl slowly turned round and smiled up at him, softly. “Thank you very much sir. How much shall I pay you?” He had never been asked this before and was unsure how to respond. “Well, I only have hmm let me see”, and she rummaged around in her pockets, “This button. Will that do? I’ll leave that there.” She placed a pale pink button on the side of the boat and then sprang up and jumped onto the bank and began to skip away into the void. Just only, as she was nearly out of sight, did she turn back and wave very enthusiastically at the man and yelled something along the lines of “Take care of your button”. But it was difficult for him to hear as she began to fade away. Charon sighed, shuffled to the other side of the boat and placed the button into one of his many pockets. And then he slowly began to row back to the other bank, to the long line of souls waiting for him. But only now just a button heavier.

3rd Place Story: London's Blood

Hannah Pedrick

Rivers have always been a part of being living. They begin as mere droplets, trickling through rocks, weaving paths and flowing endlessly, with seemingly no source and an end of rushing rapids that pump into the crashing ocean. Rivers, like the veins of human blood, have always been an integral part of society. From washing, cooking and cleaning to ceremonies of life and death, the river has always been there, flooding through history like the moon and the future like the sun, only ever diverted by nature.

Every person alive had been affected by the river, if they lived on the muddy banks and the townhouses or the crisp country with a thousand tiny rapids that rushed together to form the beating heart of London itself.

There was once a child, a girl by the name of Mable who lived in a large house with a small stream trickling around the outside. Through many seasons, Mable had sat banks as her father spoke with pride of bustling cities, bigger than any town, shops with anything and everything, businessmen with ruddy faces and jolly personalities. And the River. He spoke often about the River. He had spent much of his young life unpacking the precious exports of foreign treasures, painting images in her head of him stood nobly aboard men sent by the very Queen herself on a river of pure crystal, like ants riding on a fallen leaf down a bubbling brook.

Where Mable lived, she had plenty of streams and rapids with purple flowers in spring and tiny frogs in summer, and fountains with tadpoles that darted between your toes as you cooled off, but nothing as grand as the flowing beauty her father told her the rapids turned into. She could not imagine the tiny gurgling brooks to be anything near the infamous river in London.

She had grown up on the source of the river, miles from London but the peace of her local rivers flowing together multiplied tenfold as they grew closer to the oceans. Or that's what Mable believed.

But one bitter morning when the water iced over and the frogs had stopped hopping, her father walked into her room with a serious face. He had asked her in no uncertain terms, if she would be willing to accompany him on a trip down to the city,

down to her river on the terms she acted as maturely as he expected. She agreed, her heart swelling with the child-like patriotism of lands unknown.

Further down the stream, past the boarders and banks was a girl named Bettie sitting with her legs dangling through railings, high above a murky froth of stinking filth.

If Bettie hadn't known better, hadn't learnt to know better she would've thought the river was almost bold, in its own twisted way. Every toss of brown liquid spilling over itself in a desperate attempt to flee the smog-clogged town, every foul odour emitting from the water lapping like rabid snake.

She had been ten when she learned the river her life was built around was a ruthless presence. Ten, when her brother had gone swimming out into the current. Ten, when she had ripped her lungs out trying to warn him about the incoming ships while he struck out further. Ten, when they had his funeral, without a body to bury.

Though it was a little silly, Bettie knew deep down that though she may hate the river now, there was the remnants of a girl growing up on the water left inside her like unwashable stains. Remnants of her brother plucking coins out the mud and then boasting from the bank, skating with him in deep freezes, watching the water go smooth after a current, lapping over itself as she sat on her windowsill late into the night.

Still, the memories grew stained with every day spent alone by the banks. The memories froze over every winter when the country kids came down to skate like she had, while she used calloused fingers to dig through mud like an animal.

Almost every day, holding onto the rails tightly she descended the slimy stairs, watching London's skyline rise above the riverbank until the only thing visible was the workhouse chimneys she made the trek down her stretch of river hoping for just one treasure to save her soul from the oppressive poverty she had known.

Picking carefully through the glass and thick muck she kept a magpie's eye peeled for anything that glittered, called for her nimble fingers to pluck it from its muddy grave. Avoiding any bone fragments with wary caution she felt the soggy dirt of her objects seeping through her clothes like filthy sin, making her mother flutter as she produced trash after trinket.

Mable, in all her years dreaming of the city, had never envisioned the sights she wasn't expecting. It wasn't quaint, to be certain. Brick structures touching the heavens with chimneys larger than life, roads full of carriages and stalls. Left and right, people screaming out their produce. Right and left children running through the streets with the produce in their hands. Mable felt her head-ache from the sheer energy of the world around her, universes away from her idyllic towns.

Mable and her mother took a sharp left, out of the back streets onto a bridge Mable had only ever dreamed off. Her ponds back home had bridges, blue and white that branched over the glassy reflections, but it was nothing like the grand structure before her.

Her heart beating out of her chest, Mable stepped towards the railings.

The river dragged below her, a thick sluggish brown mixture. One second the surface looked impenetrable, the next it was carved and marked like wood carvings on trees.

Disgust coursed through her body. She stepped back, head full of shards of a dream, the clear water marred by the sludge she had seen. The painted glory of the grand liquid crystal she had painted for herself as a young girl clashed hard with the foul mixture of sludge and death coursing below her.

Her head began to spin, the bridge seeming to tip before her. There was a pounding behind her eyes, like running footsteps or a wild carriage. She put a hand out behind her, to steady herself only for a wild panic to swallow her whole as her hand slipped the barrier.

Slipping, slipping slipping.

Tilting,

tilting,

tilting.

Falling,

Falling,

Falling.

There was never a normal day in London, Bettie reflected, watching the usual pandemonium on the bridge above her. Below her, she kicked something hard. Possibly metal, possibly precious. Bettie turned away, then back again with a gaping mouth as this girl above her, defiantly country born and bred with a dress like that, just seemed to step, trip, slip over the railings.

The whole bridge seemed to freeze, even from a distance Bettie watched she shock build on her porcelain face before she hit the water.

Suddenly, she was ten again watching her brother wave at her from that exact spot before disappearing under the current, just like that girl would've done if Bettie hadn't dropped her apron with a burning heart and struck straight out of the bank and into the water. The privilege her brother never got.

The girl was lying, unconscious, just below the surface. The current was beginning to push her, the hair falling loose already dragging itself free of the mud.

