

# NEW WORLD



The 15<sup>th</sup> Elmbridge Literary  
Competition 2019/2020

Winning and Highly Commended  
Entries  
Adult Category

## **The 15<sup>th</sup> Elmbridge Literary Competition 2019/20**

### **NEW WORLD**

Whether the first day at school, the start of a new job, the tenuous steps into a new life or a strange landscape of the imagination, to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower, this year's Elmbridge Literary Competition was looking for short stories and poems that explored new worlds.

Now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year and following the success of 2018's 'A Shiver Down the Spine', The Elmbridge Literary Competition was opening its entry criteria to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, it was open to all ages. Previous Competitions explored the following 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

## Category: Adult; Short Stories

### 1<sup>st</sup> Place: A Day of Freedom – by Jasmine Flagg

I was the first to arrive in the library. Five name tags on the table next to the mugs. I took mine *Rachel* and walked over to the grand window to breathe in the view of the lake. Glittering shards of sunlight on its surface. A swallow swooped the length of the water before vanishing into the forest, but I knew it would not be so peaceful later. The screaming, yelling...anything was permitted on these *Digital Detox and Forest Freedom Days*. I felt a twinge of anticipation.

The fire's smoky smell was mixed with the musty odour of old books. The house had served as a retreat for returning missionaries. But since the twenties it welcomed people like me.

I poured some coffee and selected a flapjack before choosing a seat, in one of the high-backed chairs arranged in a semi-circle in the centre of the room. The grease on my fingers must be coconut oil not butter. *Of course not butter.*

A younger woman came bustling in and sat down with a glass of water. No flapjack. She was about thirty, with chestnut brown hair in a ponytail, dressed in running gear and trainers.

Next a couple entered - young - early twenties. Strange. I wasn't expecting anyone under forty somewhere like this. The girl was gripping her boyfriend's hand tightly. They looked like students perhaps.

A stubbly middle-aged guy, wearing a South African rugby shirt caught my eye as he sat down. He was quite good looking. I smiled to myself. Absently, I felt in my pocket for my phone. Then I remembered. No WIFI, no mobiles.

'Hello, welcome everyone,' called out a cheerful female voice followed by the click of the door closing. 'Help yourself to tea, coffee or water.' As the woman padded onto the faded rug, I

read her name tag said *Taryn*. I couldn't work out her age. She had smooth pale skin, watery blue eyes and black bobbed hair. She was wearing a white shirt, grey trousers and flat patent pumps.

*She'll have to change those in the forest.*

'Hello. I work for the Rehabilitation Board who created these *D.D.F.F Days* because they are proven to reduce reoffending.'

I raised my hand. 'When do we start the forest therapy?'

Taryn narrowed her eyes and gave a tight smile. 'Not until later this afternoon, when you've digested our delicious plant-based lunch.'

She sat down. 'Let's begin. I want to re-iterate that this is a safe space for us all. You are permitted to give opinions. Although not insults. Outside, you can release whatever is on your mind, but we ask that there is no violence or aggression towards one another. I suggest you introduce yourselves and state why you are here?'

I glanced around at the others who were avoiding eye contact. But the *Three Second Gaze* rule could not apply here, surely?

'Who would like to go first?'

'I will,' muttered the South African man, clearing his throat. 'I'm Rex. I opted to come, to avoid paying a fine. My offence was...I had a barbecue.'

The woman in sportswear gasped. The young couple visibly winced. The girlfriend closed her eyes and moved her mouth as if in prayer. Rex reddened and spoke to Taryn accusingly, 'You said we could be honest here!'

She held up her hand. 'I did. Because you can...you all can. Rex, may I ask why you did that?'

He shrugged. 'Simple. I missed the taste of meat. I was feeling down, my wife and I had split up and I guess...I wanted some comfort food.'

'What did you cook?' I asked brightly.

Rex looked at me and grinned. 'The works...steaks, burgers, marinated chicken. It was black market meat but the best meal I'd ever tasted. I relished every bite, like someone starving who's been offered their dream feast.'

My mouth began to salivate, I nodded in approval. Sports lady became very animated as if she was sitting on hot barbecue coals herself.

'What would you like to say, Jennifer?' asked Taryn.

'I don't understand how anyone could do that, even if they were starving to death.' She sneered at Rex. 'Veganism has been the established law for years. I think it's disgusting that you did not consider the feelings of your neighbours. You violated their nostrils. They did not choose to have meat particles enter them.'

'Not to mention the devastating effect of meat production on the planet,' muttered the student boyfriend.

Rex shook his head. 'Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before. What about my right to eat meat? But I'm not the only law breaker here, am I?'

I shifted in my seat. Out of the window, I noticed some white sheep, sprayed with blue paint in the field beyond the lake. The young couple confessed something about unintentionally retweeting yellow emojis. I'd actually forgotten that the yellow ones had been banned to avoid offending east Asians. Jennifer revealed that she had cheered and clapped too loudly at her daughter's sports day, thereby upsetting the other parents and children.

'I believed I was within the permitted decibel range, but I think my ear was blocked because I'd been recovering from a cold.' Jennifer's voice became choked.

'It doesn't matter about the intention, it's the action itself. You do accept that, don't you?' said Taryn gently.

Rex caught my eye and I snorted with laughter. I couldn't help it. My heart began to pound; it was my turn. 'I'm Rachel, sorry

for laughing inappropriately. I tend to do that. I'm middle-aged, you know...Generation X. My only excuse is that I grew up before this not-so brave new world. Where you could say and do things without being photographed or recorded forever. You could have an argument without receiving death threats. We were the last to know life before the internet or mobiles...can you imagine that? We wrote notes and letters, not texts. Taught to have thick skins...or so I thought.' My voice became quivery. 'I'm here because I - I tried to commit suicide.'

There was a pause.

'So, what was wrong with that?' asked Jennifer, frowning and wiping her eyes. She looked genuinely baffled.

'Sorry, I haven't been clear. I meant *Social Media* suicide.'

There was a frozen silence after that; people seemed to stop breathing and nobody looked at me. Not even Rex.

'I - I'd had enough of, I don't know...putting my foot in it, offending people because I'd quoted a song's lyrics or paid someone a compliment thereby breaking the *Appearance Commentary law*. I couldn't cope with all the trolling.'

'I assume your phone...*Sibi*...reported you?' asked Rex. He gave me a sympathetic smile.

I nodded, then slowly held up my wrist. The scar was jagged, purple tinged, where I'd tried to gouge out the chip.

Taryn reached over touched my arm lightly. 'You do understand that we all have to be connected. How can we be monitored otherwise? You must never remove your chip.'

'Yes,' I whispered.

I stood up. It was beginning to feel so hot in the room like the bookshelves were going to cave in and I'd be flattened. Death by tomes. That would be ironic. I needed to get out into the fresh air. 'You know what, I'm not that hungry. I'd like to go for a walk. I'll meet you in the forest.'

Taryn looked like she was going to argue but then nodded. 'We'll join you by 2pm.'

I stumbled in my haste to get out of the room, into the large galleried entrance hall. I grabbed my coat and was going to leave, but as I pulled open the front door, I spied my handbag, near the umbrellas and wellington boots where I'd left it earlier. A magnet was pulling me towards my mobile, to *Sibi*. My hand shook slightly as I rummaged inside, grabbed my phone and waited until I was away from the house to switch it on. Part of me hated *Sibi*, but I was attached to him, like he was a limb.

*'I can see you are heading to the forest.'*

'Yes I am.'

*'Try to make the most of your screaming therapy today Rachel. You must release the rebellion in you, because you know I have no option but to keep on reporting you if you try to delete your social media again.'*

'I know.'

*'The only escape will be...well you know what you would have to do.'*

'Yes.'

I breathed in the crisp, autumnal air. I saw another swallow dip over the water. Was it soon to migrate, like the missionaries who rested here? I was at the water's edge now. I hovered for a moment but then waded in, not bothering to take off my shoes. The icy coldness made me gasp.

I lifted my arm. *Sibi* began talking more rapidly but I didn't listen. I threw the phone high in the air and smiled at the satisfying *plop* as it sank deep into the water.

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## **2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Tarte Aux Pommes** – by Sophie Roger

She had trouble getting out of her bedroom but she managed to distract the guardian with a complex calculation (find the next unknown prime number) and made her way down into the bowels of the house. The kitchen must be down there, certainly that is where the food seemed to be coming from all the time. Three of them tried to stop her on her way and it was fun to see how they were using their lessons in human psychology and knowledge of her family to attempt to distract her and send her back to where she belonged, that is nowhere near the kitchen or anywhere where they roamed and ruled. You could see it in their multi-faceted eyes, accessing private files, working out strategies... Frankly, they were better at chess. On her they tried music, shopping, a dead loss there, but also an old book (one with actual pages) but she was only distracted for a second because it was an old railway timetable and they were maybe the only old books she had no interest in, full of some kind of obsolete algebra method.

She finally found the kitchen, a steel and plastic paradise in its own right. It was heaving in there with robots absolutely everywhere, literally wall to ceiling, many different shapes and sizes, every locomotion method represented, every one of them busy and focused. There was no real noise, only an intense busy buzz. It was difficult to make space for herself, she had to give several direct and specific voice orders, but she managed to get to a cupboard to grab some utensils, a bowl and a baking tray.

She called up the recipe from her brain implant, her working memory extension section, and perused the eye scan she'd taken just minutes before in her bedroom. She had found the precious recipe in an old recipe book, her favourite Birthday

present. The reading implement itself was in French, missing its spine but she was not to know this, the frayed disrobed aspect of the thing seemed normal to her who had never seen a book in good shape. The paper was yellowed and brittle, dotted with acid spots, a treasure of the past laid on every page. *Tarte aux Pommes*, it said. Here goes.

Apples first. It took a while. Every robot in the kitchen converged on her when she approached any food ingredients, which were classified as mild bio-hazards. They all tried to find out what she was trying to do so they could do it for her, of course. She disabled their foreign language modules, by voice, one by one, painfully. She would get scolded for it later. You could not stop the native language functions, they were in the higher priority tier and if had she said to them 'Apple Tart', they would have baked for her fifty perfect golden specimens in the time it would have taken her to find a spoon. Several times, before she managed to lay her hands on the flour, the butter, the sugar, she nearly gave up and went back to the gilded cage that was her bedroom. She did not attempt salt or vanilla. The amounts were negligible and as she had no real idea how to cook - she had only seen old 2D moving image files – she did not understand their vital importance.

