



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

11(Secondary)-13 Age Category

The 18th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2023

The Road

Some are long and winding and some lead to nowhere while others to Hell, even if paved with good intentions. From the ones less travelled to those that go ever on and on, roads and the journeys, real and symbolic, taken along them have always been a common theme in literature.

2023 is the 30th anniversary of The R C Sherriff Trust. Much of Sherriff's writing involved journeys, some literal; the charabanc day trip of his first play, A Hitch In The Proceedings, the family heading off for their annual holiday in his novel, 'The Fortnight in September', or the journey home taken by David Preston every night, except one, in 'Home By Seven', some metaphorical; Harry Faversham in 'The Four Feathers', Johnny McQueen in 'Odd Man Out' and the journey undertaken by Stanhope, Raleigh, Trotter and the soldiers in Sherriff's most famous work, a journey that leads to a fateful climax in the trenches of the First World War.

For the 18th Elmbridge Literary Competition, The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, were looking for short stories and poems on the theme of 'The Road'.

Previous Competition Themes:

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

Category: Short Stories

1st Place: The Road

Sophia Austin

A full moon hung, serene and aloof, in the inky black sky, shining brightly down at the derelict road. Broken remnants of stones that once made up the road glistened subtly, slick with rain – the rain that was still pelting down with all of its might, seeming to be wanting to gouge holes in the ground.

Apart from the constant rush of water all around, though, the night was peaceful and silent. That was, until the carriage came along.

It was an elaborate model, with plenty of fancy paintwork and other unnecessary decorations adorning the sides. The doors were firmly bolted shut, and the curtains drawn on the little square windows. The coach driver himself was sitting in the little seat at the front, trying desperately to take as much cover from the little overhang above his head. He was wet and grumpy. His carriage had been delayed thanks to his front wheel falling loose, and he had had to take *this* miserable excuse for a road in order to even hope to get home before midnight. And the weather was horrible. His coat was tightly wrapped around him, his collar turned up, and his hat drawn low over his face. First mistake. The hat acted like the blinkers on his horses below him, effectively limiting his vision to what was straight ahead of him. Because of that, he failed to notice the figure standing on the bank next to him. He was no more than a dark shape, a silhouette, bathed in faint silver light. You could see enough of him to make out a wide-brimmed hat, a long coat, and a gleaming sword at his belt. He scanned the coach as it passed, taking in the elaborate decorations, the drawn curtains, and the half-asleep driver, then mounted his horse and galloped after it.

The black stallion drew up beside the carriage smoothly. The driver didn't seem to hear the sounds of another horse next to him – or maybe he just thought it was simply his own horses below him.

Either way, he wasn't nearly alert enough to have any illusion of safety. Second mistake. The rider stood up in the saddle, glanced quickly forward, and then leapt off the horse, flying through the air in a graceful arc, to land with a soft thump on the roof of the carriage.

This the driver did notice. He whipped around, narrowing his eyes as he listened for any sound. Grumbling, he turned back around and focused on the road ahead. It must have been the wind. Or his dodgy wheel. Or one of his stuck-up passengers inside falling off their seats. He chuckled at the

thought, promptly forgetting about the noise that wasn't, in fact, the wind, or his carriage, or his passengers. Third mistake. He had obviously heard the tales about this road – about coaches going missing, about people found in the depths of the forest, floating in a pool of bright red blood. But most of all, the tales of the notorious bandits that roamed this part of the country – the highwaymen. This road, this seemingly forgotten road that this coach driver – and countless before him – had taken to try to get home quicker. The only thing that foolish decision accomplished was to bring their journey to an end. The man on top of the roof smiled thinly. The man crawled to the side of the roof, keeping low, and clasped the thin decorative railing on the edge of the roof. He stared down at the road whizzing past in a blur of grey and brown, before dropping down. He hung in mid-air for a second. The roof groaned. He let go of the railing, landing softly on the step below him. Now he was facing the door of the carriage, his nose almost touching the cold glass of the small window in the side. He shuffled to one end of

the step, leaning backwards and slowly easing the door open. It swung outwards past him, and when it was open, he stepped gracefully into the carriage.

Taking off his hat, he bowed low to the two figures inside.

'Gentlemen, ladies,' he greeted them with a confident, assured voice, 'I am *very* sorry to disturb your journey. It is just the little matter... of your gold.'

The coach trundled along the road, bumping on the loose stones and dirt, until it reached the nearest village. The coach driver was shocked to find that his passengers were not inside his carriage. He wondered how he hadn't noticed anything. He made an awful lot of mistakes that day.

2nd Place: Nature Holds Its Breath
Imogen Clements

A long black ribbon, twisted through the countryside. Lit by thousands of torch lights, dancing this way and that like balls of fire, bobbing tirelessly. The sound of metal boots rung out in the night like a knife slicing through the hearts of the hiding. They came in waves, all dressed in grey. One great mass. No longer human. Horse, cart and shoe alike all clank in the same monotonous rhythm.

The trees cowered from the road, sheltering from the people marching. A song penetrated the air. It hovered above the soldiers marching. Marching. They are proud. The moonlight creeps from behind the clouds, piercing the sky. The August night is thick with silence and rich with suspense. A faint breeze licked the trees but it's enough to make the hiding shiver.

Cartwheels screech. Men's voices reverberate throughout the forest around them. Not a star in the sky. Not a bird's cry carried on the breeze. Rifles bounced against soldier's legs, emanating a thumping sound. Horseshoes clip-clop on the cobbled road. Soldiers in leather boots marched along the never-ending road. The road winds in and out of the forest. Looking up the soldiers saw no pockets of stars, just torches they held above their heads. Nature holds its breath.

At the end of the road were many fields, stretching as far as they could see. The army move forward onto the grassy land and prepare to fight. Just visible on the horizon was a shadow. Not one. Not two. Dozens. Forts. They protruded from the ground like ugly pieces of barbed wire. And so, it began. The road left behind. Shots fired into the night and shells propelled through the air. They land in the surrounding fields, exploding. Earth churned beneath the soldier's feet as they storm the forts. Wave after wave of them cut down by machine gun fire. A human wall of bodies amass.

Men cried out as they ran toward the forts, only to be pushed back again and again. The General throws away his soldiers' lives. Nothing will ever be enough for him. No matter how many lives he wastes, roads he marches and places he conquers. He will always want more.

3rd = Place: The Forming of A Road

Sam Martin

A long, busy road is what others can see. With lots of cars sending fumes into the air; lots of people with headphones on or staring at their phones; or little children trying out their new scooters with worried mothers by their sides who sometimes call out as the child swerves too near the road.

I don't only see this. I see long grass waving softly in the wind. Then a deer leaps away in fright with an arrow in its side. About fifty stone age hunters dash forward with a cry. Soon they are back and are roasting the deer. In the morning they are gone. Only the fire shows they were there with its smoke drifting away like the smoke of time. That is not all though. They have left an indent in the grass where they had chased the deer. This is the beginning of our road.

The First Farmers are here. They have made a palisade around their village, but they have left space for the road to run through. It is not an indentation in the grass anymore but a proper dirt track. It leads from the fields outside the village in through a gate. There it starts to split and leads to the doors of the houses.

Now the Celts are here. Their road has grown. It leads up from the village through the fields and up the hill to the chief's fort. Armies march up the road to take the fort, but it is untaken. The Romans arrive. They have defeated the Celts and the fort is now a well-armed Roman fort. The road is now paved and goes through a proper town and at the other end of the road there is a bridge that means traffic is more than ever using the road.