She hoisted the girl out of the water, staggering under the sheer weight of her waterlogged ruffles.

Above her, it seemed the whole of London was watching with bated breath as the father streaked to the top of the stairs, one hand on his hat and one on his heart. He did not step down though.

No rich person would touch her mud.

The girl's eyes fluttered open, triggering a chain reaction of spitting up water while choking on it.

Bettie felt numb, surveying her sputtering as she struggled to the bank. The top button on her dress had snapped in half on impact.

Bettie ripped the half off, crudely attaching a metal bottlecap onto the loose threads and depositing the glimmering button into her pockets for the pawnbroker.

Then, better late than never, four men launched themselves into the mud and took the shivering form out her arms. The girl was pulled away, leaving Bettie dripping morosely on the bank.

She trudged back to her crumbling house and took the scolding for her ruined dress with a bold face.

She didn't mention the girl.

As for Mable?

With every clear body of water, she felt only gratitude it wasn't the rancid liquid at the heart of London, every bubbling brook having a sinister splatter to the once joyful flow.

When winter rolled around, she sewed her top button back on, but the bottle-cap stayed her most prized possession, the only reminder not everything born of London was drenched in sin.

Highly Commended: The Draw of The River

Louise Alderson

Penny lets out a long, audible sigh as she passes the sign, "Welcome to Dockbridge; please drive carefully." This is the place where she was born and the very one she had spent so many years of her life hating and eager to get away from. She finally left with her husband Adrain ten years ago. The village was so much bigger than she remembered. Newly built houses had sprung up on many of the green spaces.

Although Penny is close to her intended destination, she is drawn to the river on the edge of the village. She parks up and gets out of the car, the heavy feeling of the last few months seemingly ebbing away as the familiar sounds and smells of the river wash over her. A smile crosses her lips as she hears the chug of a narrow boat engine fill the air. She lifts Blue, her little westie, out from the front seat where he has spent a considerable proportion of the journey curled up sleeping. Penny had talked his little ears off about all sorts of things, things which she did not feel comfortable sharing with the humans in her life. He had turned his head this way and that as she had spoken before yawning and giving in to sleep.

The divorce papers had been served to Penny a few days ago, on the doorstep of the townhouse she and Adrain had shared until very recently. She was unsure whether to laugh or cry. The last words her mother whispered to her before she and Adrian left for their honeymoon echoed in her head. Penny was so disappointed in herself for the way things had gone, feeling partly responsible for the separation that had led to the complete breakdown of her marriage and imminent divorce. He would have never fallen for the other woman if she had been the wife Adrain needed her to be. Her life had gone full circle, and so much had changed, including her. Crossly, she wipes a tear away with the back of her hand, determined not to show up with a blotchy face.

Penny is so relieved to see that the riverside has not changed all that much. The water's edge pub stood like a proud parent watching over those who used the river, but it had had an extension built, and its name changed to The Riverside Hotel. The Little Teapot café just down the towpath had not changed one bit. The outside seating area of this once tranquil place teemed with people chatting and giggling, and children ran around. Penny's eyes rest upon a little girl standing close to the edge of the river waving her chubby little hand at a passing narrow boat, her curly blonde hair in pigtails just like the ones she had worn as a child.

The sun is warm for early April, which brings to Penny's mind the many summers she spent by the river as a child, drawing pictures of the boats and writing stories about the boat people while her mum worked in the café. Penny's favourite boat had been a bright blue one with beautiful angel wings painted on the side of it. The man steering the boat had introduced himself to her as boatman Tom. He and his wife Hannah often let her get on the boat and spend time with their son Ian and daughter Charlotte. Penny loved their little houseboat and decided she wanted to be a boat lady when she was old enough. Penny had drawn detailed pictures of what her boat would look like inside and out. These drawings were then glued into a scrapbook for safekeeping. However, Penny's life had not turned out as she had imagined. She found work and Adrain in the nearby town of Kirkby, and after a whirlwind romance, they were married and found a place to rent there.

As Penny and Blue, walk further along the riverbank towpath, she sees narrow boats moored in neat rows. All the boats are around the same size; however, each one has a vastly different persona. Some boats are painted in flamboyant colours, pinks, reds, and oranges, with equally loud names like Star Rocket and Lightening Flash. Others are painted in softer shades, such as lilacs, greens, and blues, with gentle names such as Ireland Dreams and Cloudless Sky. She wonders if she will see Tom's narrow boat. Penny paused, looking at each one as she passed, drinking in every detail of each boat as if today would be the last time she ever saw them again. Even though she knew this was not the case, she would have to stay with her parents until she could afford to rent a little place. Penny stands still, listening to the birds' song and the sound of the water. She takes a deep breath, and in that moment, she realises how much she has missed the river.

Penny and Blue have been cooped up in the car for a long time today, with as many of her belongings as she could cram in it. She was in no rush to climb back in there, nor was she keen on facing those awaiting her arrival at her childhood home. She was dreading the forthcoming greeting she was to experience from her parents. Her father's sympathetic smile and arm rub because he never knew what to say in tricky circumstances, and her mother's I told you so look. Blue was clearly in no rush, either. Penny watched him patter along the towpath on his lead just in front of her, happily wagging his tail and showing no sign of becoming tired.

Penny decides to continue walking around the river's bend to the big oak tree she used to climb. The horn of a narrow boat warning other boats it was coming around

the bend startles Blue. He leaps, and Penny manages to catch him before he falls into the river; his shaking form snuggles into her; Penny strokes her little dog and reassures him he is okay. She must have looked a little cross as the man steering the narrow boat shouted sorry as he passed them. Penny smiles when she realises the boat is The Angel. Her blue paint is not as bright as it was, but her angel wings are still equally beautiful. Penny is curious as to why Tom is not at the boat's helm, so she eagerly tries to encourage Blue to get down and walk; however, he is having none of it, so she pops him under her arm and makes her way towards the moored boats. Penny arrives at The Angel just as the man steps off the boat onto dry land.

'Penny?' he says enthusiastically.

She frowns. 'Yes!'

'It's me, Ian,' he answers.

'Hello,' she says with a smile.

They both laugh.

'What brings you back here?' he asks.

She sighs. 'Long story.'

'You're the last person I expected to see here.'

'Yeah, same,' she says.

'Dad got too sick to live on the boat, but he refused to sell it. He and Mum now rent a bungalow in the village.'