She had to fight them for floor and counter-top space, what little there was of it that was at the right height for human reach and comfort. At least she had access to water, there were taps everywhere. It is a well-known fact among robots that humans have a quasi-mystical relationship with water and must have access to it at all times, even though water is a noxious substance which destroys metals and invalidates integrated circuits. When she started mixing the dough by hand, the lack of any motorised tool had them in a flurry of worry. She distracted them by sending them off to find a rolling pin, but

there was no such thing, they had been using their specially adapted food extension limbs for decades already and she could hardly ask them to unhook one of their metal arms for a few minutes and give it back covered in goo. She made a big mess of the mixture anyway, sending bits flying off everywhere, covering herself in flour, flattening the dough by hand, crushing it into the flat pan without oiling the tray beforehand and bashing it in so hard that she would not be able to prise it off once baked.

A mad panic started when she attempted to grab a knife to cut the apples in slices to top the tart.

-“Knives require special order 98-900 from an Adult-Level checked being.”

-“I got my Adult-Level last week, as you know very well.”

-“Knives are top-level dangerous.”

-“Override Order 45-3B Section 3a. Give me that knife now.”

-“’tis sharp, Missy. Missy will hurt herself.”

Oh, this one had tried to use the special nurse-language expressions that her very own nanny robot had used when she was a child. She had tears in her eyes when she answered.

-“I will be perfectly fine. Do not take the knife from me, nanny.”

Eventually, with a rampart of robots watching her every move, making her so nervous she was ten times more likely to hurt herself, she sliced enough of the apples to cover the dough in the pan. There was a mild uproar among them when it became apparent that she had no idea she had to remove the pips. Apple pips contain cyanide and are in breach of higher-level health and safety rules. But these rules date from well after apples were genetically engineered to mostly not contain any pips anymore and the fuss died down after the three remaining seeds were lasered out of the dozen apples she had chosen.

Anyway, never mind knives and cyanide. When she tried to approach the weapons-grade ovens to slide her dish in, the robots rebelled so furiously she had to back out and give them instructions for the baking instead of attempting it herself. The very slow process of explaining that the baking required a suck-it-and-see approach over roughly half an hour was easier on them than allowing her fragile human body in close proximity to a 220 degrees Celsius oven, even for the few seconds it took to put a tart in and take it out.

Eventually the tarte aux pommes was completed. She was sweating. She was mad. She was exhausted. The resulting dish was so far removed from an apple tart in appearance that none of the robots recognised it as her favourite dessert.

She took it upstairs and tried to eat it.

She could not decide whether it was delicious or disgusting. Certainly, as food, it did not reach the required taste and look standards sufficient to make it fit for human consumption. It might also have poisoned the dog if such unhygienic creatures had not long been eradicated for the good of humankind.

But it was such an achievement. It was literally blood, sweat and tears and those are traditional cooking ingredients. She might have been an adult but you could think of this as the very first effort at cooking of a very small girl, a dessert prepared by a seven-year old maybe, and those are always a delight.

So, even if you had to prise each slice off the tray with a chisel, it was worth the effort. It tasted of bravery and originality and foolishness and it tasted of her love for the long lost forgotten ways, when humans still killed each other with many weapons and destroyed the planet with their love of home-made baking,

cooking with fossil fuel energy, using cereals grown in biodiversity destroying mono-cultures.

She ate the whole tart, painstakingly, bite by nefarious bite, and still could not figure it out. Which one was better? Which one was worthier? Hers or theirs?

She would bake another one tomorrow and see.

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### **3<sup>rd</sup>= Place: Forever Three – by Liz Lisac**

She was bent forwards examining the stone alphabet toy blocks in the children's corner of the crematorium. Her fingers tracing the A on one of the blocks. She had forgotten an umbrella and a raincoat. Or maybe she didn't care if she got wet. Damp dark hair tied back. Too young to be a mum, maybe a big sister or a friend. The mothers usually came in the mornings. When their other kids were at school. I'd watch them take something from their bag- a doll or a toy car, place it tentatively on the ground, as if their child might be tempted out of hiding and suddenly reappear. Only last week I'd found a chewed plastic leg of a doll that a fox had savaged. Dumped it under some rotting flowers in the bin.

She'd arrived when I started laying out the pebbles for a newly deceased's plot. When the first spots of rain began to fall. Just after the sun had slipped behind the garden walls. The winter deciding to cheat us of a proper afternoon.

'Edith Tyler' was the smudged name on the lollipop stick reserving the empty spot. Edith with grey hair, a lilac twinset and an old ladies' string of pearls. That's how it should be, Edith must be old.

Then, finally the work was complete, the last pebble in its' rightful place. The small stones forming a neat circle around the temporary lollipop stick. The rain was heavier now and the sky a dull grey. My back ached from all the kneeling, such a struggle standing up. I tried to wipe the mud off my jeans, but it clung to my knees. I picked up some cellophane wrapped flowers, they looked ready for the bin. But then I changed my mind and carefully put them back. It felt callous to throw them away when they'd been left with such love.

I trundled past the kids' garden. The rosebushes lining the path looked skeletal and underdressed. I stopped to crumble off a

few brown buds. The roses never came to much this time of year.

Someone had attached a helium balloon to the children's garden wall. Raindrops trickled like tears down the saggy *Happy Birthday* face. It bobbed around the woman who was still sitting on the bench. I dithered moving the wheelbarrow forward then back. Leaving her there somehow didn't seem right. But then again, the last thing I wanted to do was intrude on her grief. And it was so cold now, darkness pushing in. The wind was against me, the wheelbarrow heading off course to the left.

'Looks like you might need a hand with that, if you're not careful the wind 'll knock you over,' Jeff the groundsman shouted as I accelerated towards the gate, the barrow narrowly missed him as I wobbled round the curve. He looked sombre in his security uniform, a heavy key at the ready to lock the iron gate.

'No chance of the wind getting me, I'm tougher than you think'. I said, bringing the wheelbarrow to a halt. The crematorium building was visible ahead of me through the gate. Mourners trickled out of the crematorium doors in the direction of the car park. A tired looking priest was smoking a cigarette behind the garden shed.

'Aye you're a toughie, you are, I just wish my missus could push a barrow like you...and you, such a slip of a thing.' He was smiling but his face looked red from the cold. 'And God knows how you do it.' he muttered as he pulled a tarpaulin towards my wheelbarrow.

'There's still someone over by the kids' garden. I'm a bit worried. She's been there all afternoon.' I said as I tipped the contents of the barrow onto the heavy khaki gardening sheet.

'Didn't see anyone, when I came through, mind you its suddenly gone dark...roll on the Spring.' Jeff kicked the mush

of leaves into the centre of the tarpaulin with his heavy black boot.

'Thanks ... I'd have thought we'd be getting to the end of the dead leaves by now. There's definitely someone still there,' I said.

'In the kids' garden ? Then that's one for you.' And he yanked at the string of the heavy tarpaulin getting ready to tie it up.

I couldn't really argue, he'd been so helpful with the leaves. But I still felt cheated of the cup of tea I'd been dreaming of at home . And the very hot bath. This bloody wind was freezing, my legs felt stiff, my fingers numb. Jeff was the expert at getting people to go. Why couldn't he have come?

The little lights that lined the path suddenly came on. The rosebushes didn't look so bleak bathed in the gentle glow. And I could see her now by the giant oak tree . Back turned. No scarf. No coat. Just a grey jumper, and skinny black jeans. Close enough now I could see rain on her neck.

'I don't mean to bother you.' I said, standing between a pot of dead azaleas and a chilly bench. There was a smell of turf in the air.

'Sorry ' She said, turning. The symmetry of her face struck me. Taut cheekbones. Fine lines around her eyes.

'I'm just...just trying to you know, decide...' She looked at me then her phone. Decisions were never easy here , which plot, which stones. A dog was barking far, far away.

'You see Henry doesn't have his... well he's not here yet. I just came to take a look... I've been trying to think of what words.' She was grinding her shoe into the neatly trimmed grass and staring at the ground, 'Forever an angel. Forever rest in peace. That's the one I like best.' She said and looked up.

'That's lovely. ' I wasn't so sure about it myself. But then it didn't seem fair to disagree and snatch the hope of angels away? The rain was easing off but the air was still cold.

'Mm '. She tapped something into her phone. A crow cawed as it landed by a stone teddy bear. 'And I can't make up my mind between the maple and a rose.' She said as if she was trying to decide between cornflakes and shredded wheat.

'Maples are hardier, roses struggle with the clay soil but it's really your preference... you might need to give yourself a bit more time to think. The office is really helpful. They can talk you through it. If you like.' I said.

'My husband thinks we should scatter Henry's ashes. You know in the sea or... but he was cremated here. Feels wrong to move him. What do you think?' She looked straight at me, as if I would know. The crow was now perched on the alphabet blocks.

No one had ever asked me what to do with ashes. People often asked where the toilets were, where they might get a cup of tea, or which plants were hardier. But this was a hefty question. The silence between us grew.

'You're his mum. You know best. 'I said finally. That was the truth. I knew she did.

She looked up from the ground where she had been grinding her foot.

'And' I continued 'this section is the most cared for part of the garden...I always keep an eye on it when I'm here. You know, to check that the plots are fine, so ...anyway Henry will be very ... cared for.' I didn't know how to continue , the words weren't right .

She looked away from me. I knew I'd let her down.

'How old was he?' I tried again.

'He had a place at nursery starting this week. I was dreading having to leave him. He's so young...just three. '

The bullet surprised me. From nowhere. The number three shot into my lungs. Air trapped, suffocation .Then just as suddenly I could breathe. Didn't take so long these days for those bullets to dislodge.

'I like to think the older people here watch over them. 'I said remembering the pebbles and Edith's new plot.

She looked at me and sort of smiled. 'It's funny you should say that... I had an odd thought today, probably sounds really daft. But maybe it's like nursery school here, a sort of parallel nursery world. We can't see them, but maybe the little ones play with each other ...' She was twiddling the end of her ponytail as she spoke.

'That's a lovely thought. I've wondered that myself. And you know you can come back, anytime, every morning if you like.' I circled my arm around her lightly and ushered her to the path, like a nursery teacher escorting a reluctant mother to leave the class.

And maybe just maybe, another time when she comes back, I might show her the jewelled butterfly hanging over my Katie's plot. Forever Three.

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### **3<sup>rd</sup> = Place: Utterly Useless** – by Lynden Wade

The one useful skill she'd been taught, in her days as Miss Caroline Murgatroyd of Westbrook Abbey, was how to hold her tongue. Hold her tongue, hold her chin high, hold her gaze steady.