The Saxons have defeated the Romans. They have destroyed the fort and the bridge, and the road is not paved any more. Then Vikings arrive with war cries and waving axes: the road is constantly used as the frightened people run from the town with the Vikings in hot pursuit.

It is the medieval times. The road leads steeply up past a grim stone castle where the fort once stood. Round the north side it winds down again towards a miller's house with modern machinery that has not been seen before. The road is bringing in wealth to the town, which is growing rapidly. Many strangers travel along it, some with a new teaching and so a church is built and, for the first time, an inn.

The road is now paved, there is a new bridge, and the church is more elaborate; so is the castle. But with the wealth the road has brought an evil sickness – people call it the black death – and many are fleeing.

The town is under attack, this time the Cavaliers come charging along; but the Roundheads are prepared and have cannons set up along the road to destroy them. The town has now spread over the bridge to the other side of the river and is very long and constantly used.

The church had been destroyed by the Cavaliers in their attack but there has been a new one built. It is far too extravagant and is made of marble. Due to the wealth the road is bringing in the Lord has completed an expensive mansion for himself.

The road is now crowded with posh people wearing frilly cloths and golden buttons in

their expensive carriages. They are good target for highwaymen, and this has become a bad problem.

A coal field has been discovered next to the road so coal wagons are constantly using it, but the people have become poor and dark smoke drifts up from grim factories. The road is lined with beggars but the wealth that the road is bringing in is keeping the town together through this hard time.

Thanks to the road the town it has revived and is now a wealthy city with a modern train station. The people dress in expensive silk and on the road the newly invented bicycle is being tried out for the first time. The road is not so important as it was because of the train station but is still important.

The modern times are here, with the people on their phones and the busy road full of cars. I sigh. I had almost believed I was on the road watching a Celtic chief marching out to war, or a knight, or a Roundhead bravely defending the city, or a Victorian gentleman trying out a penny-farthing. But I have only been here a short time, whereas the road has been here for centuries watching people arrive, settle, and leave. But the road has not left: it has been steadfast, unswerving, endless.

3rd = Place: Willoughby Road
Felix Farrant

John was approaching Willoughby Road, he was excited for a very special reason, John was coming home to see one of the most important people in his life, his twelve year old son Fred. John had been separated from his son for ten sad, painful months, John had been on deployment with the army fighting in a horrible battle in Iraq. It was the latest of many separations John had experienced from Fred during his short life. He understood how important his job was but it always meant leaving the people he loved. John was full of mixed emotions, excited at the thought of being reunited but also a little nervous about returning back to the family. As he turned into Willoughby Road John felt an overwhelming sense of nearly being home, this road had given him so many happy memories over the years

As John drove slowly down the road, he passed the post box outside number eleven. John imagined his wife Mary lifting Fred, who was too short to reach, to post pictures that he had drawn. It always made him feel so much happier when he opened the letters and saw the pictures. It made being in camp away from his family a little bit better. Opening one of his family's letters always took John right back to Willoughby Road in his mind. Over the years Fred then started to write his name with some kisses in his letters. After that Fred started writing sentences in his letters and then they evolved to proper letters being sent to him. John treasured the letters Fred sent him, and kept them with him wherever he was based. John knew that some people would think it's just an ordinary post box but to him that post box had given him lasting memories that he will remember and love forever. The post box was one of the most important things connecting him to his family when he was away on his deployment.

As John progressed along Willoughby Road he saw the green of the park on the lefthand side. John instantly remembered that he had taught Fred how to ride his bike on that green. It had given John such an overwhelming sense of pride when Fred was first able to ride his bike on that green all by himself. Fred had been putting a lot of work into it and was desperate for the stabilizers to come off. John knew that the green had given him lasting, great memories that he will love and remember forever. The green was the one place where his son achieved something to remember and be proud of forever and he felt so thankful that he was there to witness his son's achievement. Other great times had been spent on the green, games of cricket and football, picnics and tree climbing. John felt quite emotional as he passed, recalling happy times spent at home in Willoughby Road.

John was getting ever closer to Fred and finally the car stopped outside number 42 Willoughby Road. John sat for a minute staring at the front of the house getting more and more excited at the thought of being reunited with his family. John realised in that moment that even though he had travelled to some amazing places around the world number 42 Willoughby Road was the most important place in his life and there was nowhere he would rather be. He never wanted to call anywhere else 'home'.

John got out of the car and walked to the front door feeling happier every step he got closer. John knocked on the door and waited for his son to answer, after what seemed like

an eternity the door swung open revealing Fred standing there looking absolutely thrilled to see his father after such a long time.

Highly Commended: The Road To Help

Maya Coleby

Prologue: The ancient man rose from his chair and staggered over to the dilapidated door of their derelict little home. His trembling hands clumsily unlocked the rusty, metal bolt and a sharp rush of wind smacked him right in his face, he was nearly knocked off his feet. It tore through the house like an unwelcome visitor, disturbing everything in its wake. The man – battling the ferocious wind – stumbled down the steps of his residence and shuffled his way to the car. Just as he was getting in, his trusty Labrador, Luna, bounded athletically towards the car and took a graceful leap into the passenger seat. The young, energetic dog was the complete opposite to her elderly owner.

As the man turned the key, the engine spluttered and gradually came to life. Juddering, it turned out of the uneven drive on to the road – they were finally on their way.

I stuck my head out of the smudged window, the blasting wind was a shock, but I loved how it ruffled my fur up so much! I loved walks, so many interesting scents and things to explore, but as my old man aged, these times had grown less and less frequent; he was so dependent on me these days that I could barely leave his side.

The anticipation grew as we left the bustle of our little village behind and ventured into vast green hills rippling at the wind's merciless power. After what seemed like forever, my master finally pulled into a stony layby. We came to a juddering halt; I could barely contain my excitement!

He stumbled out of the car in his usual manner but as I leapt out to join him, a dazed expression overtook his face and he started to sway concerningly. Just as I thought he was about to fall over; his knees gave way underneath him and he collapsed. Panic filled me as I desperately nosed him, hoping it was some un-humorous joke, but all I could hear was his rasping breath. It was so delicate that I felt that one touch could shatter it.

As he lay there, anguished thoughts clouded my mind like the approaching fog that was surrounding us. *Had I done something wrong? Or was this more serious?*

After much despairing thought, I finally decided to go find help. I could not do much myself; I was a dog, after all. I took one last panicked look at my master, and then shot down the road as fast as my paws would carry me.

After travelling for what seemed like hours, I came across a young woman jogging down the road. Her wild hair was whipped around by the powerful wind and a confused expression crossed her face as I approached. "What are you doing all on your own?" she cooed sickly at me. I tried to get her to follow me by barking, running, and looking back at her but she seemed completely oblivious. "You should come home with me, and I will keep you warm and safe," she called. I didn't like the sound of this, my master needed help, so started to run away. However, she forcefully grabbed my collar and tried to pull me towards her. I began to growl, and she immediately released her grasp. I swiftly darted down the road – away from trouble.

Carrying on my tireless journey for help, I spotted the great, unwieldy shape of a tractor looming ahead through the thickening mist. Hope filled my heart and mind as I raced towards the inviting shape of some civilisation. However, as I neared the monstrous, structure, a man with a face the colour of his crimson vehicle, vacated the tractor and started

thundering towards me; his hostile glare sent shivers through my bones. His face contorted with rage as I proceeded to come to a standstill before him. A moment of silence before the bull screeched unspeakable words at me and lunged closer. I dodged out of the way a millisecond before his hands thrashed the place I had once stood. I sprinted across the field as he gained on me, and he was just preparing for another of his powerful swipes when I speedily dived through a hedge into safety.