'Oh, I see, sorry to hear about Tom.'

'Thanks, you know he'll outlive us all, don't you.'

'You're probably right,' she says with a laugh. 'It's good to see The Angel is still here though.'

'Yeah, I didn't want it to sit on the river and rot. So, I asked Dad if I could use it to take tourists up and down the river. And he agreed.'

While chatting, a small group gathered by the boat trip sign, ready for the next boat ride along the river.

Ian motions over his shoulder. 'And as you can see, my idea worked.'

'I can,' she says.

'Well, I better go.'

'Me too,' Penny replies.

'Let's have a proper catch-up real soon,' Ian says with a smile. He takes a pen and a receipt from his pocket, which he uses to jot down his number before offering it to Penny.

Penny takes it. 'Yeah, sounds good.'

Penny tucks the receipt in her pocket and waves goodbye to Ian before she and Blue head back to the car. She slides into the front seat, takes the piece of paper and looks at it for a moment. For the second time today, Penny realises something important. She is unable to change her past. She must live in the present while looking forward to her future.

Highly Commended: The River

Nathanial Vosper

“Do we really have to move, Dad?” said Joe Bartley.

“Sure we do, Son,” said Mr Bartley, patting his boy on the head. “Can’t you see this is a great opportunity for me to get a new job? We can all settle down by the river. You and your brother Tim can go to the local school and your old dad will show you how to fish.”

As far back as Joe could remember, his family had been travellers. His dad could never settle down on a job, and in his wild hopes to get one, the family had travelled from country to country chasing his crazy ideas.

But each job had come to an end. They often received some sort of email to do with Mr Bartley needing to work harder or turn up on time for work. But whatever the report was, it was never a good one.

Two weeks later, the family arrived in the USA. They caught two trains and a taxi. Then Mr Bartley got out a map and proudly led the family round in circles. Then Mrs Bartley got out her smart phone and walked with Tim and Joe to their new cottage. Mr Bartley was having none of this technology business, though. He continued going round in larger and larger circles. Then he started to go in completely the wrong direction. Then he turned back and headed for the river.

It wasn’t until his wife and children were eating dinner that Mr Bartley eventually found his way to the cottage. He was covered in mud and water weed and dripping from head to foot. Mrs Bartley jumped up when she saw him.

“What happened to you, Dear? Did you fall in the river?” she exclaimed, as she set about pulling off his soggy boots.

“No, no, Darling. Nothing like it. I just wanted to see what the water was like,” he stammered. He tramped off up-stairs to get changed.

The next day was busy. So Mr Bartley rushed off to go fishing.

Joe found him a while later on the river, half in and half out of a leaky boat.

“Just getting the hang of this fishing business,” he yelled. “It was a great deal with these boats you know. The man who gave them to me sold them on for half price so I got two for only one hundred dollars.” He went on pulling and heaving on the upturned boat. “I’ve nearly got this thing righted,” he called out, excitedly but the strain was too much for the little boat, and with a wrenching, tearing noise, it ended up in two pieces, with Mr Bartley underneath. He bobbed to the surface a minute later.

“Never mind!” he spluttered, through a mouthful of water weed. “I have the other one over there.” Then he swam off after a half-sunk dingy.

Joe hadn’t been the only onlooker, though. An old fisherman stepped up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Do you reckon your dad would like to join my fishing crew? I have a boat further down the river.”

“I’m sure he would,” Joe replied.

“Right, then you run along and tell your mum to have that poor man a dry pair of clothes ready for him and when he gets out, I’ll tell him my idea.”

So Joe ran home and soon his dad squelched in.

“There you go, Nell,” were his first words. “I got myself a job. Told you I would, didn’t I! Guess the old fellow knew I was the man when he saw me handling those boats of mine. I’ll pop round tomorrow and put the men in their places.”

“Ah, there you are!” said the boat captain, the next morning, shaking Mr Bartley’s hand.

“You and the men can get the nets ready, but first of all, I’ll show you round the boat. My name is Rob and this one’s Dan,” he said, pointing to a boy of about fifteen.

“My name’s Tom,” said Mr Bartley, giving the boy’s hand a good squeeze and shaking him till his teeth rattled.

“I guess I’ll see more of you later,” said Mr Bartley, with a smile as he stumbled below deck.

The boy winced and rubbed his hand.

Mr Bartley soon finished below deck and crashed up the steps again.

“It’s a bit stiff, this hatch,” said Rob helpfully.

Mr Bartley took note and gave the hatch a mighty shove. It flew open with a bang. Then he scrambled onto the deck.

“There we go!” said Mr Bartley. “If you ever have any trouble with that, I’m the man!”

Several weeks passed. Mr Bartley went fishing most days. On weekends, he took Tim and Joe out swimming. But as usual, his prospects of keeping the job were getting lower. Each day, another one of the men would grumble about how he was so busy shouting orders, that he didn’t do enough work, or that he spent too much time grumbling about some terrible virus that was having a nasty effect on his health. The only real illness troubling Mr Bartley was a bad allergy to hard work. Soon enough, there had been so many complaints that Rob said that the next one he got, he would give Mr Bartley the sack.

One night, Joe couldn't sleep. At last, he made up his mind to go for a walk. Perhaps it would help him sleep. So, slipping quietly out of bed, he tiptoed down the stairs and crept out of the cottage door. He could hear the roar of the river and started walking towards it. He was just about to turn back when he heard men's voices on the other side of the river.

"Look, we'll do it this way!" shouted one of the men. "I'll pretend to be a new recruit. Then when he lets me on the boat, I'll take out this gun and I'll shoot him, threaten the men on board and steal their catch. Then we can put our foot on it and zoom away. No one can stop us, right?"

"Err, right" boomed the other men.

The next day, Mr Bartley left early for work. He had decided to be as amiable as possible. Perhaps, then the men would like him. Dan was the only person there when he arrived, so he went over to give him a friendly hand shake. But the boy didn't seem so keen. He turned away when he saw Mr Bartley advancing towards him.

"Come on, my boy! Don't be shy! We're friends, aren't we?" said Mr Bartley, giving the boy a kindly wallop on the head. At last, Dan extended a quivering hand and shut his eyes, waiting for the inevitable crunch. Mr Bartley took it eagerly and wrung it like a wet flannel.

"There you go!" said Mr Bartley. "Not as bad as you thought, was it?"