Yes, her head throbbed each time she did battle with the mud-brick hearth. Yes, her stomach clenched at the thought of tomorrow's journey back home on a narrow, twisty road which nudged the cart right over to the edge. She'd looked once down the drop, the sheep so small in the narrow valleys that they looked like maggots. Yes, her heart ached at the loneliness that would engulf her again on the return: their nearest neighbours a Polish family, smiling and welcoming, with almost no English. But even if she was a coward with no practical skills, she could at least maintain a serene and lady-like expression while the sheep-shearer leaned over the hotel table at them.

"Useless!" Harry waved his pipe. The smoke wafted round the trio. Caroline tried not to wrinkle her nose. She might as well not be there; but there was no withdrawing of ladies when you'd married an Essex labourer five years settled in his New Zealand farm. There'd been no withdrawing of ladies after her brother had gambled away the family fortune, either.

Bill shook his head. "They made a mistake, the Church, advertising like that. You ask for virtuous young wives, you gets shiploads of gentlewomen down on their luck. They looks at all these here plans to build a fine city that'll give Old Cambridge a run for its money, and they don't realise reality's about plucking chickens and hauling water in buckets."

The sheep shearer banged his fist on the table. The plates, sticky with lamb chop remains, jumped. "Exactly. Flackety things as can paint pretty *watercolours* and sing you a

pretty *song*. But place them in front of a butter churn and they bursts into tears. 'Oh, Harry, my hands will get all rough!' "

Caroline glanced down at her own hands, folded in her lap. You couldn't see the callouses from the wood chopper. She imagined swinging a chopper at Harry. She'd probably miss.

"Ah, but their education!" said Bill. "My Carrie will give our boys and girls the learning they'd never have got in the Old Country. Geometry and Geography and Mathematics and History. Coming here gets us along, but education gets us up. Wasted as barmaid, she were. Wasted."

This wasn't news to Caroline. She had asked him outright why he'd proposed. She'd been working at the hotel bar for months, the girls alongside her replaced with humiliating frequency, snapped up for their pretty faces or their beefy arms.

Harry peered at Caroline as if he'd forgotten she was there, then turned back to Bill with a grin. "So you think I should quiz all the girls here on their schooling? Get them to tell me all about King Norman and Queen Bess, and choose the one as answers best?" He snorted. "I'll be looking out for an Australian or an Irish lass, this time. Not some silly madam like El-iza-beth Fitz-gerald. Fine figure, but my, did she screech! I had a lucky escape there. If she can't handle a rat in the city, what's she going to be like in a farmstead?"

Bill sucked long on his pipe, then twisted his head to blow the smoke away from Caroline. She wished she could see the expression on his face as he spoke: those narrow shoulders gave away nothing. "Best watch a maid before making an offer. See what she's like with trouble."

Harry nodded his approval of this sentiment. Keep your chin high, Caroline, she told herself. Don't be a fainting Flora. Bill's never said he regrets marrying you.

"I eyed my Carrie here for months," Bill went on. "Didn't really notice her at first, just I checked out each maid when I was back in Christchurch. Saw how she were with the

customers. Wonderful mannerless heathens, most of us, jostling and shouting and never watching our language. Could see from the start she were gentle brought-up; always gliding along, never taking on when some farmer knocked his ale all over her skirts. That's the sort of wife I want with me."

It was the longest speech Caroline had ever heard from her husband.

Harry opened his mouth but Bill picked up his thread again. "It's a rough life I've taken her to, but she's up before me every day, learning to handle things as she's never done afore. No company from one week's end to another, so when she's done mending and that, she's keeping a sketchbook of native plants. And as for that blasted hill road – cool as a cucumber she were when our cart nearly went over the edge."

One blink: that was all she betrayed of her surprise. A glance at Harry told her he was looking at her properly now, appraising her.

"I'll go back to the room now and pack." Caroline rose from the table. "Don't be long, Bill, will you?"

Bill nodded. "Leave at half past? Gives us an hour or two leeway for getting back to the farm afore dark."

In the narrow little hotel room Caroline took her time to fold and pack their tiny satchel. Smoothing Bill's used shirt unnecessarily, she peered into the mirror above the dressing table. Bill had no idea what went on in her head. What he saw, as they forced a living out of the wild land, was someone brave and tenacious.

I'm not brave, she thought.

But that *is* bravery. Being afraid and doing it anyway. That's what Father had said, back from the Crimea.

Elizabeth Fitzgerald, another gentlewoman down on her luck, spurned by a graceless sheep-shearer: what would she do now? Chances were they'd never meet, but what if they did? Caroline imagined coming across her in the grocer's,

maybe. They'd talk weather and the price of eggs at first, Caroline summing her up to see if she could be trusted with something Caroline's own children need never know. Then she might tell the woman that the important thing, in this land of new starts and hard beginnings, was never to let on that inside you longed for hedges filled with dogrose, satin undergarments and glass in the windows. That it would hurt at first to press these feelings down, to stretch your mouth in a smile and agree with your neighbour that emigrating was the best thing you ever did. That those feelings, if you let them, might linger for years, but they could and should be packed in a corner to make room for new sights and sounds. Not just the clear blue of the harbour, or the delicate grace of Christchurch's half-built cathedral. Those wild, high hills that dominated the horizon might look barren and rocky from a distance. But when you were quite close, you saw they were clad in tussocks of grass, golden-tipped, wind-rippled. And when you paused your cart to give your horse a breather, all you could hear was swooping bird-song.

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## **Highly Commended: The Scissor Gate** – by Amelie Butterly

Sophie wasn't allowed in the lift by herself. Not that she'd have wanted to.

When she was in there with Mum, and Dad, and Max, and Leo, they would have to stand close together. She, the littlest, would be in the middle, surrounded by bodies. If Dad was in a silly mood, he would pretend to balance the shopping bags on her head. The lift wasn't frightening then. But if it was just her and Mum, then Sophie could see everything. She could see through the metal bars, as the lift rose through the building, rumbling and banging as it ticked past every floor.

"Stand back and mind your hands," Mum would say, unnecessarily. Sophie would be pressed against the wall, as far as possible from the gaps that could catch little fingers and elbows.

When they reached the seventh floor, the lift would jump to a stop and Mum would slide open the grills, battling to hold back the first set as she wrenched open the second. The squeak of metal on metal made Sophie's stomach feel funny. When Sophie was sure Mum had hold of them tight, she would dart under those familiar arms to the safety of the hallway.

Max and Leo were much bigger than her. They played computer games together but there were only two controllers. When they went out on their bicycles, Sophie and her stabilisers could never keep up with them. And if she was watching something on television, they'd always complain in loud voices so she couldn't hear. Then they'd snatch the remote, put on the football, and ignore her.

Today would be different. Today, they'd said she could play with them. Sophie was still putting on her socks when they called her from the front door.

"We'll wait for you on the landing," Max yelled. "Hurry up."

Sophie skipped about her room, hitched up her jeans, smoothed down her smile and ran out to follow her brothers. They were waiting down the hallway, one leaning either side of the lift. Sophie looked past them to the stairs.

“Race you down,” she said, pushing past them.

“We aren’t going down there today,” said Leo, grabbing Sophie by the arm. She shook him off, but he just gripped her harder.

“What are we doing out here then?”

“We aren’t,” Max said, combing to stand next to Leo. He jabbed her in the ribs with his finger. “But you are.”

With his free hand, Leo rattled the metal doors of the lift.

“I’m not allowed.”

“It’s an initiation,” said Max. “If you want to play with us, you’ve got to do it.”

“We’ve both done it,” said Leo.

Sophie shook Leo’s grip from her arm and turned back towards their front door. “I’m telling Mum.”

“If you do that, we won’t play with you ever.”

Sophie felt sick. She couldn’t do it.

“Can I do something else?”

“No,” said Max. “Come on Leo. She’s too little.”

They turned their backs and set off for the stairs.

“Wait,” Sophie called after them. “I’ll do it.” She leapt after them and grabbed at Max’s T-shirt, scrunching the back of it into her fist.

Leo had already made it down the first few steps.

“Let’s just go,” he said.

Max looked at his brother and then turned back to Sophie.

“She gets one chance.”

Leo gave a dramatic sigh and stomped back up the stairs one at a time, the thumps echoing up and down the hollow core of the block.

“Take the lift to the basement,” said Max. “But you’ve got to do it with the light switched off. Then when you get to the bottom,

you've got to wait there for five minutes. Open the door a bit so someone else can't call the lift up. We'll shout down to you when the five minutes is up. If you can't last that long, it doesn't count."

"Got it?" Leo asked.

She nodded firmly. The worst thing now would be to cry in front of them. Sophie pushed the button and the lift rumbled slowly up the shaft. She could feel the vibration in her feet, making her feel faintly seasick. When it lurched to a halt on their floor, Sophie pulled at the outer grate, careful to hold only the handle in case she crunched her fingers as the concertina closed. But, short and light as she was, she couldn't get a proper grip. Max shoved her gently, kinder now, and held on tight while Leo helped her with the inner door. Even her brothers weren't strong enough to hold on for long and once she was inside, they let the doors go in turn with a smack.

Separated by the bars, Sophie looked through the gaps at her brothers, standing side by side. Their faces were serious.

"Light," Max said. Sophie flicked it off, sensing a new layer of darkness behind her. Before she could change her mind, she reached up and pressed the bottom button, marked B.

It was hard to tell if her stomach or the lift lurched first. Max took a step towards her, but it was too late. As the wooden box began its descent, shadows patterned up her body. She said nothing as her brothers rose away from her. "It's only five minutes," one of them called after her. "We'll start the timer now, yeah?"

She didn't reply.

The lift took its time. Sophie watched as each floor appeared at her feet, only to disappear above her. There was enough time to take in details from each of the worlds she travelled through. They were like her own, but twisted and changed in small ways. The floor tiles on level five had been laid in a different direction

to all the others. Floor three carried a different blend of ingredients in its cooking smells. Sophie felt far from home.

For a brief spell, the ground floor came into view. This was a place she was familiar with. But the lift carried on its journey and Sophie felt even more lost.

Now, at her feet, true blackness appeared. As she and the lift plunged through the darkness, Sophie sucked in a deep breath, like a diver about to go under. The basement swallowed her down. The light disappeared entirely, and Sophie was sealed in. From the highest reaches above her, she could hear voices calling down.

