



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

11-13 Age Category

The 20th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2025

THE RIVER

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

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

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

Previous Competition Themes:

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

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Short Story Category

1st Place: Narmini's Silent Cry

Pranjal Agrawal

In the heart of Sundaram, a peaceful village in India, the river Narmini flowed, revered by all. Her waters sparkled under the sun, weaving through the green fields, nourishing crops, and providing for the people. To the villagers, Narmini was more than just a river. She was a storyteller, carrying ancient tales of the land and the sky. Her song, a soft and constant hum, was a part of everyday life, filling the air with peace.

The children would play along her banks, their laughter mingling with the river's gentle murmur. Sitting under the large banyan tree, the elders would recount stories of how their ancestors had relied on Narmini and how the river had been the village's lifeblood for generations. Farmers washed off the dust of their labor in her cool waters, while others came to collect water for cooking and drinking.

But one day, something changed. Narmini fell silent.

Bhavya, an eleven-year-old boy, was the first to notice. After finishing his chores every afternoon, he would walk down to the riverbank to sit by her side and listen to her peaceful song. He would close his eyes and imagine the stories she whispered, the legends she carried from the mountains to the plains. But that day, as he reached the river, he was struck by an eerie silence.

The river, which had once flowed smoothly and clearly, was now sluggish and muddy. Piles of plastic bags and bottles clogged the water, and discarded waste lined the banks. The once-vibrant fish had vanished, and the air around Narmini felt heavy, suffocating.

Bhavya's heart sank. He rushed back to the village, calling out to the elders, "Narmini is dying! She's drowning in trash!"

The villagers gathered around, but many of the older ones dismissed him. “It’s just some waste. Rivers like Narmini can take care of themselves,” said one elder. “She’s been here for centuries; she’ll clean herself up.”

But Bhavya was not convinced. He couldn’t sit back and watch the river he loved fall into ruin. With a determined look in his eyes, he rallied his friends and showed them what had happened. Together, they marched from house to house, pleading with the villagers to see the damage. Slowly, the message began to spread, and the villagers started to realize the river was in trouble.

It was not just the trash—it was the pollution, the chemicals from the fields, and the neglect of years gone by. If they didn’t act, Narmini might never recover. The village elder, who had initially been dismissive, agreed that something needed to be done. The villagers, united by Bhavya’s courage, decided to take action.

They formed teams to clean up the river. The men and women worked together to remove the larger pieces of garbage, while the children collected smaller waste from the riverbanks. Bhavya and his friends led the efforts, pulling out plastic bags, bottles, and even old tires that had been left to rot. The villagers were tired, but their determination grew with every bag of trash they pulled from the water.

It wasn’t an easy task. Days turned into weeks, and the work seemed endless. There were moments when the villagers felt discouraged, but Bhavya would not let them give up. “Narmini has given us everything. We must return the favor,” he would say, his voice filled with passion.

As the months went by, the river began to change. Slowly but surely, Narmini’s waters began to clear. The plastic that had once suffocated her was gone, and the flow started to regain its strength. The fish returned, darting through the water once more. Birds perched along the riverbanks, and the air became fresh again.

One evening, as Bhavya sat by the river, the sun casting golden light across the water, he heard it—a soft, familiar murmur. Narmini’s song was back. It was a

gentle hum, like the whispers of an old friend, telling tales of the journey she had been on. Bhavya smiled, knowing that the river had returned to her true self.

From that day on, Sundargram vowed to protect Narmini. The villagers had learned the importance of keeping the river clean, not just for themselves, but for future generations. They set up waste disposal systems, educated the children about pollution, and promised never to let their river fall silent again.

Bhavya's actions became an inspiration for the village and beyond. As he grew older, his love for nature and his desire to protect it only deepened. He went on to study environmental science, becoming a voice for rivers and ecosystems across India. Bhavya's work in conservation won him recognition, but his heart always remained in Sundargram.

The village, too, blossomed. Inspired by their success in restoring Narmini, Sundargram became a model of sustainable living. Farmers adopted eco-friendly practices, children grew up learning the value of clean water, and every festival began with a prayer of gratitude by the riverbank.