At this moment, Rob turned up with the rest of the men.

"We have a new recruit!" he exclaimed, pointing at a little man. "You lads, can go downstairs while I show him around the top deck."

"Right, here are the nets," Rob began.

At this moment, the man suddenly reached under his coat and drew out a gun. Rob leapt back but was pinned against the side of the boat. The man took a quick step forwards so he was standing on the hatch and levelled the gun at Rob's head.

Down below, Dan had decided he would quickly pop upstairs to fetch something. He gave the hatch a shove but it wouldn't budge.

"It's stuck again!" he complained.

This was Mr Bartley's chance to show the men his worth.

"Leave it to me!" he boomed excitedly, as he took a run up.

Back on deck, Rob was in big trouble.

"Please!" he begged. "I'll give you anything."

The man's face was cold, his fingers tightened around the trigger. At this moment, there was a loud thumping noise down below. Then suddenly, there was a terrific crash. The hatch burst open and Mr Bartley erupted like a torpedo onto the top deck, sending the man with the gun skywards.

"There you are!" he said. "Not too stiff, was it then!"

A moment later, there was a loud splash.

"What a move, Man!" exclaimed Rob with much enthusiasm. "Who'd have known you had the wit to do it! You can keep the job for as long as you like."

Everyone was shouting,

"Three cheers for Mr Bartley!" They congratulated him on his quick-thinking to save Rob's life.

That night Mr Bartley walked back to his cottage, still not knowing quite what had happened.

"They said I can keep the job for as long as I like," he told his wife.

"Oh really?" she replied "how come?"

"Well I'm not quite sure, but I just helped a boy out the hatch and they all cheered!"

Commended: The Stream of Souls
Esme Speight

They came in droves, came in whispers, came in the sliding of cotton against rough skin and the twinkling of stars as they hung in the night sky. They came in shadows disguised as mere curiosity as they paced the confines of Elva's mind, admiring the textures that made up her very being.

She's good, they would murmur as she dreamt of faraway horizons, borne of a blooming desire to scour the arresting nature that encompassed the small village of Maren. *She's perfect*, they would muse while raking putrid nails down her walls, testing the strength she could retain. *She's the one*, they decided one fateful winter's night.

Elva couldn't resist their call that roused her from another unfulfilling slumber as she hurried out of her rickety house with an urgency she couldn't fathom being privy to. Maren was haunting when it was swallowed by the sheet of black that accompanied the inevitable rise of the bloodless moon, the one she would find herself praying to desperately in the longer days. Elva would curl her fingers into the fruitless dirt that was supposed to bear fruits and vegetables ; the harvest had instead come up dry and whatever little bounty there was had shied from the sun and shrunk back into itself in the form of wilting petals and sallow stems. The moon, for Elva, was the hope she held her life dear by - the lifeline to shed the manacles that bound her to so underwhelming a life, a rope to pull her up from the abyss when her own suffering would toss her into the pits without so much as a backwards glance.

It was one of the many reasons the Dead favoured Elva so.

She didn't question why she had run out of her home with her feet bare, didn't wonder why her body propelled her deeper into the forest, blocking out the white orb from her view. Elva didn't so much as slow her pace as her feet stumbled on tiny thorns that embedded into her flesh with a relish that drew tiny beads of crimson. For her, there was but one certainty ; the moon had answered her prayers and was showing her the path to obtain what she so desperately craved - never minding the fact she was on no literal route. She stumbled through the foliage all but immune in the depths of darkness because somewhere residing in her, some little voice assured her she knew the way.

The forest was silent this time of night. Not a sound was heard - no peep of an owl or rustling of a rabbit Elva occasionally hunted when situations grew dire enough. The night air rattled along her very bone marrow, blowing through her in gusts that caused her body to quake. Despite running, it wasn't enough to shake the chill that engulfed her so completely. If anything it was made more acute in the goosebumps that prickled her arms and chattered her teeth.

There. Elva sprinted out the forest and onto the soft green grass that thankfully, didn't harm her feet. For the first time since she had stirred, she felt that she could take a breath. Walking now at a more leisurely pace, she made the last few steps towards the sparkling river, the ripple of water becoming clearer with each bated moment. As she was able to see each glimmer and speck fully, she couldn't help her collapse onto the river bank. The exertion she had pulled on herself had finally grown taut and Elva found herself to be utterly exhausted. But her work was not done. Not at all as it hadn't even begun.

It was then that Elva recalled the warning dictated to all villagers - to not so much as look upon the Stream of Souls, a deadly river where your life could be sent thrashing within a moment due to a misguided sense of fascination founded on myths and tales. That wasn't here though. Was it? Elva looked up at the moon that remained as bright as ever and smiled to herself in reassurance.

She stared into the water, finding her own reflection staring back at her. The water was so dark it was almost black. Elva appeared in the water like a shadowy counterpart to her current self. Her straw blond hair was ragged, torn out in clumps by too sharp nails and her blue eyes were so vivid that their very essence seemed to glow. Her skin was waxy, pallid, sickly in hue - her face mottled with ribbons of cuts that slashed harshly across her blurry features. Her body was the worst of it all - her legs were sticks and her body was so thin she could count each individual rib that was stained in an array of pale colours with the occasional deep purple. Elva blinked and as she did, the distortion disappeared, replaced with her usual looks - sweet faced, beautiful, unmarked.

The water seemed to be balanced in a perfect yet unnatural stillness, caught in the harmony of time - but whether that was good or not was yet to be decided. She kneeled by the bank, dirt smearing on her legs but she hardly noticed as she trailed a pale

hand through the biting cold. The night had casted its blanket over the river and nothing could be seen. Not a sign of a fish or any signs of life - not just in the river, but anywhere. It occurred to Elva she had no idea how to get back to Maren but as the thought drifted into her mind it soon left silently, so she forgot it had ever been there at all. Right. The river.

She dipped her hand in deeper this time so her body had to lean forward for the river to capture the rest of her arm in its opaque embrace. Elva wasn't certain how long she remained like that, bent over like the cracked doll she would play with as a child and waited. What for, she didn't know but it didn't scare her or cower her back into the trees. All she could think of was lands far away from here, of evergreen hills looking down on sparkling cities and so high mountains that she could walk through the very clouds that dominated the sky. So she could sleep there under the stars and watch the moon from a far closer distance. A smile pulled on the corners of her mouth dreamily, as her surroundings continue to fade out from around her. Each time she would tire of a setting, another one would be quick to replace it, like flicking through pages of a never ending book.