For a few, long seconds, fear paralysed her. Then Sophie realised she needed to open the lift door. She leaned forward and reached for the grate, terrified someone would call the lift as her hand felt around the bars, exposed. She grasped the metal and edged it open just enough to jam the tip of her shoe into the gap. Her back was cold where sweat had cooled and now she was confronted with the black expanse in front of her. Sophie shifted her body back as far as it would go and her foot slid out of her trainer. Caught between the grate and the side of the lift car, it held the door open, while Sophie retreated to the corner. As her eyes adjusted, she could see variations in shadows, deeper and lighter blacks. But then something scurried in the dark and she screwed her eyes up tight.

“One Mississippi. Two Mississippi,” she said, counting down the seconds in a voice that lost itself in the humming silence. She was long past 300 Mississippi and sick with fear when a door opposite her opened, letting in a shaft of light that hurt her eyes when she opened them in alarm. She screamed as a figure loomed through the doorway and ran towards her. There was a screeching sound and then something big was dragging her out of the corner and away from the lift.

“Why didn’t you come back up?”

Max was peering down at her, Leo behind him. They both had a look of relief. Max pulled her up and brushed off some of the dust she'd gathered from the floor. Leo fetched her shoe and tried to put it on back on her foot.

"We called down to you. We said come back up."

Sophie looked around the basement. In the light, she realised she'd been down here before to get Christmas decorations. It was where Dad kept his fishing stuff; she could see the case in the corner

Max pulled on her arm. "Come on. You know we're not supposed to be down here."

Sophie stood firm. "Two weeks."

"Two weeks what? Come on," Max said again. Leo pulled on her other arm.

"You have to play with me for two weeks."

"The deal was today. Just today."

Sophie didn't reply. Max turned back and looked her in the eye. He chewed on the side of his lip.

"Two weeks," he said. Leo started to protest, but Max raised a hand and he stopped.

Sophie shook off both their grasps and walked ahead of them.

"Hurry up," she said.

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## **Highly Commended: Lillian Davies and The New World –** by Sarah Evans

The seaman sways as the waves drench against the side of the boat and fall away. The sea stretches before him, wide and uncertain, like the new century. It is his wife's time, a new life beginning.

Back home, Mary-Ann is drenched in sweat and dizzy with exhaustion. The wind hurls against the windows of the narrow house. Gulls screech over the docks. There must be no more, she resolves. For the sixth time in six years, a baby snuffles against her breast.

Lillian will be the baby for nine years.

When she is five, Lillian joins Charlotte and Maggie walking uphill to school, each of her sisters holding a hand. Charlotte marches out in front. Maggie trails behind. Lillian is stretched out between them, like a cotton sheet before being folded.

Already Lillian is cleverer than Elizabeth. Elizabeth stays home and helps Mam with mopping floors and scraping potatoes. Once when she was three, the story goes, Elizabeth was on a swing. Higher and higher the swing went, like washing whipped upwards on the breeze. Her fingers trembled; her grip loosened and she became a baby gull, leaving the nest too early. Elizabeth landed on the grass, on her head. But Mam loves her the same as all of them. Who was pushing her? Who carried her back, half-dead, to Mam? Lillian does not know. She herself is careful on the swings. She won't let anyone push her high up into the sky.

Lillian's lungs fill with salt air as she walks. Her stomach is full with porridge. Her pockets are full of broken biscuits for her dinner. When she gets back, tea might be porridge again. Or maybe bread, fried until the edges are crisp in the grey-white fat that Dad brings home with him in jam jars, the fat that has run off the bacon he cooks for the seamen's

breakfast out on the waves. But when Dad is home there are better things to eat: grey-skinned fluke, brought back from the boat, fried in that same bacon fat; broth, made from six pennyworth of pieces, cooked in a big pot into which Lillian has been allowed to plop the potatoes. Whatever there is, it serves to fill her up. By the time she is nine, she has grown tall and strong.

But Mam's face has grown pale and thin, just as her middle grows taut and thick. Lillian hears the grown-ups whispering. *Twins*, the whispers say. Lillian thinks of Betty and Elsie at school, looking like two bird-eggs in a nest.

Talk of twins gets Aunty Margaret frowning. Dad should have been more careful. *Getting off at Dalton instead of going all the way to Barrow*. Or better not to go there at all at her age. But what have bus rides to do with the fact Mam is so heavy and tired?

Lillian shares Mam's bed when Dad is at sea. She wakes one night to find Mam crying out in the dark and the bed all wet. She lies there tightly shut, like the mussels they pick up on the beach. She wants to wake up and find it is just a bad dream. Suddenly there is candlelight and Charlotte is shouting at their brothers. Bill must run and get Aunty Margaret, and John get Mrs Geeson. When Aunty Margaret arrives she sends Lillian up to the loft. Lillian, Maggie and Elizabeth clutch hold of one another, tangling together like new-born kittens.

For three days they do not go to school. Their hair is wild and knotted with no one telling them to brush it. They tiptoe round the house, and talk in voices soft as waves lapping at a low tide. The curtains stay closed. The door to their mother's bedroom opens only to let Aunty Margaret and the doctor in and out.

After three days, Dad is home. Mam is dead. No one mentions those bird-egg babies.

Lillian clams her eyes closed as Dad lifts her to look into the heavy wooden coffin, though Maggie has said Mam looks just the same, laid out in her Sunday best. Dad's cheek is rough and wet as sand, as Lillian buries her head in his neck. Her own tears have run out. Her eyelids are brittle and caked with salt, like dried out seaweed. But Elizabeth is the worst. She does not understand.

The next week they go back to school. When they come home, Elizabeth is not there.

'She had to be sent away,' Charlotte says.

'But where to?' Lillian asks. Charlotte does not know.

Charlotte no longer goes to school and must now manage all the things Mam used to do. The porridge sticks to the bottom of the pot. Bill and John are always arguing and Charlotte always shouting at them. When Dad is home, he gazes into the distance as if he is still out at sea. At night Maggie whispers how she plans to go into service, just as soon as she is old enough.

Bill takes to staying out all night. He arrives back in the early morning, his breath sour, his eyes red and dull. He stays just for a brew of tea and bread and butter, before heading to the docks where he and John build the ships and submarines that the whole town goes to see being launched. One morning Bill does not come in for breakfast. He is not there that evening, or the following morning.

That summer Lillian lies on the beach at the tide line, in her knickers and chemise, out beyond the dunes where no one comes. The waves are cold as they tickle her feet. She does not move. The waves ripple round her edges and over her shins. They creep forwards, like a cat stalking a mouse. They climb higher and colder. Lillian lies there. The salt spray sprinkles on her cheeks. She screws her eyes tight as the first wave washes over her face and claws at her hair. She splutters out the salt water and gulps in seaweed air. Bill lay down on the

sands, they said, the water came in and dragged him out and under. Lillian jumps up after the second wave washes over her face. How could he have slept through? She runs along the beach, feeling her limbs moving and slowly coming back to life. Gradually, everyone moves away. Now it is just Lillian who remains, looked after by Mrs Dauber who keeps house in return for lodging. Dad is rarely home.

Lillian is being taught to keep house herself. At school she learns how to cook and sew, and how ammonia combined with washing soda keeps floors clean and hands itchy and raw. She knows how to heat the heavy irons just right and press the linen flat.

'Hands out, palms flat,' the teacher says when Lillian arrives late, or talks too much. The cane darts through the air, like a gull intent on stealing a chip. It pecks her fingers and leaves them smarting. The worst bit is the waiting. Once Lillian could not stand it. Wanting to pull back, trying to stay still, her hand shot away. The cane followed it and landed on her wrist. The welt lingered all week, like a wave carved into sand. She has learned to keep still. She is counting down the days.

Today is Lillian's fourteenth birthday. The counting ends. She is grown-up now. Tomorrow she starts work. Maggie has found her a position in service. On Maggie's afternoons off, they meet up after school. They go down by the docks and buy chips and scraps that burst with scorching fat. Maggie has told her about the long days and how her arms and legs will ache at night. But she will have her own room, good food, shillings tinkling in her pocket.

Lillian does not want to go to school on her birthday. The winter sun is bright. She packs a picnic of bread and jam, and thinks how she will walk over to the beach, out to where the grass is sharp and the sand is fine. She will gaze out at the sea and dream. This job is just a start. Maggie is talking about getting work in the pawnshop, or at the picture house. The hours are

shorter, the money better. Once she is settled in lodgings, Lillian could join her.

There is a knock at the front door. The woman is tall, her face like a sharp-toothed fish.

'Are you Lillian Davies?' the woman wants to know. 'Are you unwell?' Lillian shakes her head. 'Why then are you not in school?'

In the classroom, Lillian stretches out her hand for the cane. She holds her arm firm and straight for the final time. The sting will not last long. It is 1914 and the future is stretched out wide and open before her. She cannot know what it will hold.

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## **Highly Commended: Brave New World – by Ellen Evers**

I held my mother's head as she puked again although there could be nothing left to bring up. She moaned as I wiped the spittle from her mouth and despite her misery pulled her face into a semblance of a smile.

'Thank you, daughter. I am truly blessed to have you with me. It must be God's will to keep the sickness from you.' Exhausted she lay back and fell into a deep sleep. Creeping in close for some meagre warmth I knew that my presence gave my mother comfort. She had spoken up for me when Father refused to bring me on the voyage, saying that I had the value of ten lads. She had convinced him of my worth but I knew she could not bear to leave another of her daughters behind in England. My sister Susannah was a wife and mother and could not make the voyage. We knew, though we did not voice it, that we would never see her again. I heard my mother sobbing at night when she thought me asleep.

I wondered again why I was one of the few who had escaped the torment of sickness at sea. My brother Joseph with all his strutting was laid low in his own filth and vomit and he could lie there still, I cared not. His mockery still rang in my ears. So, he thought girls were too weak to make the voyage and should be left behind like muling infants? I would show him my mettle.

Of all the trials and tribulations on this voyage I declare it was the noise that filled me with the most fear. The heavy timbers shifted and groaned like tormented souls in Purgatory, the sea like some furious beast threw us up and around until the cries and shrieks from down below only added to the cacophony. Some, a few, could still pray for our deliverance but they would have been as well to save their strength for the next test of faith.

When silence came it seemed like our prayers had been answered but strangely the dead calm frightened us even more

than the storm. 'Twas as if the elements were playing with us, we were sport for the devils that ruled the oceans. Everyone prayed then to Almighty God.

Despite our fear, exhaustion made us sleep and we awoke to the sounds of the sailors on deck. Our ship, The Mayflower, had previously carried wine and rum; it was a sweet ship indeed or had been fifty-six days before. The human smells of so many created a new miasma.