Years later, as an adult, Bhavya returned to Narmini, now flowing even more vibrantly than before. The river, carrying the stories of a new generation, sang its song—a song of hope, resilience, and the unyielding spirit of a boy who refused to let her voice fade.

2nd Place Equal Story: My River, Our River

Yuehan Yao

When we arrived in our new town, the first thing I asked was: “Daddy, where’s the river?”

Dad just smiled. He led me to a small river winding hesitantly around the outskirts of town. It wasn’t at all like the rivers I knew from back in China. This river was muddy and greyish and I couldn’t see any fish. It seemed lonely and forlorn. Our river in Suzhou was clear all the way to the bottom. I wondered what the people in town did to the river, or if it was born that way.

Now I’m in fifth grade and know that the river was neglected and polluted because people kept dumping their trash into it without giving it time to breathe. That’s one of the reasons I miss home. People cherished our river in Suzhou like a member of their family.

Today I come home from school as always. My only friend Opal is always “too busy to play”. Sometimes I wonder if she really is busy or if she just doesn’t want me around. When I started going to the town school in second grade, my classmates were all curious about life in China, so I had a lot more friends. I invited them all to my ninth birthday party, and Dad got the big round table out from the shed just for them. He cooked my favourite type of fish and served it whole because I like the head. I’m still not sure why all my friends except Opal estranged me after that. Dad said it was because of the fish head. Americans don’t eat fish heads, apparently. It’s called “cultural differences”. Whatever it is, I miss the food back in Suzhou.

I sit down at my table and start my English assignment. I’ve finished all my other assignments at school. I think that’s normal, but the boys call me a nerd.

Today’s assignment is to write a composition titled “My Home” and illustrate it. My mind is blank. I walk outside and stare at the house. Is this my home? It’s where I live, after all. It’s big and white, and the roof is black, just like the colour of our old house in Suzhou, but the architectural style is different, so it seems odd. There’s a pond too, with goldfish swimming around inside. The water is crystal clear.

I try to write about the house and waste several pieces of paper. My language seems stiff and I have to think hard for every sentence. Usually my words think for me, soaring onto the paper like swallows in the sky. I try to write it in Chinese and translate it, but

that goes even worse. Then Mom and Dad come home. I'm determined not to ask for help.

Dad cooks dinner and I inhale my food. Then Mom and I wash the dishes. I hate doing that. It always reminds me of how, in Suzhou, all we had to do was dump the leftovers and lower the dishes into the river in a basket, then retrieve them spotless the next day. Sometimes we even caught some shrimp.

I sit back at my desk. I still can't think of anything. This should be easy. My home is where I live, isn't it? How can I not know how to describe it? I idly try drawing our house on a new piece of paper as my gaze lands on the cheongsam hanging on the wall. Mom bought a plain one and then wove brilliant, intricate patterns onto it for me. The magpies look like they're about to swoop out onto my table, and the large fuchsia peony is so alive that I'm afraid it might fall right off the fabric. I can't weave like Mom, but I can draw.

I look back at the paper. It's my house, but also not. The house looks like our old house in Suzhou, but there's a pond with goldfish in the yard.

Then, like the first strike of lightning at Jingzhe, I have it.

Suzhou. Home. The river.

My river.

I snatch another piece of paper and nearly tear it in two in my haste. My pen flies and so do the memories. I see flashes of colour and hear snippets of laughter and firecrackers going off. Merchant boats sail past my vision. The market unfolds before my eyes, full of noise and bustle. I can smell the aroma of the noodles from the shop down my old street. Summer drizzles, the soft kind that only fall in Suzhou, fall in my mind. I catch these snatches, one after another. I write about my old house, with its vintage furniture and its dampness. I write about my friend Lingli's naughty cat. I write about the lady down the street who could always spare some snacks for Lingli and me. I write and I write and my pen is like Mom's silver needle, sweeping and diving, stitching colourful squares of memory together to create a magnificent tapestry of my home, with the river running straight through it, pure and reassuring. Though I live here, my heart will always live with my river.