Without warning, a sliver of skin gently grazed Elva's own. Testing it - confirming it was fresh flesh and not putrid like the rest that floated aimlessly around the area. Elva gasped, wrenched free of her fantasy but the hand was already gripping her arm tightly, digging too long nails to keep its hold and leaving crescent shaped moons in the process. The wound bled freely into the depths and Elva barked out a cry of pain. And then a cry of fear as she spotted a pair of luminous green eyes hovering just below the surface. It was something of a nightmare as the tendrils of shadow curled underneath the figure, the robes hanging off the meagre body to reveal every bone peeking through menacingly. It opened its mouth and a wave of foul air washed over her, accompanied by the sight of rotting yellow teeth that gnashed together hungrily - hungry for her, Elva realised with a dawning horror.

She didn't even know why she was there. It was too late to ponder her night's happenings though as rising beside the corpse were dozens of others with the same neon eyes, the same haunting attire and tiny daggers that made up the expanse of their teeth. Elva choked on her own breath as she was flung forwards, so her face was but a hairbreadth from the corpse's. He opened his mouth and smiled gruesomely, in

a satisfied manner that made her heart cease its rapid pulses. Multiple hands were on her now, dragging her into the river and Elva was powerless to stop it.

Powerless to do anything but scream as she was yanked under with a tiny splash. But no one heard her cries because she was all alone. And as the souls finished feasting on her fresh cadaver, they all found themselves pleased with how the night had turned out. They had chosen well indeed.

Commended: Esconderijo

Katherine Thomas

The four of them walk down to the riverbank - sister, sister, brother and friend. Their bare feet pressing footprints into the red earth as they walk that old path, leaving a marker of where they have been.

The siblings had been here many times in their youth, back when they were still classed as such. Almost every day they'd be down here, on the edge, wandering in and out of games and imagination and water. It had been a place of refuge for them; where they were not 'The Immigrant Children Who Lived AT 13 Trent Road', but simply kids. Free to skip and run without being peered at as though under a microscope.

Perhaps the oldest, Naomi, would find an interesting rock which she just had to show to Kraven and Karin. Or maybe Karin would beg and cajole Kraven into going for a swim in the icy water with her, or Kraven simply had to stay and watch the sunset. Whatever it was, something about this place would hold them captive from dawn to dusk. Every so often, they'd suddenly look up and the day had slipped away from them, and they could see an anxious parent on the cliff coming to call them home for supper.

Even as they grew older, this place was still a sanctuary for the trio. When school and the weight of all those judging eyes grew too heavy to carry, or when Kraven had picked a fight, or Naomi had failed a test, they'd come here. Their days might've gotten busier, and more chaotic, but this was still their secret cove; the place where they'd come to simply be. Somewhere where they could leave their worries on the sand and slip into the river and swim like fishes.

That was then, and this was now. Yet still, after all these years, after they'd grown up, moved away, gotten jobs, this was still their wild place. A little nook they'd carved out together in a world which had been pitted against them at every twist and turn of fate. And so they walked, the three of them and Kraven's friend, Jace, down to the riverbank. A little winding path which remained hidden unless you were looking for it, and the little windy place which was the same unless you were bold enough to venture down that path.

It was Karin who had taken the first steps all those years ago. They didn't know why the path had chosen to reveal itself to her, didn't even know where she had gone after she'd run off in a fury. Perhaps she'd just gotten lucky, or perhaps some external force

had seen her stumbling and crying, knees bleeding and rage in her eyes, and known that she'd needed a place to hide out – away from everything. But whatever it was, the path had opened and with it a world. They called it 'Esconderijo' - hideaway in Kristang, their mother's tongue and the one spoken at home.

It was with this language that Karin and Kraven had passed notes in class – a running commentary on the lesson which only they could understand. If the teacher or one of the other kids interrupted it, all they'd see was a page full of meaningless scribbles, but to the twins it was a lifeline. This creole was what had gotten Naomi into trouble so many times, when she had mixed it with English – creating her own little patois which only she understood.

With an ease born of stumbling through the traps and pitfalls of school, Kraven ducked under a low hanging branch. Jace however, turned around and animatedly discussing why a banana is in fact a berry, received the branch smack in his face. Kraven smirked, remembering the same thing happening to him repeatedly when running down to the water. Eventually he'd learnt to duck at just the right moment, and it appeared that he'd retained that instinct, even after he'd moved on from the place.

Slowly the path branched out and they turned the corner and suddenly it was there - this forgotten place of wilderness. Grass had crept up on the riverbank, and the little den which they had built all those years ago was derelict and crumbling. A tree grew through the roof, and the door had fallen in, and the little hut was a mere skeleton of what it had been when they first build it.

Then it was a riot of colour, lovingly painted in every sort of colour Karin could get her hands on. Kraven had sourced the door – a big heavy thing which he had carried down the little rocky path on his back – and nailed it to the bare structure Naomi had built. On his first attempt at attaching the door he had placed the hinges on either side, but the second had worked. And sure, the end effect was a little lopsided and tended to get stuck every so often, but what did that matter – it simply added to the shed's charm. The three siblings stood for a moment, taking in what had become to their place and all the ways it had changed. Then, with a cheeky grin at eachother which spoke volumes, Kraven and Karin turned and sprinted down to the waterfront. Kraven reached the river first and dived in seamlessly.

Kraven remained underneath the water, just long enough for Naomi to get worried and Karin to peer over the edge, before bursting upright and dragging her in, and she gasped in mock outrage before allowing herself to be pushed in. Then they're both in

the water, splashing and laughing. Their shrieks echo out over the landscape, their splashes creating ripples over the otherwise still river.

And just for a moment Jace can see the children that they once were.

Commended: The River's Echo

Anna Xanbekyan

The river was never short of stories. It never had been. Whispering in the reeds, murmuring under bridges, booming after storms. Some it took whole, pulling them under into the deep, and others it took gently, letting them ride on its surface for years. Today, it witnessed another.

I. The Stranger on the Banks

Noah had been walking for hours, his boots sinking into the damp earth of the riverbank. The fog of morning had burned away, leaving a clean autumn sky, but he scarcely noticed the loveliness of it all. His thoughts, like the river, were called to some unseen thing.