I had obviously invaded his private land and he hadn't been too happy about it! By this time, I was panting madly and desperate for a drink and rest but knew I had to carry on for my master. The stony road gradually changed to smooth concrete under my aching paws as I continued the journey. I was thankfully nearing a small town and the once-felt hope soared up inside me again. The intimidating hills surrounding me seemed to deflate more and more as I walked. Turning a corner, I spotted a small cottage perched on the side of the road. It certainly looked promising; but after my last encounters I wasn't going to take any chances. Just as I was wondering how to get inside, the gentle click of someone unlocking the door reached my ears and a kindly-looking man ventured out. He didn't see me at first, so I barked to get his attention. His eyes were immediately drawn to my bedraggled shape, and he strode towards me in concern. "What's wrong, where is your owner?" he called worriedly. Unlike the young women, he didn't try to stop me but thoughtfully tried to figure out what the problem was.

I tried to make him follow me by using the same tactics as I had with the women earlier. After much puzzling thought, he finally understood and jogged back to the house to retrieve his bike and started to follow me. We repeated the tiring journey once again until we reached my master. The man immediately phoned someone named a 'paramedic' and praised me repeatedly.

I knew now that after all my efforts, my master was finally safe.

Highly Commended: The City of The Gods

Beatrice Young

Chapter 1

My name is Hani. Even though I am 15, I still love listening to my grandfather's stories. Some are true and some are fantastical. Lina and Aya are always enthralled by them. My older sister, Aisha says I am too old for stories but sometimes when she makes the family's food, I see her pause to listen.

Every evening after supper, while the adults clear up, grandfather tells us one of his stories. My favourite is 'The City of the Gods'. It is about a city in the desert where the land is so bountiful and the people so happy that it is said to be inhabited by the gods themselves.

It was after supper. Grandfather was telling us 'The City of the Gods' on my request when the invaders came. They wore black masks and rode powerful Arabian horses. Everything was aflame. Charred bodies lying everywhere. My eyes stung with the smoke. Then I was running. I could hardly breathe.

"Just keep running", I told myself.
Out of the burning village. Into clean air and I still kept running until the fire is far behind.
Then I collapse.

Chapter 2

Hot sand. Why is it beneath me? Why am I not in my bed? The sun is bright. As my eyes adjust to the light I start when I see where I am. Sand. Everywhere. Nothing. But. Sand. Then I remember. No more home. No more family. I'm alone in the desert with no water or food. I'm going to die pretty quick.

Something is in the distance. I realize it's the smoky remains of my village. But something else moves closer. A dark shadow. Maybe a survivor. My feet sink into Arabian sand as I start towards the shadow. Only when I am within 20 metres of it do I think they may be a lost invader. Well, I think, dying by the sword is better than starvation and lack of water. But as I draw nearer I see it is no human. A magnificent chestnut horse stands wilting in the sun. A sack of water. It feels good against my dry tongue. Climbing onto the silky back of the horse her muscles wave beneath my fingers. She is strong and beautiful but also soft and gentle. I name her Saba meaning soft breeze.

I have decided to go to the City of the God's so we ride all day and rest at night. I never realised the stars are so beautiful and so many. I once heard there are more stars in the sky than grains of sand in the world. I'm not sure if I believe that.

The road to the city is hard going and so hot. We ride on and on occasionally stopping at small villages and towns to refill our supplies.

Then one evening, we climb over yet another dune to find an orange sunset illuminating a golden city, 'The City of the God's.' That evening Saba and I sleep under the starry heavens, anticipating what tomorrow will bring.

Chapter 3

The next day we arrive at the city. Towering domes of gold rise above white walls encrusted with every imaginable jewel and stone giving the colossal city a rainbow glow in the fading light. As we enter the gates, wealth and splendour crowd my senses. Marble columns hold up grand houses and temples. Markets overflow with spices, succulent fruits, expensive silks and rare gems.

That night, a luscious palm shades us as we lie next to a diamond pool of water. In the city, the stars aren't visible due to the many temples and houses and domes. In the morning, I start looking for work. But everyone who is not crazily drunk turns me down. And the more I wonder around, the faster an unease drips into me.

Everyone is just too happy in the wrong way. There are no friendships or families. Everyone is in their own world of greed. After four days trying in vain to find a job or a place to stay, I decide it is time to leave.

Back on the desert road, the realisation sinks in that I have no-where else to go. The ache that I've been trying to block out seeps back in when I remember I'm all alone. After a few days of plodding aimlessly, our supplies are running low. And exhaustion starts setting in until one day, Saba collapses beneath me. She can go no further. I raise my head and see a small cluster of huts situated by a clear pool of water. The want for water drives me on but the fall has had a bad affect and I collapse a few feet away from a door.

Chapter 4

Water. Clean fresh water. It's beautiful and oh so refreshing. Between my half-closed lashes a familiar woman stands over me. Perhaps this is heaven. Otherwise my mother wouldn't be here, would she? I sit up. Everyone I love is here. Aisha, her husband Qasim, and their twin daughters Aya and Lina. Father and Mother and best of all, Grandfather. Also Saba stands in a stall, strong and well, a little away from the hut.

"We all thought you had gone to the heavenly realms." Grandfather says.

"Yes. We had given up all hope." Sighs Aisha.

"I thought the same about all of you." I say. "And how did you all end up here?"

"We are all wondering the same of you I'm sure," Father speaks out, "And we have a long night ahead of us to tell our stories."

"But first, let us sit to eat before story time."

As the food is set upon the table and we all settle down, I think, all the best roads lead back home.

Commended: The Road Back Home

Luci Borzoni

Lekka was born to the sound of chirping parrots, the crunch of leaves and hiss of snake. That was his home. He learnt how to catch food and defend his territory from only a few months in his tropical paradise. Then a few weeks later, his life was ruined. Chunky men in heavy jackets arrived in large jeeps, and started setting traps for the animals. The jungle was no longer the peaceful place it was. It was now full of the sound of destruction, the animals' cries for help echoing around the deserted forest. Lekka was caught, yelping in fright, he watched the silhouette of his mother grow smaller as they were torn apart.

The head of all this chaos pointed towards Lord Ganboaboa of the Pearl mansion. He spent his life sinning, spending and scamming. His greed was the centre of his life and although he didn't really have all the money he said he had, he leapt at the offer of the building of a new motorway cutting through the Southern Tibet jungle. He may have been disliked by many, but he still managed to gather a team towards the creation of the road. He was not someone who cared about the loss of the rainforest and animal habitat, or someone who cared about the fact that he couldn't pay for the new motorway. "I'll get the money off that Jimmy person, he always seemed to like me," was what he simply thought as a builder walked up to him with a sheet of measurements.

Lekka, an Anatolian leopard, was, in short, simply confused. He had no idea why his mother had to be taken away, and why tall, pink creatures wearing what looked like the smooth, shiny bark of the commonly found rubber tree were appearing all over the place. He had no idea that at this very moment, while he was sitting there lazily under a tree, his mother was trapped in a tight, wire cage, about to be shipped to a distant land. And he had no idea that the only world he knew would soon be destroyed because of one greedy person.

Several hours later, Lekka awoke to the sound of machinery. His damp nose picked up foreign scents which made his fur stand up on end. Quickly, silently, he stalked towards the source of the noise, not letting even a dry leaf crackle under his soft, padded feet. He could hear raised voices, and as he reached the clearing he saw something he would never forget. Four ginormous diggers were charging into the helpless tree while humans hacked into the wild undergrowth. Lekka watched stealthily several metres away as the intruders worked as if there was no tomorrow. His furry body trembled in fright as the realization hit him.