I use up three pieces of paper for my composition. Then I do a traditional painting of our street on some rice paper, cut it out and paste it at the end. I decorate the papers with willows and swirly clouds.

My composition gets an A+ and is put up on the noticeboard. I befriend another girl like me. I'm starting a club to help our river here. I hope, in time, this river will be as dear to me as the one back home. On our graduation ceremony, I give a speech on cultural differences. I show my tapestry to everyone in the form of words that flow and rise and ebb like a river. Somebody asks me the name of my tapestry. I consider "My River", but the words morph as they come out.

"It's called 'Our River'."

3rd Place Story: River of Memories

Adveka Tripathi

The river never forgot.

Its waters bore stories—of laughter, of love, of hushed secrets under the weeping trees. Grandpa always said that if you listened hard enough, you could hear the faraway whispers of the past. I wish I had listened to him sooner.

Every summer, I sat beside him on the wooden dock, my toes hanging over the water. "This river has seen it all," he'd say, banging his cane on the planks. "If you wait long enough, it'll tell you its secrets."

This summer, though, the river was different. Quiet. Sombre. As if it knew time was slipping away.

One afternoon, he took me out in a boat. As we let the river carry us along its course, I looked at the tiny ripples on the water. I heard Grandpa sigh happily, so I looked up and saw a tiny patch of land, covered with wild dandelions.

"What's this?" I asked.

"My childhood," he said, smiling. "My mama gave birth to me here."

I sat there, imagining a woman cradling her newborn, and smiled, comforted as the river flowed on.

A gentle breeze rustled the river's edge. The water shone, carrying the scent of damp earth and blooming lilies. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the rocking rhythm send me into a haze.

"Did you ever swim here?" I asked drowsily.

Grandpa chuckled. "Swim? I lived in this river almost. My friends and I would swim from one side to the other, pretending we were explorers. Your great-uncle challenged

me to jump off that old rope swing over there when I was eight." He pointed to a weathered oak with a frayed rope swinging in the wind. "I belly-flopped into the water, almost hurt myself, and didn't stop laughing for an hour."

I smiled at the vision of a younger Grandpa, wilder than he was now.

"But things change," he whispered, his voice softer. "The river stays, but my friends are gone. The rope swing hangs by a thread. Even the trees look different."

He sighed, then smiled weakly. "But not everything has changed." He waved up with a wicked grin. I looked up to see the most beautiful cottage, straight out of a fairy tale.

"This," he said, "is where I married your grandma. We had a small wedding, but a magical one." He was lost in the memories, and so was I, in the stories he told me.

The boat drifted lazily. The river hummed around us, a soft lullaby on the breeze. I let my fingers dangle in the water, feeling its cool caress slip through my skin.

Grandpa chuckled. "I used to do the same when I was your age. I'd sit right here and dream about all the places this river could take me."

"Did you ever leave?" I asked.

"For a little while. But no matter how far I went, I always returned. The river calls you home, no matter what."

We floated past an old, huge, crooked tree leaning over the water, its twisted roots wrapped around the ground. Grandpa nodded toward it. "That's where I carved my initials when I was twenty-nine. Thought it would make me a part of the river forever."

I squinted, trying to find the letters, but time had weathered the bark, concealing his mark.

"Even memories fade away—unless someone remembers to keep them alive," Grandpa said.

A lump formed in my throat as a thought flashed into my mind, but I pushed it aside.

The river took us to an open area. It was dark now, with the stars twinkling in the sky. "Time slips by so quickly. It never waits for you," Grandpa sighed, and turned to me. "Listen, if I ever go away, spread these memories, will you? Take care of the forest for me..."

I didn't want to go there. I didn't want to hear this. If I had—

"Grandpa, could we go home?"

"Ah, of course."

He glanced at the night sky one last time before taking the oars and rowing away.

I returned to the river the next morning, sneaking out to see it again. I saw the little field, the rope swing, the crooked tree, the cottage, and the river. I always thought of Grandpa with it—never without. My best times with him were by the river. It was his life.

As I reflected on what he had attempted to say to me last evening, a gentle touch landed on the back of my shirt. It was my mum. She sat beside me, her eyes red.