He had come back to this river not out of nostalgia but out of something more basic—an unspecified ache. He had spent hours as a child sitting here, observing the water cut its eternal path. He had speculated where it would lead if only he had the courage to let it carry him away. Life had, however, carried him elsewhere, away from the books he had forever wished to write, away from the aspirations he had put on the backburner.

A rhythmic splash shattered his daydream. He turned his head and saw them—rowers. Eight bodies in sync, their oars plunging into the river, drawing through water, through time. Noah was not alone. A man stood a few steps in front of him, observing the rowers with a look that was half admiration, half wistfulness. He was older, maybe in his sixties, his silvery hair blown around by the wind.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the man replied, his tone low but unyielding.

Noah paused. "Yeah," he conceded. "I've never actually seen rowing."

The man smiled gently. "It's not a sport. It's poetry in motion. A dialogue between muscle and river, discipline and release."

Noah arched an eyebrow, looking back at the boat cutting through the water. He wasn't certain he did get it, but there was something about the words that had intrigued him.

"You rowed?" he asked.

The man nodded, his eyes still on the water. "A lifetime ago."

II. The Story Beneath the Surface

They stood there for a bit, the river doing the talking for them.

Then the man said, almost as an afterthought, "I knew someone once who lived for this."

Noah turned to him. "Who?"

The older man breathed slowly out, as if the name itself was a burden. "R.C. Sherriff."

Noah rummaged through his brain. The name was recognizable, but remote. "The writer?"

The man smiled. "The writer, yes. But before that, a rower. He used to say that rowing was the nearest thing to poetry he had ever experienced."

He paused, watching as the boat disappeared around a bend. "He rowed here, on this very river. Even after he became famous, even after Journey's End changed his life, the river stayed with him. There's a memorial to him not far from here—The Rowing Eight. A tribute to his love for this place."

Noah allowed the silence to sit. It was odd to consider a writer not so much characterized by what he wrote as by the cadence of oars cutting through water.

"Did he ever return?" Noah questioned.

The man nodded. "Not in the way he hoped. But the river recalls".

Noah tracked his gaze, seeing the ripples move outward, each one pushing the next. The thought stayed with him—of something enduring beyond one life, borne along by water and time.

III. The Weight of the Past

Noah had never thought of himself as sentimental. But there was something about the river that made it impossible not to think about the past.

He had wanted to write sometime in his life. He used to fill notebooks with stories as a child, his imagination running wild. But life kept getting in the way as years passed. There was always something else, something more urgent, more practical. The stories slowly faded away. And now, here, he felt the old twinge return.

The old man knew. "You see," he said to Noah, "Sherriff doubted himself, too. Thought he wasn't good enough. Thought nobody would care about what he had to say. But he wrote anyway."

Noah swallowed. "I used to write."

The man nodded as if this was precisely what he had been hoping to hear. "Then maybe the river isn't finished with you yet."

IV. The Echo of the River

The rowers had long since disappeared, the river peaceful once again. The sole movement was the passing wave, a sigh of wind ruffling the surface.

Noah sat at the edge of the water, gazing out at the river as though it could provide him with some solutions. The older man sat down next to him, saying nothing but being there.

Noah finally spoke after an excruciatingly long period of time. "Do you come here often?"

"Every day."

"Why?"

The man smiled weakly. "Because the river remembers."

The words gave Noah a shiver down his spine, though he wasn't certain why. Perhaps because he wished to be remembered as well. Perhaps because some part of him had come here hoping for just that notion—that stories, once spoken, never truly disappeared.

He patted his pocket, his fingers brushing against frayed paper. A notebook. He'd carried it with him for years but not written in it for the same amount of time.

He hesitated. And, eventually, opened it.

The man glared at him but said nothing. He didn't have to.

Noah started to write with his pen.

And, for the first time in years, wrote something down.

V. Where the River Leads

Days passed. Then weeks.

Noah went back to the river time and time again, filling up his notebook with words he'd thought were lost. Some days, the older man was there too, watching the rowers or simply listening to the water. They spoke less, but the silences between them were significant.

Noah walked along another section of river one afternoon, near Molesey. He hadn't meant to go there, but something had drawn him.

That's when he saw it.

The memorial. The Rowing Eight.

It was there quietly, unobtrusive yet powerful. A tribute to a man who had found his passion on this water.

Noah ran his fingers across the inscription, tracing the words carved in stone. It was a quiet tribute, yet one that remained. A reminder that stories weren't just told in books but in the spaces we leave behind.

He sat on the river that evening, running his fingers through the pages of his notebook. He had written more than he knew.

Perhaps, perhaps the river had been narrating his story all this while.

Commended: The River Wolf, Tales of My Grandfather

Paul Ostroverhy

This story is a true story, but like all true stories they're sometimes unbelievable. My grandfather Oleg was born on a river in Siberia, a river so large that you could not see the other side. The Captain of the ship wrote on his improvised birth certificate: "a happy and fully in term child was born on my ship". Nobody really knew where he got his medical knowledge, but these words defined my grandpa's whole life: he always smiled and loved to fish. Soon after he was born, his mother moved to Lvov, near Poland, where she became the prima ballerina of the city's opera. The same year as my grandfather was born, his own father, a former White Army officer and eccentric geologist, was arrested during one of his scientific trips in the Taiga villages, and sent to Gulag for fifteen years on the accusations of being an English spy exclusively due to his aristocratic manners.

Amidst the ravages of post-war Ukraine, in an ex-Polish city with hungry children where food was scarce, Oleg taught himself to fish. At just five years old, he was already feeding his fellow comrades. This band of children was defined by its lack of care towards their nationality and background, and were exclusively preoccupied with finding food and antique furniture; the latter to later burn it in the abandoned villas they squatted to heat the place up. The villas' Polish proprietors were either killed, deported, or driven away by the various armies that passed through the city. But to Oleg and his band, there was only one thing that mattered: food.

My grandfather never fished alone. He had a companion, named Vaska, who was an enormous Siberian Forest cat that would sit by his side, waiting for fish. Vaska would take the fishes out of the river and place them side by side, waiting until his master gave the permission for him to taste the catch. Oleg had a turbulent childhood and adolescent years, never joining the Soviet pioneers or Komsomol, the Young Communists. He was refused entry at the medical school, upsetting his plans to become a surgeon, because he had in turn refused to join the Communist party. This is how he became a political dissident to the Soviet regime, printing forbidden books.