Back in his cozy den, Lekka's usually expressionless eyes were full to the brim with anger. His mind was in a whirl of grief, and a longing for his mother. He wished her warm, comforting body was there once more, lying by his side, keeping him safe. Suddenly, as though a spark had lit up inside him, he leaped to his feet. Motivation pulsed past his heart, into his soul. The sound of construction had become quiet and distant, his fur stood on end, before he took off into the night.

His once fluffy, round face was now sleek and streamline as he trudged through the rainforest. He had been traveling for days now, and had become used to the dull, grey road. Now and then a huge, monstrous vehicle would thunder down the strange, hard ground, frightening Lekka back to the undergrowth. The stiff tarmac seemed to Lekka a path – a path back to his mother. Light did not shine on it like the arched ferns sparkling with morning dew, and neither did it give him protection and food like the towering coconut tree. Lekka noticed that the trees were gradually starting to thin out and his surroundings were beginning to get less familiar as the road widened – glowing buildings specking the distance, unfamiliar smells coming from every direction. But still he carried on. He knew that he had to reach his mother before it was too late.

A couple of hours later, Lekka's ears pricked up in excitement. His delicate paws could feel the pulse of the rhythmic waves vibrating the tender soil. Sharp pebbles pierced the land as the road widened to show a rocky coastal path. In the distance, he could see the misty outline of an ocean liner, slowly cruising into the dock. Inside him, Lekka could hear his mother's voice, urging him on to the swaying ferry. Suddenly, the liner let out an ear – splitting hoot, and Lekka knew that could only mean one thing. The boat was leaving. All the worry and fear that had been hunting him was gone in an instant as Lekka hurtled towards the departing cruise ship. He bounded through parks and gardens, he leaped over logs and fences, until finally he reached the shore. Now on the pier, there was only a few metres distance between him and the ocean liner. In between them, waves crashed ferociously, clawing at the sides of the boat. But Lekka had made up his mind. He sprang up onto the metal railing of the pier – and jumped. Just about making it onto the steadily moving liner, he looked into the distance, towards the glowing sun illuminating the early morning sky, and knew that he was one step nearer towards finding his mother again.

Commended: The Road Back Home

Niamh Affley

We were born wild, ran wild and lived wild. But it wasn't always so...

I am Prestissimo, born on the wild plains of western America. I lived a good life, that was, until the men came. They came with their guns and shot Old Silver, the lead stallion of our herd. I was very little at the time, but I still remember the shock on the mares' faces to this very day. Then they struck. Mother and foal were torn apart, any horse who kicked up too much fuss was killed on the spot.

I, whinnying in despair, was dragged away, fearing that I would never see my homeland again. We crossed through plains and deserts, until, eventually, we came to what seemed like a grand mansion, with horses of every breed and color locked up in what seemed like little cages (which I later learned were called stables). But what I was most surprised about is that they didn't seem to mind one bit. Then I knew: I would do anything to get back home. A few years later, I was now a young colt, and I was going to get my first pair of horseshoes from the farrier. But when I saw his evil tools and the red-hot anvil, fear unleashed in me. With all my might, I bucked, sending the farrier flying. Then I lashed out with my front two legs, knocking the man holding me into the dust of the rarely-swept stable yard. Now no-one could control me. Despite the angry shouts and bullets from powerful guns whizzing past my ears, I jumped and sailed across the splintered gate. This was it. I was home free.

Or so I thought. When I jumped over the stable gate, the rope from my halter happened to get caught in it, resulting in me being dragged back to the stable yard.

Due to my bad behavior, the stable I was currently at couldn't tolerate me for more than a month, so I was put on sale in the market. Luckily for me, the owner that bought me was kind and encouraging, a racehorse trainer who thought I had a lot of potential in me, even though everyone doubted her, saying, "The only thing he's going to be useful for is dog food!"

After a year of living in this new place, I began to enjoy my fit but luxurious lifestyle. Every morning, I was released into a huge paddock with other friendly horses. The warm spring sunshine shone through the trees at the bottom of the paddock where a clear little creek ran. Then, later in the day, the other horses were saddled up and ran around a long racetrack while I watched from my quaint paddock, quietly grazing.

Soon after that, my owner came to me, and, offering me a polo mint (which I had grown fond of during the last couple of months) which I graciously accepted, said, "Now, let's see what you've got," and upon leading me to a long stretch of grass with a gate at the end of it untied my halter. Presently, she signalled to a groom at the top of the stretch of grass to open the gate, and I was off. "FREEDOM!" was the single thought that clouded my mind. Just as I was about to escape, the groom shut the gate at lightning speed, forcing me to go from gallop to walk in two strides, whilst I whinnied and tossed my head in anger – another chance blown! "That's quite a horse you've got there!" Complimented Mr. Gibbonses, a friend of my owner's, and scrutinized me carefully. "He looks like a real race winner!"

"Only time will tell," mused my owner, who, secretly was thinking the same thing, "But I hope you are right."

She must have mused a lot more than I thought, as, only two weeks later, she entered me for the most prestigious horse race in the world: the Epsom Derby.

After months of rigorous training, and the painful process of being 'broken in', the big day finally arrived.

By 6:00am, we were rumbling down the gravelly driveway in the horse box when Mr. Gibbonses (who was also coming along for the day) broke the nervous silence, saying the thing that we were all dreading. "Do you think he's ready for this?"

"I hope," said my owner, "Or £85 000 goes down the drain."

Before the race started, my owner whispered to me: "I know your past, and I know your dream. Win this race for me and I will send you home. Lose, and you will stay here for longer, as I will not be able to afford the transport to send you home."

When we were in the stalls, ready to go, I concentrated, I thought hard about my family, my friends, who were still out there somewhere, searching for me. I would not fail them. I would not let them down.

CLACK! The stalls opened and we were off. Concentrating on my power, I galloped like I never had. I rode with the wind; *on* the wind, my hooves a blur that were barely touching the ground.

Before I knew it, ecstatic cheers erupted from all around me – I HAD WON!!!!!! But most importantly, I had won the road back home – the road back to my family and friends.

"Congratulations - I'll arrange for you to be sent back to America right now!" exclaimed my happy owner, having just won £909,628. "Besides, that might've been just a one-off race – I doubt you could run like that in others, let alone a steeplechase!"

And that was it.

The end.

I got to see my family again, and we shared the memories of our individual adventures, one's tale as unique as another's.

We were born wild, ran wild and lived wild. It may not have always been that way, but from now on it will be. ***I know it.***

Commended: A Journey With Death

Scarlett Stephens

Like flies to a carcass, darkness swarmed around me. Its icy embrace enveloped me with the metallic smell of blood. Spindly, inky talons pinched and stretched my face; I was a rag doll and he, a cruel merciless child in need of a victim. Bleak, black eyes appeared before me, surveying me with severe distaste. Bile rose within my throat, clawing upwards to meet the predator. "Hello, Rose." A voice, calling from everywhere all at once cornered me. "I am Death." My first instinct was to laugh, and so I did. It came out unnaturally high and loud, echoing around the endless expanse. This must be a trick with cool effects because it could not be the alternative. "You find me funny, I see," he growled formidably. "How naïve you are. You are dead. Now that I find funny. You must traverse the road to reach your end. I am truly sorry for your loss. Run along now."

Falling. Falling. Falling. I am an apple plummeting from its tree, soon to be bruised and decayed. THUD. I screamed as I made impact, knowing no one could hear my calls. Time warped as I lied there, numb, and tired. Yet I knew I could not stay there forever in that in-between state. So, I got up.