I noted every day that passed. I was a girl but no fool. I could make a mark on my bunk near the blanket that for modesty's sake separated me from my parents. Joseph and our servant Robert were bunked at the other end of the deck. Let our servant clean up their mess. I would not unless commanded by my father, William Mullins, a very respectable member of the passengers. His trade was footwear and had brought two hundred and fifty pairs of shoes and thirteen pairs of boots. They would be in very great demand in our new country. He had even presented a special pair to our Captain Christopher Jones and one poor mariner had the task of crawling along the mainstay to tie on a boot as a measure of good luck. We knew that some of the pilgrims disliked this superstition but we needed all the protection we could get in this great and dangerous adventure.

All one hundred so passengers then began to grumble their way to wakefulness and I began to prepare ship's biscuits and weak ale that I hoped my family could keep down. I steeped the precious herbs in the liquid to help to keep the sickness at bay. My knowledge was almost as deep as my mother's and it served us well. I had a strong appetite; I would eat the pottage that was too rich for their stomachs.

I thought then of three mornings before when we had been troubled by, as we were daily, by the visit of a godless sailor whose only pleasure in life seemed to be the persecution of us poor passengers.

'New life ashore, you puking whinging God botherers? You will die here and your bodies thrown to the fish!' He would laugh as if he were indeed mad.

'And then all your possessions will be ours!'

But Almighty God sees all and suddenly the sailor took sick, died and was buried at sea. It is wrong to take pleasure from another's misfortune but there were few passengers who did not give silent thanks for a small deliverance. Master William Brewster called it 'The Will of God' and he prayed with much solemnity for the sailor's soul although my mother muttered that he scant deserved it.

The days were long and hard with tasks that were difficult to perform in our cramped space. I looked after my parents and helped out with other families despite my tender years. I had an old head on my thirteen-year-old body my mother said as my father smiled and my brother scowled.

In the last days of October, the storms dropped and a great omen of good luck happened in the birth of our first baby. I helped Mistress Hopkins as best I could in the freezing, dark wet and filthy space no bigger than a coffin. She screamed and blasphemed which frightened me but I kept my cool head and prayed that all would be well. When the boy was safely delivered, Elizabeth indicated a sealed box full of dry baby clothes and a thick dry blanket – welcome indeed.

So Oceanus came into our world named by Captain Jones who presided at his christening. We took heart at this new life though some thought the name too flighty for our group. Mistress Carter sniffed with disapproval and stated loudly that the babe should have a Christian name. I kept my own counsel but rather liked the unusual name especially as we had already shortened it to Shunny. We took turns to comfort the little mite, the younger girls looking to me for guidance. In our new world I vowed to have my own family when God decreed of course.

When I mentioned this to Mother, she told me sharply that there was enough time for such things when I was older.

Birth and death go together do they not? Our spirits were dashed not three days after when Robert broke the news to us of the demise of Master William Button. Those who had the strength huddled on board to watch his body being dispatched to the waves, and those who could sang hymns to send the poor unfortunate to his watery grave. Some wept but my heart was hard. There would be time to cry; we had to be brave and I was. If this was God's will I would face it.

We did not want to return to the torments below so a few of us remained on deck and quickly noticed the drop of the wind. The sailors became excited, pointing to the driftwood in the water and exclaiming that the birds were from land. I rushed below to tell my mother that our ordeal might soon be over.

Sixty-six days after the start of our voyage we reached land. To be on deck, in that dull morning mist to welcome dry land was wondrous indeed. There was much weeping and thankful praying that is until we surveyed the wilderness before us. The shock was great. I cannot say what I had thought I would see but my disappointment was keen especially as we were told that the women and children must stay aboard the Mayflower whilst the men explored our new home.

I longed as never before to join the men in the new adventure. I was brave enough and strong, I had proved that but I knew it was impossible. My place was with my mother, Mistress Hopkins and little Oceanus who had a special place in my heart. I even pressed my lips together to stop my harsh words as Joseph and Robert boasted and taunted me. I would be patient for my mother's sake.

We had succeeded with God's guidance and arrived in the New World. The voyage had ended but our new life had just begun. I shivered as we stood on deck listening to the rowdy shouting of the crew desperate to be released from the ship and the

quieter excitement of our men folk. I knew then with a deep and heartfelt certainty that our adventure had scant begun and God had many trials for us yet to overcome.

'What You will,' I whispered in prayer. But in my thoughts, I knew I was as fit as any man.

I was ready for the challenge.

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**Highly Commended: In A World of His Own** – by Pierre Perera

Through the window, Abe could see Matilda, her pale green fronds fluttering in the air con. She was angry with him this morning, the new shoots she'd put out last week already turning brown at the tips, and why not? Water had been late in coming, caravan broke down somewhere outside of town, so she'd had to make do with the drippings Abe had scraped from the inside of the condenser, more grease than moisture, an iridescent sheen still sitting on the surface of the pot hours, days after her last watering. Matilda had reason to be angry with him, alright.

After all, it was summer here. It was summer because Abe said so. Summer was like every other season on Deridia.

She would have to forgive him though. As soon as he'd opened his eyes, Abe had been cognizant of the sound that woke him. That finely tuned whine. He'd been out into the yard before he'd had time to wheeze out the remnants of last night's drinking session. Matilda would have to forgive him. Pot plants just don't have a sense of urgency.

The limousine had pulled to a stop by the time Abe made it to the gate, the blue light of the engines fading, the whine ending with a crunch as the car set itself down on the sand. And out of that finely tuned auto-mobile stepped an equally finely tuned man. Today's suit was grey, flecked with gold. The face was interchangeable, Abe couldn't be sure if he'd seen this guy two weeks ago or yesterday. The teeth certainly seemed familiar, a set of perfectly white tombstones in his mouth, spread into a grin which must have been learned from a book. They all had it, that grin and the smart suit and the sheaf of papers which they pressed into his hands with the traditional refrain;

'The board has authorized me to make a further offer, Mr DeLuise.'

Abe scanned the topmost page, noting that they'd added another zero to the figure at the bottom before folding it into his pocket.

'I ain't sellin.' His voice was cracked from years of underuse, sounding less like language and more like someone scrunching up a ball of sandpaper.

'Now Mr DeLuise-' The voice was like the man, smooth in the manner of an oil slick, but Abe wasn't in the mood for the usual tête-a-tete.

'I. Ain't. Selling.'

The man's smile didn't falter.

'It would be a very simple process' he said, almost as if Abe hadn't breathed a word of reply. 'I the undersigned, Abraham Marley DeLuise-'

'Any idiot can sign his own name. It's the bit that comes after that's important.' Abe stepped closer, braving the fumes of the man's cologne, sharp and sticky. 'I ain't interested in being shipped off the no other part of the galaxy.'

'The colony world that's been chosen-'

'Isn't here.'

'I can appreciate that, Mr DeLuise.' A note of genuine apology seemed to have escaped from somewhere into the man's voice. 'I am sure Deridia must be very important to you.'

And so Abe told him, like he'd told dozens of other suits on dozens of other days. How the day the ship had dropped out of hyper-speed or the worm trail or whatever they'd called it. Abe hadn't cared. Back home was a planet with too many people, and here was the dustiest, deadliest, most beautiful hunk of rock this side of anywhere, with hardly anyone on it. Deridia had welcomed him with scorching arms and let him do exactly what he wanted. Other migrants had complained about the sun and the drought and the high salt content, but Abe had taken his government stipend and built his shack as far out as the caravans would deliver. He'd thought there was nothing out

here but sand at first, until the lizards had started trying to get in under the porch. Within a few weeks he'd gotten used to their skittering about the house, being better company than they were eating, and by the time the last of the convoys had wound their way back across the salt flats and back to the space port, he was happy enough with just them for company.

Except for Matilda. She'd fallen off the back of a wagon delivering nutrient sprays for the mushroom farm. Probably the only bit of green on the planet, and it was the only bit of it he needed. And now, here these people were, trying to kick him off it so they could make the whole damn place green. Every bit of it. But they needed the whole planet to do it.

'And I ain't interested in leavin'.' Abe said, for the hundredth time since negotiations had begun. 'Whatever plans you got for the future, that ain't my problem.'

If the suit noticed the spittle which flew from Abe's mouth and struck him on the cheek, he didn't show it.

'That is perfectly understandable, Mr DeLuise, and the company is more than happy to reimburse you for any inconvenience you may suffer in the resettle-'

'-I don't wanna resettle nowhere. You think your company can give me back my time? The time it took me to get here and build this place up-' he gestured, almost ironically, to the beautifully flat landscape '-from nothing?'

The man in the suit cast his eyes over the salt dunes, blending with the sky to the point that they almost seemed endless. His smile flickered for a second.

'I also understand that, Mr DeLuise, but I'm afraid if you refuse to sign the contract today, the company will be taking steps to utilize its previously acquired assets.'

'Utilize how?'

'Well, the terraforming process is a very costly procedure, and the company would like to push ahead-'

'Push ahead? Over my dead body, is that it?' Abe spread his arms wide. 'Oh that'd make a great sales pitch, wouldn't it? Come to Deridia, built on the bones and blood of the poor sods who came before you.'

The man's smile flexed into something Abe might have considered grim.

'You're right. And the company doesn't want the future of Deridia marred by such an unsightly,' his mouth worked to find the words 'incident.'

'Then I suggest you go back to your company and figure out what it is you can offer me.' Abe took another step closer, the man's smile wavering, 'I want everything to remain as it was. Like it was yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. I want my mushrooms and my lizards and my Matilda. In short, Mister Suit, I want to be left alone.'

Abe leaned in, and let out his last question in one dusty breath.

'Can your company arrange that?'

For a second, the corporate facade on the man's face seemed to shift, the eyes flickering with something approaching understandable humanity.

'I think, Mr DeLuise, that something could be arranged.'

Within a month, Abe had gotten everything he wanted.

The scaffolding had started to go up almost as soon as he'd signed, figured they must have been waiting behind a dune or something. Each day he and Matilda woke to the growing criss-cross of pylons, so high up they looked like filament wires, reaching for each other in a broad dome around his land. By day three the web was complete, and on the fourth Abe had waved away the last suit who had come with a briefcase of credits and a ticket off world. No words, only a gilt smile which seemed to grow wider just before Abe shut the

door. On day six, the coruscating curtain of light had fallen, starting at the apex of the dome and down to the dunes, covering the sky in a thin oily sheen.

And behind it, their machines were getting to work, bringing water to the desert. In only a week the horizon beyond the dome was cut off by a rising wave of emerald green. The forest was full size before the fortnight was out, and on a quiet day Abe could hear the faint calling of what he thought were birds over the electric-wire hum of the forcefield.