The year his father came out of the camp it was the turn to Oleg. He was imprisoned for his underground printing factory. In the Gulag, which had no fences or wall because

it was in the middle of the taiga at the riverside, Oleg could walk out without any problem to fish and bring the fishes back to the camp. The camp had its own domesticated bear, Mishka, who took Vaska's place as a fishing companion.

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Paris had never been part of Oleg's plan. It was my father's idea who wanted him to join our family. Strolling on the riverbanks of Paris near Notre-Dame, the river Seine called him again. He established himself as a fisherman between Île-Saint-Louis and Île-de-la-Cité, just next to the bridge connecting the two islands.

One day, as he was fishing by the Seine, he felt a strong tug and felt that this was the biggest catch he had as of yet. For nearly two hours he wrestled with the invisible fish. The sight of a torso naked man, sweat running all over, wrestling with a rod that was perfectly bent into the form of an arc, attracted a small crowd from nearby. There was a bus tour from Belarus and whilst the women went sightseeing, the men stayed behind, exchanging cigarettes and were now involved in witnessing the fight between Oleg and the enormous carp. Once they learnt that he too was a compatriot, they started encouraging him even louder and started placing bets amongst themselves. The net broke and the carp escaped. Oleg, determined as ever, put the cast again, and once he felt the tug, he grappled with the creature. The crowd held its breath. Suddenly, he dropped his fishing rod and lunged head first on the shore of the river like Mishka, wrestling with the carp with his bare hands. With the crowd applauding, my grandfather, drenched, emerged from the river Seine, with a gigantic fish in his hand. It was eaten by my family for an entire week.

There was also the story about the Rothschild eels. The Rothschilds owned a manor house at the end of Île-Saint-Louis. One day, Oleg, always eager to find a new fishing spot, discovered that the place was filled with eels. Pleased, he returned home with a bag full of them and decided to store them in the freezer for the night. The eels, contrary to what my grandfather thought, survived the freezer. The next morning, much to his horror, thinking the eels were dead, he went over to open the freezer. What he saw was a myriad of eels slithering across the kitchen floor, infiltrating the desks and

furniture. This was a lesson, and from that day on, whenever he would catch eels, he would make sure they were killed on the spot.

Back in his favourite spot by the Seine, one day Oleg sat hacking away mercilessly at the eels with a hammer. What should have been a romantic promenade for a nearby couple in the city of love instead became a memorable scene of blood and screams. Casually glancing over to the elderly fisherman, what they saw before them was a wild-eyed, bald, chest tattooed man smeared in blood as he decapitated the fish. Screams of shock drew the nearby gendarmes, who upon arriving at the scene, were met with my grandfather, who responded with the only French phrase he knew: "Je suis un homme de Sibérie, un loup solitaire" – I am a man from Siberia, a lone wolf. Whether to let an old man go or lock what looked like a madman, they chose the former.

Yet what is perhaps the most memorable scene remains by far the story about his fall into the river Seine. One morning around 5ish, backpack and fishing gear on his back, he peered over to look at the water; fascinated by the way the light intermingled with the lapping waters, crystal clear to the point of translucency. Alas, he lost his balance and toppled into the water near Saint-Michel. Like sirens the river had lured Oleg over, and he was now engaged in an existential fight with the stream, refusing to let go of his fishing equipment in order to save himself. The stream bore him down past a group of drunk, homeless people that were huddled under the bridge. Oleg shouted "I'm the lone wolf - from Siberia!" . Intoxicated, they could but laugh and jeer replying: "A lone wolf? My ass! A river wolf!" Infuriated, Oleg started yelling in Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and even Yiddish: "Help me you bastards! I'm sinking!" Luckily, the firefighter's boat, permanently stationed by the side of the Seine, had a few firefighters that spotted and rescued my grandfather from his plight. However, the moment he was back on land, he stripped down to his bare pants and ran off in the direction of the men that had insulted him. Again, the sight of a half-naked, tattooed, bald man shouting about Siberian wolves was enough to make the homeless men dash off, escaping the strange apparition.

*

These various stories and anecdotes are some of the ones I think when my mind turns to Oleg. For all his struggles, lost dreams and misadventures, to me he will forever remain my beloved grandfather whose famous Ukha fish soup, its delicacy my palate still remembers. As time passes and the stories are yet retold, they become increasingly hard to believe, detailing the life of a man from a bygone era.

Having returned to his native Ukraine, in 2014 Oleg went over to the Maidan in Kyiv to fight against his avowed enemies: the Communist régime. Wounded during the protests and later hospitalized, Oleg escaped the hospital despite still having the intravenous equipment attached to his body. He was convinced that the agents were there to get him and he would rather die than return to the Gulag. In the middle of a forest and by the Dniester river, he settled in a riverside house that was periodically inundated. In this case he went to the roof where he had painted in big letters: Memento Mori. There, he would cast his fishing rod and spend his remaining day in solitude, peace and quiet, surrounded by the river, a never-ending presence throughout his life. He died as he lived: a lone wolf from Siberia. A river wolf.

Poetry Category

1st Place Poem: The River's Song

Merey Nurgazy

The river bends like time's own spine,
A silver thread through oak and pine.
Its whispers carry tales untold-
Of lovers' vows and warriors bold,
Of Huck's raft, Toad's reckless spree,
And Charon's wake to destiny.

It mirrors skies in liquid glass,
Then churns with storms it cannot pass.
Its banks once nursed the firefly's dance,
Now concrete steals the otter's chance.
Plastic blooms where minnows fled,
A shroud of progress, thinly spread.

Yet deep within its mud-choked veins,
The pulse of ancient life remains.
A child skips stones, ripples rise-
Her hope, a beacon in wise eyes.
For hands that mold and minds that strive
Can coax the drowned world back alive.
The river sighs, but does not cease-
It sings of loss, and love, and peace.

2nd Place Poem: Passing
Martha Blue

A thread of geese unspools
the grey silk
of the sky.

A brittle breeze fingers
the soft warmth of their feathers then
swirls harshly around their folded feet
but still they fly headlong into daybreak.

An unfurling brilliance
kindles their hearts,
gives them courage
to continue.

Below, winter trees
lean languorous
against ashen horizons,
the vaporous river refracts
a resplendent moon above,
as silence heralds deeper currents.