Before me, the road stretched endlessly, shimmering in a haze of heat like a mirage. Beyond the road was an abyss of darkness. Cackles and shrieks rose from its depths, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. "You can do this," I whispered to myself. Breathlessly, I took my first step onto the cracked concrete. I took another and another until I was racing as fast as I could. This was all I had now; the road. Nothing else.

Death was supposed to be something that happened to old people in their sleep or spies on perilous missions. It was a faraway thing that would occur to me once I was content with the life I had lived. Death did not visit teenage girls with normal, boring lives. Yet it had.

Blisters stained my feet as if death wasn't already bad enough. Sweating, I wipe my sleeve across my forehead. My encounter with Death replayed in my mind. "I am truly sorry for your loss." But what had I lost? Days spent completing work to prepare for university. I had thought that I would leave living to future me when I was successful. I had spent so long trying to live up to others' expectations of what my life should be that I never truly lived. It was pitiful. I was now another dead girl in a world littered with them.

Death would not take me that easily. I ran once more, navigating the twists and bends in the road. Concrete and darkness and solemnness. It stretched on and on and on. But I would beat Death's game. Predators like to toy with their prey before they pounce. Maybe I would pounce first. I thought of the smell of books, dancing in the rain and my sister's laughing. I wanted to experience those things again.

A year passed though I couldn't tell as time became distorted in that in-between world. Then I saw it. First, it was a faint flicker, unnoticeable if you weren't looking for it. But as I kept running, the flicker became blazing; the light's radiation enveloped me in hope. I had arrived at the end of the road. Death appeared once more, emanating sorrow. "Hello Rose," Death sneered. "You made it, not many do. Now step into the light, child."

"No." I said adamantly. I couldn't leave. Not when I hadn't even lived yet.

"Ahh. I see. You think you can escape me. I want to see how this plays out. Find a way back to life Rose. If you do, I will not come for you again for a long time. If you don't it will be eternal damnation. I guess you'll have to decide." With that, Death disappeared, rising upwards like smoke from a fire. I spun around, taking in my surroundings. The concrete road, the blazing light and the all-consuming darkness. I twirled and twirled, blurring my vision to make my thoughts clearer. Light, concrete, darkness.

Darkness.

The thing I was so afraid of. I had kept to the path laid out to me as I had all my life, too scared to leap into the unknown. Yet here I was. Death would know I would never dare to make the jump. I was a coward, a sheep, a little girl. But could I be something more? If I made the leap, I would be carving my own path in the darkness. I would show that I would do anything to live again. What would be the worst thing that would happen? I would die? I had already ticked that off my bucket list. I hovered on the edge of the road, staring into the inky abyss. Here goes nothing. As I closed my eyes, I leapt.

This time I did not fall, I flew. Soaring, I was a dove, gilded in light. I could hear laughter coming to greet me and the cool breeze of late summer brushed past my cheeks. Home. The life that I had come to loathe was not so bad after all. As I reached the ground once more, instead of screaming, I smiled.

Commended: The Road To Math
Danyal Sayad

Jacob sat in his normal crooked wooden seat and stared blankly at the board, one inch away from falling asleep. His ancient math teacher droned on and on, like a fly you really want to swat. His head was drooping unwatered plant.

'Now, if x is the sum of x squared and...' Blocking off the continuous source of noise, Jacob began to fall asleep, his tattered math book becoming a pillow for his head.

He gasped and sat up straight. The world was spinning around him, as if he was on a globe. He groaned and slowly his normal vision returned. He looked around. Trees towered over him and hugged him with their branches. He was on a layer of something, which reminded him of soft, velvety grass. However something did not feel right. He looked around, then rubbed his eyes.

'The texture of the trees is wrong,' he murmured to himself. He approached the trunk and slowly slid his finger along the width. They felt like loops and curls. Like... like numbers. Jacob's eyes widened and his breathing started getting shallower. He looked at the ground. Long, stretched, minuscule numbers, like individual blades of grass. He looked at the sky. A mass of equations, graphs, charts, shapes. He was now hyperventilating and his skin started to get clammy.

'No, no, no, NO.' He was panicking now, waddling back and forth along the rows of torturous numbers. **'WAKE UP!'**

He tried pinching himself, slapping himself, punching himself. But it did no good and this new world was stuck with him.

After a while, he eventually accepted his fate and calmed down. He lay on the math grass and thought about what he should do. Jacob rolled over on his side, and then something caught his eye. A shiny yellow gleam. He pushed himself off the ground and walked towards the light. Stopping himself, he realised he was standing at the foot of a yellow brick path. Glad to see something that was not math related, he fell to the road and hugged it.

'Oi, Get out of the way!' Jacob jumped off the path to avoid getting hit by the math equation. *'A math equation? What the...'* Another vehicle whizzed by and he saw the number 6 inside. Then 2. Then 30. Then 9. Hundreds of numbers, inside hundreds of cars, buses, lorries, made up of the equation.

'Hang on a second. I know that equation! X is equal to x squared minus 2. It's the one we did in math class! But what's the answer?'

'It could be me!' said the number 99 who zoomed by.

'Or me!' said number 3.

'Is it me?' said a confused number 8.

Jacob closed his eyes and tried to block out the continuous dull roar of the incoming vehicles. Words started popping up in his head. Factorising, quadratics, algebra, polygons, binomials. His brain started whirring like a rebooting computer. It decoded the expression. It took in inputs. It repeated and repeated and repeated. He opened his eyes.

He knew.

Jacob saw it from a mile away. The Math Ferrari it was riding on boasted power and influence. The smug face of the digit showed arrogance and authority. It cruised on the brick road which seemed to twist and turn to give the number the most fluid voyage.

However Jacob was not intimidated. He knew these kinds of numbers. All round and prime on the outside, but soft and gooey on the inside. He walked onto the golden path and stood in front of a passing car. When the car stopped, he shoved the number out of the automobile. *'Hey! What are you doing!'* protested the poor digit, pounding furiously at the window. *'Sorry, got a number to catch,'* apologised the boy. He sped away, driving his 'borrowed' pair of wheels. After that episode, the gleaming red Ferrari was trundling far ahead of Jacob.

He weaved in and out the oncoming traffic. Flexing his biceps, he concentrated fiercely on his target. After tense minutes of speeding, he began to notice something. The road he was traveling on looked as if it had a mind of its own. It guided him along the path, like a caring, helpful teacher. There were no bumps on this intelligent road, and it was smooth like polished marble. It wanted to help him, Jacob realised. Its glinting in the forest was like a beacon. It was the road that connected with his neurons, and let him see the answer. And now it was giving him a smooth journey to catch the answer.

Courage flowed into him, and powered him like a battery. He knew he could do this. Putting all of his strength into his foot, he pressed down on the accelerator. The vehicle shot forward like a missile and pushed through the air, traveling at speeds a Formula 1 driver could only dream about. The road had become a wide racetrack, and was egging him on, giving him the strength and the belief that he needed. G-force was pushing him into the seat, but he couldn't stop. Not this close. The Ferrari was right in front of him. He was nearly there...

'JACOB TRANDRICK!' shouted the frail math teacher. *'Sleeping in my lesson! Again!'* Jacob groggily lifted his head off his book and saw that he was back in his classroom. *'Have you even taken any information from this lesson into that feeble brain of yours?'*

'Sorry sir,' mumbled Jacob, his cheeks burning a red fire.

'Sorry is not going to cut it Trandrick. I'm starting to get worried. In fact, do this question on the board. It's the first question we learnt today, but I suspect you have not taken anything in, have you?'