Hear though, not smell or taste or definitely see, and that was what they'd promised him. Nothing through the field but enough air to keep breathing, and maybe the odd speck of moisture to keep the collectors turning over. So long as he kept to his own means, he could grow enough mushrooms to last till the end of time. If a new world bloomed in space whilst everyone and everything he had ever known was gone, what did it matter? Each morning he would watch the lizards scurrying about under the shade of the porch, feel the dry wind on his face, and listen for the faint rustling of Matilda from her seat on the sill, and smile.

It was a dry, dusty, dead world, but it was his own.

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## Highly Commended: School's Out – by Ella Zubeidi

The day has finally come. Freedom lies beyond those tall, green gates. I started school on the 'red' table in reception, and they have held me back ever since. They have never seen me. Not really. I was born different. I was one of those children who is a thinker. Unsettling. Adults would speak to me in tones they thought appropriate for someone in short trousers, and I would stare back. Watch them. Drink in the swell and shrink of their pupils; the curl of their lips; their smell. Children aren't meant to watch, they just are supposed to just look and listen.

I can't help it. I've always been this way. People don't like me because of it. They don't say that of course but I can tell. It's because I say things. Things that I know. Like when I told Fiona that the other children were laughing at her because she smelled funny. I thought I was helping. I thought she'd be pleased to know, and she'd do something about it, but she wouldn't speak to me afterwards. She said / was the one being mean.

I've got used to it now. School is a long twelve year sentence. I've learned that it is okay to not be understood. No one here has time for me. Mr Barber despises me most. Any chance he gets he's on my back. *BOY!* he yells down the corridor, *Are you wearing white socks again, Boy?* He spits out his words as if sock colour leaves a foul taste in his mouth.

I stand before him in the peeling, painted corridor. Head down, eyes fixed on the dirty- looking mole on his chin. He rants; he judges; he is brimming with bile. He is shouting and I cannot hear the words. He doesn't ask why I didn't have a pair of black socks. He doesn't want to know that Mum won't get out of bed. And Dad has gone. *They are the same effing dirty socks I was wearing last time,* I scream inside. *Yes Sir, Sorry Sir.* I say. There is a system here. It is people processing. We are made to come, told what to think, measured and judged then told to

leave. Don't get me wrong it is fine for some. Those who are born followers. Clones who want to please and who find pride in being told that their handwriting is neat. Whoever heard of a doctor, artist or inventor with good handwriting? Those kids are the ones that strived so hard at primary school for their gold stars. The only stars I was given were token ones, for not causing trouble. Those were the days that I left my voice at home.

The teachers here have no vision. They read stuff in a book and spout it back to us. They made us choose between geography and history for our GCSEs, and I had to drop geography. I asked Miss Meyers whether that meant learning about global development is thought to be unimportant for half of us. She didn't give me an answer. She gave me a detention. The newspapers run stories about how my education is not as good as it should be; not as good as it was. I've read them. They tell me it could be better if I was born, or could afford to live in a different postcode. It would be better if soldiers were my teachers. It would be better if teachers were trained by teachers. It would be better if I was graded with numbers rather than letters. They tell me that my teachers are giving up on me; that the stress is too much for them.

The media must think that my education is so bad that I can't read or understand this stuff.

I'll tell you what would make it better: it would be better if I wasn't forced to spend every day in a state school that the state has judged inadequate, and told everyone so. It would be better if Mr Barber didn't despise children. It would be better if I was measured on what I can do, and not what I can't. It would be better if they had given me nothing, and in exchange allowed me to keep my self-esteem.

Five years I've been stuck here. I have done my time. I have been processed and taught using the formula. And I have lived up to the expectations that they set for me. They can pat

themselves on the back. They get a tick; they were right: I have failed.

Today is mine. Today I'm going to walk my size 10 feet through that gate.

I am finally free.

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## **Commended: The Internet Is Fun** by Benjamin Britworth

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was given a brand new phone by his parents. He was a happy young lad, because it was the first phone he had owned, and it was very, very shiny. It had a big black screen, which reflected his face, and when it was switched on it showed all manner of marvellous things. His parents never monitored activity because they were too busy playing with their own devices. There were lots of apps and games that he could download and he had free rein on a strange thing called the internet.

In his early days of browsing, the boy clicked on an advert and discovered a place with lots of ladies taking their clothes off. They were pretty ladies, who would scream and moan when they were prodded by men. He liked the ladies, but they weren't his favourite thing. No, his favourite thing was an app called Chirpy. Chirpy was a special place where he could write things. Other Eggy accounts (which were *apparently* other people) would reply to his messages. This was fun, because it was like making friends; something he wasn't very good at.

At first he used Chirpy to read stories about his favourite video show, The Humple-de-Bump Roundabout. But this got boring, so he started reading other posts. He discovered that there were more naked ladies on Chirpy, and he wrote to a few of them. They were friendly, but said that if he wanted to see their show he would have to give them money. He didn't have any, so quickly lost interest.

He discovered that there were people selling smokeable plants. They also wanted money, and got annoyed when he said he didn't have any. They would write lots of new swears and naughties, and he would giggle to see them so angry. It was like playing a game.

The game was a good one, he decided, because other Eggy accounts liked to annoy people too. There was a name for the people who played this game. They were called trolls, and one of the other trolls told him that the name came from something called 'Vikings' and that it meant 'gods that were powerful'.

The boy was strongest when he was trolling, because he could reach out with his words, stir people into a storm, and watch them spin. It made him happy, because they connected with him in a way that his parents didn't. He became a Viking God. For a while he was content making other Eggy accounts mad. That was until he met someone called 'SadMelissa', with a profile picture of a girl with drab black hair and scars on her arms.

When the young boy scrolled through SadMelissa's posts he saw that her cat had died, and she had been on lots of dates with bad men who she called bastards. She had a problem with her arms, which always needed bandages, and she wrote lots of posts about crying. The boy enjoyed reading about her sad times, because it made him feel better about himself.

When he finished reading her posts, he read her conversations with other Eggy accounts. He saw a couple of troll gods had messaged her. One of them said that she looked like a "guppy fish." The boy didn't know what a guppy fish was, so he looked it up. It made him roll on the floor with laughter.

He put a star next to the troll post and wrote a reply, saying that he'd never seen anyone that looked more like a guppy fish. After this, he put away his phone and went to play with his Lego.

An hour later his phone pinged. SadMelissa had typed her response in capitals, which was the best sort of anger. She had written: *WHY DON'T YOU FUCK OFF AND DIE!* and had attached a picture of a middle finger emoji. The boy didn't know what the middle finger emoji meant, but only people furious with him used it.

He replied, using his favourite 'crying with laughter' emoji, and said: *You r sad. You shood die. Sad peeple are dum. Nobody wants you.*

He sent the message and forgot about it. That was the trick with the trolling game. It was about typing the meanest thing you could think of and then not caring what the person said in response. SadMelissa was a *dum sad persun*. She should learn to be happy, or get lost.

Twenty minutes later she sent an even angrier message, saying that she would block him if he continued to be mean to her. He had been blocked before, and he knew how to get round it. If she did it, he'd use his other account and get his friends to help troll her more.

Lo and behold, she blocked him. So he told his friends to troll her good. They sent nasty messages, saying her lady bit smelt, and that it had eels in it, and that she was fat, and that she would never have a boyfriend.

It was the best trolling the young boy had ever seen. Her posts got more and more dramatic. The boy used his second account to comment on them all, saying that she was a *big cri baby with a smellie vag*, and that she should *dy dy dy!* She should die, because she was miserable, just like his mum and dad. It would be better if she died. It would make him feel better.

The young boy went to bed, content with his trolling. SadMelissa would know not to mess with him again. If she did, he knew that he could get her back. He had lots of Eggy troll friends who would message her and be mean.

When the young boy woke up in the morning, he found thousands and thousands of messages from lots of angry people on his Chirpy accounts. His stomach sunk, and he thought – just for an instant – what would happen if these angry people found out where he was. But they wouldn't, would they? A lot of them told him he should be ashamed of what he had done, that he was evil, and that he deserved to be hurt.

He didn't see why they were so angry, or why they wanted to find out where he lived, until he scrolled down to a message that said 'murder is evil'. He hadn't killed anyone. At least, he didn't think he had killed anyone. He had once stamped on bugs in the alleyway behind the flats. They had wiggled their legs and curled up. But he had never killed a person.

He kept scrolling, reading through the millions and millions of messages telling him that he should die, have his head cut off, and be burnt alive. They spoke to him like he was a grown up, and that frightened him.

Finally, he saw a message that mentioned SadMellisa. It said that she was lovely, and had three letters after her name: RIP. The young boy swallowed hard. He had seen these letters in a graveyard before, carved into a stone. They were the letters of death. He switched to her profile page, and saw lots of messages saying they loved her. There were also messages from people telling her not to do it. Then he found a message that she had written – her final message – which read, “I'm sorry.”

There were messages where she poured her heart out, messages where she said she couldn't go on. Messages asking for help.

The young boy's parents came into his room. They looked scared. It was the first time he had seen them display any real emotions. Normally they were focused on their phones, and they didn't have time for feelings. They said that a police officer was coming round, and that he wanted to talk with him. This made the boy's heart start to beat. His parents said that it was about something that had happened on Chirpy, and that the police wanted to protect him from what they called '*credible death threats*.'

He thought of the troll gods, and wondered whether they would be afraid. He didn't think so.

The troll gods weren't afraid of anything. But he was afraid, which meant he wasn't a god. He wanted to hide somewhere dark and quiet; somewhere where the angry people couldn't get to him.

His parents left his room, and said they were going to pack their things. The young boy climbed off of the bed and slunk underneath it. It was safe down in the dusty dark. He didn't feel like a god. He felt like a monster. He was a monster. He was a troll.

THE END

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## **Commended: Podcast** by Nancy Charley

Which to choose? Row after row in colour-coded pods, according to ethnicity. Start with the ones the same as you, the smart-arsed attendant intones. Switch your brain to emotive. You will sense the bond when you find the right one. Though of course, there's always BOGOF if you're not sure. But there aren't any the same as me. Through various relationships during the twenty-first century Latino, Filipino, Caucasian, Black African, Native American and Chinese slipped into my genes and who knows what other bits and bobs. Not these – pure-breeds each. About thirty years back it was decided to experiment, see if pure-breeds kept in separate states made for a peaceful world. Daft if you ask me. Someone suggested that in Europe in the mid twentieth century – it led to war. I guess the saying is true – we never learn from others' mistakes.