In bared fields, steaming cows droop weary heads
in stony trance: in monochrome masquerade,
they trudge, knee-deep, in the mud of their minds,
following each other around invisible tracks towards
streams of grey sludge that return to the river.

Above, the geese glide onwards.
Sudden rain does not disturb them.
The kindling sun does not cause the sight
of the fractal, sodden horizon to be lost.

It is reflected in the river's glass,
shrouding the geese.

Equal 3rd Place Poem: The Singing Stream

Om Sahu

I was born where the cold winds rise,
Where peaks touch clouds and silence lies.
A restless thread, a newborn sigh,
Slipping through stones as eagles fly.

I dance through valleys, smooth and wide,
Pulling the sky in my rolling tide.
The trees lean close, their shadows bend,
Telling me stories I never end.

The heron glides, the minnows dart,
The willows weep, their branches part.
I hum to the stones, I sing to the reeds,
I carry the echoes the forest needs.

But storms will come, and rains will call,
I'll rise in fury, I'll leap the wall.
Fields will drown, and bridges break,
I take, I give, I shift, I wake.

Yet when the dawn spills gold once more,
I soften my voice, I kiss the shore.
Back to my song, back to my way,
Pulling the light through another day.

And though I run, I never flee,
For all roads turn to meet the sea.

Equal 3rd Place Poem: Where The River Remembers
Leow Rui En Amber

when my mind starts to wander far
to a place where no light can burn me, where no hands can scald my skin
i will squint my eyes and at the very horizon of my sight
there will be a winding river resembling the crook of your neck.

its waters are clear and salty—they taste of my tears.
in it swims fish that gulp with gaping mouths at the food pellets in my wounded
hands.
in it lies skipping stones drawn on with waterlogged chalk.
when i dip my feet inside—hesitant, tentative—the water ripples around my toes.
it tastes. it remembers. faint musk of mud and wood that once stained my bare soles.

the further i walk along the upstream, tides hugging my bare knees,
the more i recognise the silhouette of familiar mountains against the sky.
the river guides me, takes me onto forgotten paths marked by
faded bicycle tracks and carved initials covered by wild, twisting vines.

when the sun starts to descend, the clouds coloured gold—beautiful, wondrous,
the river will lead me to a worn out house with a broken picket fence,
spit me out onto the cracked stone pavement. bright red firecrackers hang
from the door. it hasn't left since that lunar new year all those years ago.
i will perk up at the sight of white plastic chairs that have heard more eclipsing
laughter and
moonlit confessions than the god we grew up with. i will knock on the wooden door
and
my eyes will grow teary at the sight of a white-haired mother,
2 waiting with handmade straw sandals in her hands.
when the moon is hung high, i will hear the lapping of waves against stone.
it is soft against the occasional chirp of the birds. the next morning, i will walk along
the river
once more, holding handmade sandals in one hand while my other waves adieu.

i will run my hand along its gentle current and let it guide me until
the mountains fade and the houses vanish.

i will thank the river at my final turn as it splashes against me,
whispering goodbye.

Highly Commended: The Eternal Thread
Savanna Libberts

The river carries lives untold,
Its waters deep, its stories old.
Through every curve and rushing wave,
It keeps the past, the lives it gave.

Baptism's grace in its gentle stream,
Lovers' vows and dreams unseen.
Warriors crossed, their steel held high,
Echoes of their battle cry.

A cradle for their newborn's tears,
A grave for those who've spent their years.
Ashes blend with slit and stone,
The river claims them as its own.

Time wears on; the waters shift,
The river's voice a mournful drift.
Plastics choke, its currents slowed,
Bearing scars of what we've bestowed.

Yet still it flows, the stories stay,
Whispered secrets of yesterday.
Through drought and flood, it finds its way,
A living thread no force can sway.

The river ripples, soft and low,
A timeless thread where lives still flow.
Its strength endures, a bond so tight,
Through every soul, its endless flight.

Highly Commended: River's Journey

Bill Matthews

Beneath the willow's sweeping grace,
The river winds at patient pace,
A mirror for the shifting skies,
A whispered hymn that never dies.

Its currents carve through stone and sand,
A sculptor with a gentle hand,
Bearing secrets, ages old,
In waters clear, in waters cold.

It gathers rain from distant hills,
A tapestry of streams and rills,
A wanderer in ceaseless flow,
From mountain high to valley low.

Upon its banks the children play,
The lovers rest, the elders pray,
It carries tales of joy and woe,
Of fleeting time, and ebbing glow.

In moonlit nights, it softly gleams,
A silver thread in twilight's dreams,
And when the dawn ignites the day,
The river hums and slips away.

Yet, in its path, it weaves a tale,
Of journeys vast, through mist and gale,
Forever moving, wild and free,
A timeless dance to meet the sea.

Commended: Rivers Flow; Children Grow

Kai Lee

I was raised by the banks of the Platte,
My neck bent from looking through river-wet bangs
For elusive Petoskey stones to put in the kayak,
Ferrying them to our weekend river-home.

We would end our days on Lake Michigan
After climbing the back of the Sleeping Bear,
Our feet caked with sand and thistles,
Flip-flops abandoned where we spotted the snapping turtle.

We would laugh on the drive back home-
For you wouldn't be a Michigander until you had a car-
Reminiscing on salmon-grounds and Beaver dens disturbed.

Now I live across the globe,
Kayak passed on to the next explorers to discover
Their own river-snakes and turtle-land
That I must now live without.

Commended: Lethe (River of Forgetfulness)

Bakhtawar Waqas

Do you hear it? Between your day-to-day routine,
The whispers of ice water running – her melodies,
Silver amnesia that washes minds clean,
Closing the eyes of her (hollow) devotees.

Your phone screen light stains your eyes,
Drama and stories and shadows on the wall.
Somewhere, an innocent person dies.
You yawn and think of nothing at all.

They ended the world before you were born,
Sold it for scrap and set it aflame,
An inferno that burns with hunger and scorn,
(Finds fuel and flesh taste much the same).

Drink from the river, fall gently to sleep,
This blood-red sunset is not yours to fix.
Her voice is decay that quietly creeps
Into your mind, a longing that sticks.

Lethe is the salt-stung daughter of Strife,
River of oblivion, cold argent blue.
She offers an ignorant and blissful life
(Till the ravenous fire next reaches for you).

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 30 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