Jacob smiled smugly. He walked up slowly, absorbing all the eyes that watched him.

'It's 2.'

Jacob walked back to his seat, and watched the spluttering math teacher twiddle his thumbs in embarrassment.

Commended: The Road

Emma Collins

Bang! Bang! Bang! I hear the clanks and clinks of hammers drum in my ears. I find it doesn't bother me anymore: I am so used to it. I hear the occasional screams of pain as ankles, wrists and legs get painfully scarred by thick, heavy slabs of stone. But once again I find it doesn't bother me anymore: I am so used to it. I hear the angry soldiers yelling, 'I et laboro!' They push, shove, and point at every little grain of gravel out of place. Yet again, this doesn't bother me anymore: I am so used to it.

'Non recta!' yells another soldier, smirking at a poor slave's frustrated expression. The soldier gives him a harsh push and turns away, leaving the man unsuccessfully attempting to lift a large, flat stone to make the long road straighter.

I finish my section of road and stand reluctantly to help others struggle to put their stones into place. I walk limply to another slave, who is clutching at her clearly sprained or perhaps broken ankle.

'Quam?' I ask her, as I see her pale, young face stare up at me.

She points to a stone slab, now fitted into place like a mosaic. I heave a sigh and know that she had accidentally dropped one of the stones on her little foot, now swollen and red.

'Quad nomen tibi est?' I ask as I carefully examine her drooping ankle. 'Valentina,' she answers me. What a pretty name. My caring mother was

called that. She passed away when I was only an infant. I seem only to remember her delicate hands stroking my little forehead while I gurgle and giggle in her arms.

I pick up another stone slab and drop it into place. The woman gives me a faint smile. Although our smiles have been damaged by constant, backbreaking work, we are lucky and praise the gods that we are alive and can fill our famished bodies and quench our thirst for water.

I look towards a great high, round building, with many columns and finely detailed carvings on them. I close my eyes and just imagine. I could not have felt more fortunate than now, for there, within this gigantic, illustrious place are gladiators, fighting to the death. Being forced and beaten to kill and not to be the weakling in the group.

Many weeks pass by as I work with my head down and my back hunched painfully over as if I were bowing. Valentina often helps me with my section of tedious work (after she injured her ankle, we have become close) so I have company. The soldiers seem to be giving me more work, day by day. They keep on glancing in my direction. I always feel their unnerving glare upon me. I shiver as they walk past; they take no notice of my work but simply stare at me.

'Surgere! Surgere!' I am violently woken by the frightened face of my dear friend Valentina her face stained with tears and her whole-body trembling. She tugs at my arm, and I am forced to get up. It is what seems to be the middle of the night. Darkness from the outside is all around me now but a pleasant, bright moon is shining, illuminating our faces as I am dragged out of my stuffy little, straw hut.

'Quid-est?' I ask again and again now panting hard as we break into a fast sprint towards a dark, moody forest. She acts as if she doesn't hear me, and still holding tight to my wrist, we enter the forest.

I am seriously concerned now. The wolves, the owls... why is Valentina so stubborn in running us deeper into the dark depths of this forest? She is still leading me on, deeper, deeper, not even to be stopped by the howls and hoots of a host of dangerous, deadly animals.

'Valentina! Valentina!' I decide at this precise moment, even though it hurts me as well as her, to hold her back tugging violently at her wriggling arms. I am strong and even though Valentina knows that she has little chance against my firm hold, it takes her several minutes to finally stop wriggling. I stare at her with an angry, pleading face.

'Milites volunt...' she pauses, panting frantically, 'Tu gladiator'

She stares back into my burning eyes, a single tear trickling down her pretty face. I can't believe what my ears are hearing, I have strength but me, a gladiator? I would certainly die, I would lose everything, even Valentina.

I look down, my petrified expression stuck on my scratched face. But now it is not just the horror of being a gladiator and killing to survive on my mind.

Valentina has a large cut on the side of her leg, blood and mud smeared into one. She's more bruised, scratched, and pale than ever. She looks shaken and weary and unpredictably falls into my arms. I let myself cry, hope fading just as this young woman, maybe only sixteen, is fading. I close my eyes, what could be worse than this? The next day I would hand myself to the insufferable soldiers, allowing them to drag me into the hands of the lions.

I feel a warm bed of straw. But I feel no comfort.

'Est satis bene?' says a woman's gentle voice, I open my weary eyes a familiar, pretty face with black, silky hair, stares into my eyes. By her side I notice a man standing there too. He has a shaggy brown beard and rough olive skin and kind eyes. A shepherd. But I do not care now, not with Valentina here.

She swings her arms around me, hope is alive again. I cannot feel happier. Could the gods have given us a chance? Could we go far from here together? I am here with Valentina, on a bend in our road to the future.

Commended: The Road

Ben Snowball

Midnight struck. The last glimmer of hope had dissolved as quickly as a cheetah chasing down its kill. Karl had nowhere to hide, no help, no hope.

Only hours earlier, Karl had received the briefing; he knew what he had to do— he just had to execute it. Karl and Franz had been summoned to the leader's office. No one knew his name, all they knew was that he was the strongest, the smartest, the best, and the leader. Karl's hands were shaking, his leg was twitching. Why was he nervous? This was no different to his flights before, but something was different, something was weird. The leader was emphasising to stick to the middle road – not too high, the radar would trace you— not too low, the British would shoot you.

As the leader's speech drained away Karl and Franz jumped in their plane. The plan was to ascend into clouds and secretly take the bombs back to the German base in France. The problem: Britain's most powerful base, Camp Lille was in their way. If this mission failed all hope would be lost, the enemy would win.

As usual Franz navigated Karl so all he had to do was fly. As a flight with them so often did, it started smoothly, reaching the safety blanket of the clouds quickly. Soon they were out of Berlin and reached Leipzig in no time and then Netherlands. Still the leader's words echoed in his mind "Keep to the middle road, keep to the middle road, keep to the middle road."

One more problem: Camp Lille was still in their path. Camp Lille had undoubtedly the best radar tracking system, they had the second most troops in France (300,000), they had 2,400 spitfires ready to fire, but they had a weakness. There was a route where they would be safe. That route— through the clouds.

They departed again at 4:00 PM on 5th February. They soared into the clouds as gracefully as an otter gliding through the river with the current on his side. The speed ascended rapidly 30 km/h to 70km/h to 130km/h to finally reaching its limit of 160km/h in seconds. The plane was a Messerschmitt BF 110, it had the ability to store and drop 40 bombs in a matter of minutes and can single-handedly wipe out a village or camp. More importantly for Karl's mission it can reach speeds of 160 km/h. His mind was still echoing the leader's word's "Keep the to the middle road, keep to the middle road, keep to the middle road". But he knew he had to focus on the present and quickly snapped out of it. Franz told him that they would soon be entering Belgium. Karl looked at the time 5:00 PM, they were still on track. Suddenly, his radar was beeping and Franz shouted "SEVEN SPITFIRES! NORTH!". Karl prepared himself for a dog fight, "it's just training, it's just training, it's just training" he murmured.

The spitfires closed in on them. It was go time. Karl weaved bullets flying at him as Franz took the responsibility of shooting them down, already two British planes were down without a bullet even brushing their plane. Karl dipped and ducked as bullets crashed around him in the pink sky of Brussels. He just had to hold on and let his co- pilot shoot them down. Bang, Crash, Kaboom! A trio of spitfires came crumbling down on the despairing city of Brussels. Two remained and not a scrape or scratch on the Messerschmitt BF 110. Machine guns blazed down from the two remaining planes, it was just a roll of the dice now— pure luck. Franz sent another spitfire tumbling down into Brussels, one now remained. The ammo was low for Karl but they kept going hoping for one lucky shot to pierce the spitfires engine. One

hit. The last spitfire crashed down into the night but it was not done. The British pilot had one more round of strikes. Their wing was hit.