Back to the job in hand. I amble along a row of lilac pods – Scottish descent – lilac for heather was someone's attempt at authenticity. But this synthetic strident hue doesn't look anything like the heather in the fields behind my capsule. Maybe Scottish heather is different. Should I choose a Scot? They're supposed to have meanness in their blood and a liking for whisky. Might well suit me. Though I guess stereotypes have been bred out by now – personality traits I mean not features – these all show wisps of fair or ginger hair and skin so pale you can see the pattern of veins running under the skin. Not so attractive.

The warmth of cinnamon beckons. I find 'Singhalese origin' printed on the pods and babies inside all brown skinned, black hair. One opens an eye and waggles its arms. I suddenly realise I'm calling them 'it' – I can't tell whether they're girl or boy and there's nothing to inform me short of stripping them off. What an oversight! Apparently, not knowing was the norm when mothers carried babies in their wombs until they invented

ultrasound technology to produce an image. Strange to think babies used to be born. Even farm animals aren't. All kept clean and safe and regulated in the lab.

Except for this lot. A slip-up in the process and they went way over the quota, didn't notice till they were ready for release. Someone somewhere will be out of their job. Seems there are qualms about putting them down. I'm not sure why, no-one is troubled about it happening to folks at the other end of life, or 'undesirables' or anyone who signs the form. So why not these? I suppose it could be because they're not recyclable or would create too much pollution if incinerated. There's certainly no space left for burial. All these extra mouths to feed. It just seems they are some big cock-up when they've decided exactly how many of us this planet can support. It's irrational keeping them alive.

And this pick-and-take definitely doesn't add-up. They are usually so fussy about who can parent – strict tests for suitability. Now any Elisabeth, Mohammed or Harry can select. That seems a retrograde step. I saw footage from the early twenty-first century when there were no regulations. Well, they certainly produced some weirdos – acting outrageously on their television shows seemed to be the pinnacle of achievement. That's long gone. We are much more focussed. No time or substance wasted. Except for these. Offered to anyone. Thought I might give it a shot in my 'declining' years. After all I've done most things.

I better choose.

As if on cue, a baby starts to cry, which sets off another and another, and though the feeding tubes and hold simulators kick in, try to pacify, the noise goes on and on. I look at one, its helplessness kind-of tugs. I feel an urge to pick it up, cuddle. But no, I flick my switch from emotive to rational, weigh up the pros and cons. Do I really want one at my time of life?

I sashay past that smart-arsed girl who drones: Have you made your choice? Type the code into the console and collect by the door. Yes, I reply, none of them. They're not my problem.

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## **Commended: Pancake Day Unlocked** by Tracy Cook

I wear black for Shrove Tuesday, as usual.

I ink the stamp, bang it down hard on Doris Armitage's pension book. Her eyebrows rise under her hat and behind her, Mr Booth stares. I stamp again. Anything to drown out the cheers from the Pancake Race outside.

To drown out the memories fighting to drown me.

*I should never have let her go.*

'Anything else?' I frown.

'No thank you, petal.' Doris clips her handbag shut, pulls on her gloves. 'I'll just pop outside for the race. The bairns love it so....'

She gestures to the shop windows, running with condensation, where outside a crowd blocks the weak daylight. Grandmothers, mothers, overcoated and booted in the damp, hats low against the wind, gather round the sign saying 'Toss here'. Shouts drift, feet clatter on cobbles, applause buzzes like unseasonal bees.

The year after it happened, I asked them to move the finish line away from my shop. Peggy Snippet refused. She said 'Dolton's Pancake Race has run up this hill and finished outside the Post Office for a hundred years now and will do for another hundred. Can't be messing with tradition and that's that.'

Except it isn't. Never will be, for me.

Shouts of 'Come on!' 'You can do it!' 'Faster!' echo off stacked tins of custard powder and spam; bounce off jarred humbugs and liquorice allsorts.

'Champion. Brings whole village together.' Doris tips her head and is gone in a clang of shop bell, a draught of chill air.

More childish squeals. Bessie's voice now, loud and booming. 'Well done, lass! So proud of you.'

It wasn't loud and booming then. Not that other Shrove Tuesday, when it needed to be. I grimace. Bessie, with her

plump cheeks, her lipstick smile, jumper stretched so tight across her chest her painted eyes pop. All grown up now and with her own daughter, who has won the toss, by the sounds of it.

Bessie had been Molly's best friend.

Molly never won the pancake toss. She was too small – copper frying pan too heavy in her thin wrists. But she loved the race, making batter, the whole fun of pancake day.

Memories pierce. A hand reaching up to a peg, golden curls bouncing under the red bobble hat I knitted that Christmas, blue eyes flashing, her wide grin of tiny teeth. I gasp, grip the counter. My heart flutters, a trapped butterfly in a cage. My hand trembles as I hand shillings to Mr Booth, dismiss him with a curt nod. He opens the door and his breath steams.

'Toss it quick, Jack!' A child's voice rings out.

The door slams, dulls the noise. The clock ticks. I sit at the counter, hands in my lap. I don't knit any more.

A soft splat; a gale of laughter. Someone's dropped their pancake on the cobbles.

Another Shrove Tuesday, twenty years ago. Colder then, frost hoared holly outside our scullery window, hedge rimed with icicles twinkling in the sun, field beyond a steam with mist. Molly in her gingham apron at the kitchen table beside me, wooden spoon in hand, peering into pancake batter.

'I think it's done, Ma. Look no lumps.' Her bright smile turned up to mine, a drop of creamy batter on her peter pan collar.

Shouts from outside, ten-year-old Bessie banging on the scullery door.

'Molly! Pond's frozen! Completely frozen.' Her delighted face an invitation.

Molly's apple cheeks rosy, beseeching eyes. 'Aw Ma. I haven't had a chance to use my skates since Christmas. Please!'

‘Come on, slow poke.’ Bessie grabbing Molly’s hand. ‘We’ve got to get there before the boys...’

In the narrow hallway Molly’s wooden skates hang from the coat pegs, silver blades glinting in the low sun slanting through the back door. Molly stretching on tip-toe to unhook them, turning to me, eyes shining. ‘I’ve wished and wished for this Ma...’

And I was glad. *Glad.*

Now, bitterness curdles like rancid batter in my mouth and I swallow hard, tidy away coupons on the counter. But I can’t tidy away the memories. We’d saved up stamps for weeks to buy her skates, skimped on petrol and candles. Stan even stuffed grass in his pipe.

The new leather straps creaked as she laced them over her shoes.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked Bessie. ‘It’s completely frozen?’

‘Bill from farm said he walked across it this morning and Dad says if Bill can walk on a frozen pond, anyone can.’ Her dark curls bobbed, cheeks flushed above her scarf.

I eyed her as a tiny warning voice tugged at me from far away. Oh yes, I remember that moment’s doubt, that hesitation that could have changed everything. We all hear that voice. And we all ignore it. Don’t we?

I open the till and my hand shakes. I knock the ink pot, snatch it up as black liquid pools, dark as memories.

*Don’t judge me.* I do that just fine myself. Every day.

‘Well, so long as Bill’s sure...’ But the kettle whistled on the stove and I turned away. The girls ran past, shrieking, laughing, Molly shrugging on her coat, red bobble bouncing, back door slamming, footsteps crunching down the path as they disappeared across the fields.

I was at the Start Line with a bowl of batter when Bessie ran up the hill, screaming. No one noticed, at first.

Then, confusion. Running feet, shouts for rope, drawn faces, tight lips, whispered voices, eyes not able to meet mine. A man approaching. In his hand, a sodden red bobble hat.

Now I wear black on Shrove Tuesday.

I move to lock the door, but a child pushes from the other side and the bell jangles. Bessie's daughter moves behind the shelf of custard creams. My heart pounds, roars in my ears. She walks up to me, a plate of sugared pancake in her hands. Her voice halting.

'Mother thought you might like one of these?'

I stare into the blue eyes gazing up at mine. She smiles, a grin of tiny teeth. I breathe in, then I nod and accept the plate.

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**Category: Adult; Poems**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place: What Happens If Harriet Studies French** – by  
Andrea Reisenauer

She buys a wrinkled textbook, files the edges of her white-tipped nails and gently etches the name *Madeleine*

on the first page. She sends a text to fitted-jean Maxime from Marseille,  
donates her gray sweats, tosses t-shirts like cheap berets

on the way to the airport. Then she flies – pale childhood framed by faded morning -  
in a wide-winged plane over the open moors of the past, cornfields,

belonging. She bites into a microwaved baguette on a layover in New Jersey, wanders the miles of shining floors, buys a plastic handbag

and a floral scarf. Then she doesn't stop until she breathes Paris, the fluttering streets, the chestnut leaves along the Champs Elysées,

the time-stained edges of sky. She rents a brick one-room studio  
with Maxime and a grey Bichon Frisé named Lulu

on the 8th floor of a recast tenement wrapped in vines,  
takes orders at a sidewalk café, sips boxed red wine,

works weekends. At night they lie together  
on a twin-sized mattress and conjugate whispered verbs: *être*,

*espérer, rêver.* She yearns for paper birds, the spring,  
that one day her lips will become melody, a beginning.

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**2<sup>nd</sup> Place: 3 Star Elimar** – by Janie Mitchell

Unlovely Rincon de la Victoria  
your faded flags and concrete beach  
1970s daytrips from Malaga  
the last town before the airport home.

We came to you unbooked and hot  
children sticky and glum in the back seat  
soaking up the charge of our storm.

We drove your empty streets looking for signs.  
Hotel Elimar's three sudden stars,  
two others on the sign unlit:  
Broken. Or downgraded.

Rooms the blue and yellow  
of pound store ceramics, seahorse-relief  
bog-brush holder blue-and-yellow.

Stale cigars, forty years of accepted pets,  
holiday sex of those now dead  
on the blue-and-yellow thinning bedspreads.

The closed, threadbare curtains  
blue and yellow, pinpointed with sea-light  
from moth holes and ciggie burns.

Still, the sun set into the sea  
at the hotel bar on the concrete promenade  
where blame and fault

turned into a wisp of sea foam,  
a swirl of fish smoke, a child laughing

in a different language, the light clink

of the lightest foreign coin  
tipping on a counter; where we learnt  
there were so many ways  
to say sorry in Spanish.

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### **3<sup>rd</sup> = Place: New World** – by Rachel Gee

Do we care, can we dare to unfurl a new world?  
Is that sustainable, maintainable, achievable, believable  
Is it possible or plausible, reasonable or feasible  
Or an impossible possibility, an unrealistic reality?