Red triangles of danger flashed and beeped on his dashboard as chaos ran riot. They were now above Camp Lille but they were rapidly descending uncontrollably towards the camp. Karl thought of training, he pulled his brake in a helpless attempt to rescue them from the grasp of British base. It didn't work. He swiftly changed speed to 40km/h to gain control, he pulled back the brake hoping to level the wings.

Soon, they were speedily reaching the clouds but they had to avoid the bullets reigning from the British base. Two hit their wing, one Franz's cockpit.

Franz was knocked unconscious as the plane spiralled out of control; Karl's cries of panic rang out. Karl couldn't do anything this time; he was as helpless as a mouse in the grip of a golden eagle.

They crashed. Franz was still unconscious after the shooting but Karl was fine apart from a few scratches, the plane, however was not. One wing had been severed, the other had been split in half, the plane was sinking and Franz was still in it. Karl checked his surroundings: they were in the middle of a frozen lake. North of the fallen plane Karl heard shouts of "We found them!", followed by echoed shouts of glee.

The clock towers struck midnight. Karl surveyed his options: run away, let Franz die and the British win, save Franz and risk his life or blow up the bombs and kill him and Franz but destroy chances of a British victory. Which road should he take?

He ran away. He reached the end of the frozen lake as the English stepped on it. He checked himself, seconds later Karl found himself to be diving in the frozen water, drastically trying to get Franz out the water. Success. Then crawled out only to be greeted by 10 rifles pointing right at him. Karl had one more road to take. Karl shot at the bombs- they exploded taking everything with them.

Commended: Bucharest

Noah Edwards

“Ole, quick, come!” came the shrill cry of Oleksander’s mother, as she and her son hurried toward the dilapidated train station lying on the outskirts of Cherkasy. “Mama, I’m coming, wait!” He replied, jogging over to her. His face was covered with a thin layer of grime, and his legs were decorated with spots of crimson blood, where he had tripped over in the panic of getting to the train. Oleksander was a tall, brawny youth, with soot black hair partly covering his sapphire like eyes. He followed his mother in a quick pursuit, quickening his pace despite his leg’s constant scream of pain. His mother glanced back at him, a distressed look covering her face, “Ole, really, we must hurry. C’mon.” Oleksander gave his mother a pleading look, but he knew she was right. If they did not catch this train, it would be over. Now or never. He yet again hastened his pace, and the two of them boarded the nearest train, collapsing on the dust coated seats. As Oleksander looked around, he realised the fellow passengers were much the same as him and his mother: sooty boys between the ages of 4 and 15, and desperate, exhausted mothers. No fathers. They had all been ordered to fight Putin. Oleksander’s eyes began to feel moist, so he thought of the road ahead. It was going to be a long, winding road, for sure.

As the train pulled into the station, Ole and his mother stumbled off, and slowly wandered over towards two abandoned benches. They crumpled upon them, and his mother instantly entered her dreams, but Ole could not help thinking about where his father could be.

Oleksander awoke with a start. He raised his neck, peering over at his mother. But she was not there. He nonchalantly laid back down, letting his consciousness ebb away. Then, as if hit by shotgun, he leapt out of his bench at alarming speed and glanced again at his mother’s bench. She really was not there. Maybe she went to the toilet? He knew this was unlikely but bolted to the toilets. They were closed. With his legs wobbling, he slowly walked back to his bench. He had heard many startling stories about kidnappers at school, but he had never truly believed them. Now, it seemed, they were rather believable. Ole knew there was only one way that his mother would leave the station: if she was threatened using brute force. He suddenly felt his heart pumping, as though it would explode like a ticking bomb. He knew there was only one way he would survive. To stay calm.

Ole had never bought himself a train ticket before, let alone jump on a train without his mum or dad, but as the battered old train departed Uman, Ole could not help thinking about his parents. He had waited at least half an hour for his mother to return, but she never did. What if he was now an orphan? He pushed that thought out of his head; thinking would not help. Doing would. After a couple of hours, the mechanic speaker called out Chernivtsi, and Ole joined the crowd leaving the train. He stayed with the crowd until they had left the station – they were a useful mask. If anyone found out that he was fourteen and travelling across Ukraine alone, they would spark awkward and time-consuming questions.

Oleksander trekked through the forsaken streets of Chernivtsi for almost an hour before coming to a halt at a dejected looking bus stop. According to the map that he had picked up, a bus from here would take him over the border into Romania – what his mother had planned to do. Soon enough, a bus halted, and Ole got in, knowing that this would be one of the last times that he would ever see his home country again. Wiping his eyes, he turned away.

Oleksander was sleeping motionlessly as the bus drew to a standstill on the Romanian side of the border, just north of the Carpathian Mountains. He stirred and sat up whilst the bus voiced its termination message. As he staggered off the bus, Oleksander gulped. The true size of the mountains and of his mission seemed to have hit him hard in the face. His road to safety was not going to be an easy one.

Day after day passed, and still Ole had to endure his laborious journey across the mountains - they had proven much steeper than he originally thought. His legs now resembled a mess of blood and bruises, inflicted by the harsh rocks. The mountains seem to tower over him, leaving him in a seemingly endless dark shadow. Each day, Oleksander's pace gradually decreased with his fatigue, and his mind seemed to taunt him. Despite this, he betrayed no thought of stopping, but still pursued the distant dream of Bucharest.

Much time had passed since Oleksander began his road along the mountains. Too long, in fact, for Ole to keep track of. But eventually, the outline of a city became apparent to him. Bucharest. Oleksander was not sorry to leave the hellish mountains behind, now entering the luscious fields blanketing the outskirts of Bucharest in a foliate layer. In little time, he found himself facing the heart of the city. His new home. In the misty clearing, Ole could make out a familiar outline of a figure distorted by the shadows. Apprehensively edging closer, he chanced a glimpse, and, in his disbelief, he gasped. It was impossible. It was his mother. "M...ma...mama?" he breathed, in incredulity. The figure looked up, clearly confused, and then a flabbergasted smile covered her face. "Ole!" she cried out, her voice shaky, stumbling forward to embrace her son. Oleksander looked up at his mother's face, beaming. There was going to be a lot to tell her; it had been a long road.

Commended: The Road

Oscar Lewitt

I opened my eyes, and I had no idea where I was. It was a cold spring morning and there were beautiful animals surrounding me. I started feeling something cold and hard on the bottom half of my body, so I looked down and saw a grown man walking on me in his winter boots. I looked around to see where I was, and I started to realize I was in Bushy Park. Chestnut Avenue to be exact. I used to play here all the time when I was a little boy. I would come here every summer and autumn day when it was hot and sunny to play football with my Dad, but I haven't been there since my dad died from a serious illness. So why have I woken in the middle of it of The Road? Something didn't feel right, I felt stiff and claustrophobic. I couldn't move my arms or legs. The only body part that I could move was my head. With my tongue I started to feel my lips and chin, they felt rough and bumpy. I was so confused until I understood what was happening, the worst and the most unbelievable thing ever had taken place. I had turned into The Road?

It would make sense though because I felt rough and bumpy, the exact texture of a road. I couldn't move my body, there were people walking on me and last, but not least, I woke up in the middle of Chestnut Avenue. I started trying to work out how this could have happened and then I remembered something; something I thought was I distant memory. On a cold Christmas night a few years ago, I made a wish to be on The Road for a year with my Dad again. I don't have any idea why it came true or why it took ages for the wish to become reality, but it had. But, I then thought of the positives, when I wished to be on The Road, I wanted my Dad to be here as well, but he isn't.