Where faith is embraced and differences no disgrace  
Where religion is not division nor ammunition for opposition  
Where heroism not terrorism is applauded and recorded  
Where depravation and degradation are ousted and flouted

Where there are actions and interactions, not factions and  
inactions  
Idiosyncrasy and democracy not bureaucracy and hypocrisy  
Simplicity not duplicity, transparency not conspiracy  
Vision not derision, decision not suspicion

Empathy not enmity, kind acts not cruel pacts  
Where we connect with respect and protect not neglect  
No treason nor traitors but reason and debaters  
No spying nor lying but honesty for posterity

Where hostilities are halted, new friendships exalted  
Where warfare is denounced and peace is pronounced  
Dream of new shores, abhor the scream of dire wars  
When shots have been fired, bodies piled on the pyre

Just giving and forgiving, living and delivering  
Where good overwhelms evil and hope is the ease  
For the rich picture of the future, the landscape of our  
handshake  
Circled and curled around this precious pearl:

Our preferred new world

Where seas heave clear, forests not demolished  
And need, not greed, defines a kinder mankind.

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**3<sup>rd</sup>= Place: Ms Pain Has Come To Stay – by Ella Zubeidi**

You and Me and Pain,  
just the three of us,  
It can be quite a drain,  
I try not to fuss.

Just the three of us,  
Plans made, then it's a *No*,  
I try not to fuss,  
Pain decides we cannot go.

Plan's made, then it's a *No*,  
*Sorry we can't be there*,  
Pain decides we cannot go,  
*Can't predict a flare*.

*Sorry we can't be there*,  
Pain's our guest tonight,  
*Can't predict a flare*,  
limbs crippled, stiff and tight.

Pain's our guest tonight;  
anguish drawn across your face,  
limbs crippled, stiff and tight,  
gripped in Pain's embrace.

Anguish drawn across your face -  
I wish it could be me,  
gripped in Pain's embrace:  
Our new reality.

Pain's not leaving us,  
It can be quite a drain,

We'll just have to adjust,  
You and me and Pain

---

## **Highly Commended: Report** – by Clare Marsh

As first voyager to our blue neighbour  
I have assessed its potential  
to support our teeming population.

Long ago our ancestors abandoned  
our red world's arid lands  
and tunneled deep into its interior.

For us the liquid form is genetic memory,  
etched in ancient channels,  
river deltas and boulder fields.

But here, while some regions are cloud-starved,  
for most there is an abundance, falling  
in torrents from the turbulent atmosphere.

Changes of state, from white polished solid,  
to colourless clear liquid, then white gas,  
were observed near polar volcanoes.

Immense salt pools cover the planet's surface.  
The inhabitants navigate vast distances,  
floating on the moon-dragged skin.

Dominant life forms are incubated in aqua,  
yet can drown after hatching.  
Their cells exchange oxygen in solution

and dissolved nutrients promote growth.  
Aqua is essential for their survival.  
We will harvest them –

I recommend colonisation.

---

**Highly Commended: Rescued** – by Hilaire McLiesh

Folded in on their trauma  
they queue out the door.  
No expectations.  
Battered and broken.

In triage, the first pangs of hope;  
the gentle assessment of snapped ribs,  
a bisected shaft, lacerated canopy,  
total evagination.

They pass between gloved hands  
from hushed voice to hushed voice  
through dimmed pastel rooms  
where skilled stitchers mend rips

ribs are righted with solder  
and magicians conjure painless reversions.  
New ferrules are fitted in place.  
Only now do they begin to believe

in the angels of rescue  
who gathered them in before dawn  
from gutters, bus stops,  
ignominious bins.

In the sanctuary grounds  
they take the sun  
somersault on the breeze  
make new friends, find old ones.

---

**Highly Commended: Crossing** – by Chloe Balcomb

Upstairs  
listening to 45s,  
you dare not meet his eyes.

He slides towards you, fingers  
questioning the hem of your skirt,  
his kisses quickening the sea inside you.

You are just kids, the two of you,  
the hands mapping your body  
navigate from stolen bearings.

You are glad now,  
of the older girl,  
that he knows this much.

Arcing above you,  
he is suddenly still,  
both close and far away.

Lost and lovely,  
new worlds,  
tumbling from his lips..

---

**Commended: I Sang For The Morning** – by David Dixon

I sang for the morning, I danced for the rain, gave thanks for  
this 'Eden' then

the Whiteman came.

We welcomed you with open arms; you raised a 'Statue of  
'Liberty' over our bones,

Tricked our people, bullied our chiefs, brought plague and  
fever; broke the pipe of peace.

Poisoned the waters, dug up the land, put down roots on our  
burial grounds.

Cut down the forests, killed all the game, sold off the prairie,  
fenced off the plains.

Then came the 'Iron Horse' and the 'pale skinned ghosts,' then  
the 'talking wires' down the Telegraph

Road

Then came the missions; the schools and the rules, the  
lawyers; the stage coach; the bar girl whores,

Then 'Sunday Doctors' with prayers and psalms, sent amongst  
us with honeyed tongues,

Armed with a book about a pale faced God, on their chest was  
a man nailed to a cross.

Jesuit Fathers; 'Black Robed Chiefs,' baptising our people,  
making us weak.

D'you think your God's in human form looking down from a  
golden throne,

Presiding o'er some 'Grand Design,' what is yours and what is  
mine,

Conversing with a chosen few, 'I am the way, I am the truth,'  
convert the savage it is my will.

No! God is an infinite unstoppable force; that breathes life  
throughout the universe,

A boundless energy beyond space and time, a pulsing river  
shot through with life.

He's 'Rolling Thunder' cross prairie grass, the 'Roaring Wind'  
through a mountain pass,

The rustling leaves in the high treetops, a fleeting rainbow in  
the last raindrops. .

Give me buckskins and feathers not these Whiteman clothes,  
my sisters are the flowers;

my brothers the wolves.

I'm connected to the Earth, the waters; the air, my kin is the  
eagle, the beaver; the bear,

The trees are my shelter, the streams are my roads, the breeze  
is my counsel, through grasslands I roam,

I rise with the daylight, count time by sunshade, know night by  
the star shift, mark months by moonphase

We are who we are, born equal and free, you can't sell the  
ground from under our feet!

Where is our proud nation our Indian braves, like the tracks of  
the buffalo gone from the range.

We are his 'Red Children,' we care for the land, all that swims  
in the rivers, the four legged of the ground

All that grows from the Earth, and the winged of the sky, we are  
part of creation in the 'circle of life.'

---

**Commended: First Day At School** – by Janet Fludder

We walk hand in hand  
dragging our feet.  
We reach the school gate  
in plenty of time -  
not late.  
Mum bends to kiss me whispering -  
Be a good girl  
and waves goodbye.  
I will not cry, swallow my tears  
and follow the girls and boys  
through the open door -  
new shoes shuffle on the parquet floor.  
Good Morning children  
My name is Miss Sycamore.  
The first day begins.

I walk home, slowly.  
Turn the key -  
the house is strangely quiet.  
I make tea, sipping slowly.  
Wander from room to room  
in silence.  
I wonder, is she missing me?  
I make tea and glance at the clock again,  
How long until three?  
I wait at the gate to meet her,  
and there she is, running to greet me.  
Hand in hand we hurry home  
to make tea.  
The first day ends.

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**Commended: Mobile Phone Addiction** – by Shona Johnson

Head bowed, but not in prayer.  
Searching for answers, but God's not there.  
Lonely and lost, but surrounded by friends  
Of the virtual kind, but that's where it ends.

Feeding your soul with likes and mentions,  
Worshipping followers for hollow attention.  
Lost faith, can't find your way.  
Lonely nights, dark days.

I interrupt. Let's have a chat,  
Put down your phone. Enough of that.  
I'm right here, sat next to you.  
Do you know my name? I hope you do.

You grunt at me, then shy away  
Conversation's art gone astray.  
A comfort, a shield: your mobile phone,  
You tumble down the rabbit hole.

I've got a plan to curb your addiction:  
I'm going to invent a new religion!  
To give you hope, to guide your way,  
To save humanity today!

But how to convince you to believe  
In this new religion that I've conceived?  
I must spread the word and gain some followers.  
A viral post should sway the doubters.  
A fake news story of lost scriptures,  
A new messiah, to rival the Christians!

My phone vibrates and a feel a sensation,  
You liked my post and gave me a mention!  
I've converted you, I think I've won.  
I bow my head, it's only just begun.

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**Commended: Every Year, Almost About This Time** – by  
Robert Keeler

Every year, almost about this same time,  
—in memoriam, M. N. and I. P.

tiny black ants—or maybe descendants—  
arrive back indoors. For they invade  
and strut around, take hostages, toss  
everyone aside. They care not for  
decorum. They care not for steeped-in  
graciousness. They care not for light,  
rising darkness, hot, cold, or time of  
day. Ants' wants do not encompass  
wild heroics; only seek tasty crumbs  
dusted in palm oil, sugar, or saffron.

Only yesterday, lawless ant-scouts  
formidably, efficiently mapped out  
my grimy kitchen counter, ever-stuck  
drawers, my ancient under-sink spills.  
Not confused by connived decoys—salted  
strategically to distract or disperse—  
ants move to consolidate gains, hot  
little phantom-like beachheads.

Then, before their welcome fades  
away, before the fast-incoming fall,  
ants formlessly slide down my counters  
and bathroom walls, bushwhacking  
back to basement hives, into fertile  
welcoming soils. For they seem  
very small and painless.

Blest ant gods, please consummate  
our numerous failings, for lapses  
in past we inflicted and you suffered,  
your fairest punishments.

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**Commended: Seventy** – by Andrew Lunn

Ten and three score years,  
memories, held for the life of me,  
like the apples I scrumped,  
grappled with under my jumper.  
Sorted, washed and polished,  
no blemish, tart taste or maggot  
mars the past.  
More painful is the longing.

Time stretched, yawned ahead  
in a glue-treaded pace to school.  
Stone stairs, walls pond green against smears,  
pens dribbled blue-black blotches,  
faked bruises to skip PE.  
Chalk dust swarmed in beams of sun,  
tadpoles stared, dot-dashes in a jar,  
land-legs trailing, waiting for the jump.

History made at a classroom desk,  
witness to insoluble sums,  
crushes carved in hearts and arrows,  
imagined journeys on wood-grain roads,  
crossing bridges, over rivers,  
dead-ends knotted,  
day dreams hit head-on  
by a blackboard duster.

Time gave so freely then:  
worm casts scattered with senseless kicks,  
ferns severed with a willow whip,  
skimming the water with stones,  
not knowing what mark to make.  
These days I recall as time runs out.

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 25 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at [www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk](http://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.