Three months has passed and every time I woke up, I was still in The Road. It has been the same old thing every day. I wake up and it's a winter wonderland and then by midday, it's like the Sahara Desert. Every second I get walked on, pooped on by dogs, geese, and other animals and feel very lonely.

By summer, everything changed. It was so hot throughout the day I would start to melt. On one day, a bunch of teenagers decided to crack an egg on my body and see if the egg would start to cook and to my surprise it did! All I could hear was the sound of the ice cream van, children screaming with joy and then crying because they had dropped their ice creams on me, which was quite refreshing to be honest! But there was one boy who caught my attention, he looked exactly like me when I was younger, he was playing football with his Dad too. I slowly looked up to look at the Dads face and I paused before stopping completely. It was Dad. I felt like I was going to faint. I wanted to get up and go and run to him, but I couldn't move. I started to realize what had happened; the wish had taken me back to a time when my Dad was still alive, healthy and in our lives. From that point on, I woke up early 'in' The Road to just watch my Dad and I play together all day until my Mum rang my Dad to tell him to come home.

Autumn was far more relaxed; the temperature was just about perfect, there was no screaming or crying children, all you could hear was the swishing noise of the leaves on the trees. Me and my Dad would come less often, but I could see them far more clearly because there were less people blocking my view. There were brown, orange, red and yellow leaves all over the floor. On every Saturday morning hundreds of people would start running on me

and I didn't know why. I kept on thinking "why is everyone running on a Saturday morning?" and then I suddenly understood, it was Park Run.

Then suddenly everything stopped, no more park runs, no more dogs, deer's, or geese, no more people and no more Dad. The puddles turned to ice, there was snow falling from the sky, it was dark, there were cracks in my body and owl noises surrounded me all day. It was lonely and scary, all I wanted was to go home.

Then I woke up, I looked around and I was back. I was in my double bed all nice and warm, I ran straight downstairs and into the living room where there were presents under a tree with my Mum and Dad beside it saying, "Merry Christmas Joe!"

Category: Poems

1st Place: Your Road Is Your Destiny

Jet Pariera-Jenks

Follow the trail of shells my boy, they'll lead you down to the sea;
Where you'll carry your staff hung with tokens of God, wherever the winding path leads.

Follow the shells with your heart and your soul, with your world in the bag on your back;
Follow the road where others have trod, down the beaten track.

Follow the line of scallops, my son, each ridge is a route to the end;
And on your travels everyone you meet I hope you will call a friend.

Follow the shells set in wall and road, markers for you and others before;
That guide you there and bring you home, to the welcoming light of your door.

Follow the shells and follow your heart, and light your way with joy;
This is the route other pilgrim's took, the route of the sea shells, my boy.

Follow the shells engraved on your soul, to find your sanctuary;
Whether you've miles to go, or just a few simple steps, embrace this guiding journey.

Follow the way markers, my child, to your own heaven wherever it lies;
Whatever your beliefs, if any at all, listen to the voice inside.

Follow your own crusade, my friend, to the thing you are searching for;
Peace and love in times so hard, a solace in sorrow's core.

Follow the shells to freedom, but it's only a short escape from pain;
Then follow the path back, for with every rainbow, there must be some rain.

Your 'rain' is returning to hardship; to confines and to bars;
But never forget, in the darkest hour there shines the brightest stars.

2nd Place: New Ending

Aurora Blue

Walking along the old railway line, lively in my memory,
Himalayan Balsam bushes shelter Rose Bay Willow Herb
that flanks the open track. While I stride onwards,
I make a circlet of willow and place it on my head
and enter the dream, for I am Queen of all my own imaginings,
my imaginings never end, neither my dreams.

Pushing past overgrowths of scratchy brambles that bow down
as if they seek to mark my rule, I pace onwards, sweeping
past gaps and stiles, where shadowed trees crown
my head with laced light that dances through emerald
leaves who fall into my cupped hands.

The possessing light of the sun
blinks my eyes, widens them, pushes me forwards
in continuous presence, as I carry myself
into dark undergrowth, and slip a few steps and stop
here, for here is the path of my completion.
But endings are mere interruptions,
for the line is without end:
turn around and they begin again and can lead you anywhere.

3rd Place =: The Road To Loss

Aldous Heaf

Remember The Flowers

Do you remember the flowers? so long ago now,
In the fields of red and orange, the sky dimming from light to dark,
We talked for hours, the world was ours,
As we walked down our road, emotions overflowed,
Under the orange sky, we used to dream about how far we would fly,
I start to cry,

How far we used to go, letting our hearts flow,
Nobody will understand what we had,
And that's what makes me sad,
Our story was kind, Our story was free,
Freer than you and me, and why can't I see,
that you can live without me,
It doesn't make sense, So you put up a fence,
I felt so so dense,
Breath,

I'm lost for hours, Looking up at the towers,
Knowing you're there, it's just unfair,
You picked them and not me, but I guess your free,
And I guess that makes me happy?,
I should have been more clear, spoken without fear,
About the way I held you so dear,

Our story went so fast, and that's why it didn't last,
I stand up on the balcony, and finally I see,
This story is between you and me,
The petal falls, so slow but fast,
Its own world, It's seeing at last.

Do you remember that flower, the flowers by our road?
So many memories with so much power,
So many memories that they overflowed,
And no longer exist only on our road.

3rd Place =: The Road
Peter Howard

New I stand enjoying the fun;
Washed by rain,
and steaming in the blazing sun;
a warm summers day,
watching many visitors,
many a visit I hear them pay,
or a traveller in a bright caravan,
or maybe a laughing circus,
and oh – just look at that clown-like man.

I know the winter is coming,
The harvest is finished,
Now I see few just doing a little mining;
They come in with spades,
And come back with useless rock
Of many different dull shades,
And what else do I see?
Maybe a few servants,
Running away from their masters to be free.

Now as I am beginning to grow old,
And many, maybe too many, a tale
I could have told
And slowly I crumble
And no more carts
Not even a rumble
I wail into despair,
As I am growing more
and more out of repair.

Highly Commended: Roads of Life
Elianna Wambui Kagai

We all come from different roads of life,
Some travel on raucous buses,
Others in the quiet comfort of a taxi,
And few of us have to move on foot,
But we all make it together,

We all come from different roads of life,
None are as clean, straight or simple like some say,
In fact, some may have a bump or too,
And sometimes it can feel like your road is going nowhere,
But trust me, we all make it together,

We all come from different roads of life,
Each in different shape and size,
Yours might descend into gloomy tunnels,
Or rise onto bridges to the tallest skyscrapers,
But we all make it together,

We all come from different roads of life,
And that is what keeps us connected,
By cars and coaches, buses and bikes,
It doesn't matter how many twists and turns it takes,
We will all make it together.

Commended: The Road of Life
James Wright

Imagine a road is your life,
Obstacles and decisions.
You're driving down this road of life
On the horizon, your envisions.

What would be on this road of life?
Every lane-change, a choice you make.
Would the path be clear ahead, but
You leave crashes in your wake?

Would it be wide and empty?
Would it be long and straight?
Or would it be narrow and busy,
With a dead-end showing your fate?

Have you hired builders who
Tarmac the road as you go?
Or are you following others
And travelling with the flow?

Whatever your road looks like,
I hope you're not alone,
That there are vehicles beside you,
And amongst them friends are known.

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

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