"Mum, why are you crying—"

"Honey," she sniffed, "last night... last night, Grandpa passed away in his sleep."

"No! I don't believe it. It can't be true."

I barely felt as Mum placed her hand around my shoulder. Thoughts raged about in my head.

"No... it—it can't."

I thought about all the moments I had with him. I thought about what he had said that evening, what I had said, what I hadn't said, what I should have said—while my tears dropped into the river.

Highly Commended: The Girl and Her River

Mitali Ragtah

Rivers are like stories.

They all start from somewhere, and they always end. They flow in definite directions, and all we have to do is to be carried along.

But what if someone decides to swim against the current?

Once upon a time, long ago, a little girl played by a river. It was a nameless river in a nameless village in India, but she didn't think too much about it. The river was real to her, as it wove through the trees and the mud houses.

Birds flew over the stone roofs of the houses and called to one- another from the skies. The ladies laughed as they beat the clothes over the stones in the river, and the boys played as they took the cows to graze, chasing each other over the emerald grass and through the trees.

It was a brilliant cacophony of noises, and the little girl loved it.

But most of all she loved the river. She grew up along the banks, her limbs going from short and pudgy to lean and slender. She played with her friends, and later just gossiped. She drew water from the pure river, and it gurgled in response.

But somewhere, it took an unexpected bend. The girl went back home one day where her mother, a short woman with murky eyes as hidden as a swamp, told her that she was to be married. The smile slipped from her face, trickling away like water. "Married?" she said, feeling the word limp off her tongue.

"Yes, dear. You will be married to a man of a high caste. He will take care of you, and it will increase our status. He will keep you safe, and will treat you like the princess you are."

All you have to do is obey him.

"Besides, you have to get married. It's in your fate"

The smile flooded back onto the girl's face. When she stroked the red sari* her parents got her, she imagined her husband to be beautiful and wonderful, a god on earth.

On the wedding day, the girl looked lovely in rose red, adorned with jewellery, and illuminated by the fire.

Of course I will obey him, she thought as the man chosen as her husband towered over her. They both went around the sacred fire seven times, each time to denote a vow.

The river moved on, slowly as ever, though it knew that the girl would no longer remain little.

As the fire danced, her husband's eyes looked colder than she'd imagined, and doubt trickled into her head, at the place where there was no room for it.

The beautiful red sari the colour of roses now resembled the colour of blood.

She went with her husband to the house where they both would live. It was bigger than the one she grew up in, but she wasn't its princess.

And he wasn't "god on earth." He was the monster near her bed, and the monster in control of her life.

He would rage about the house, and take it out on his wife. The hand she had held at the ceremony was so hard. Her beautiful dark skin was a mixture of purple and blue, like a child mixing paints.

And yet she never looked him straight in the eye. She sat and sobbed at the brown floor, and stared at the cooking-pot, but never in his eyes.

That would take every inch of courage left in her broken soul. She couldn't defy fate. And the monster was her fate.

The girl lived as tied up as the horse and donkey they sold her for. Shades of blue and brown and purple painted her vision, darkening the edges. It would have been a masterpiece if it hadn't been so ugly.

But beauty was always ugly.

The river was beautifully ugly too, now that it had taken a dark turn. It was so beautifully ugly that different shades mingled in it, blacks, and reds the colour of wedding saris, but they all disappeared when she blinked.

It was ugly, but she could still follow it. She could still obey him... follow the path like the fish in water. They went about their day without tiring; could she too?

The cool water bit at her ankles as she knelt down. She hitched up her brown sari to protect it from the water's teeth.

Everything seemed perfectly in order, when she began to beat the clothes against the rocks, but as she peered closer through the water, a tiny black fish the colour of rebellion pushed its fins against the icy-cold current.

Silver fish and brown fish, all moving exactly as they were supposed to. Yet none of them noticed the tiny dark fish dare to defy the river. No matter how much the river tried to oppose it, it could just look on and seethe as the little black rebel wove through the water.

Something stirred in the girl's chest. She felt a ray of warmth in the cold water.

Maybe this was her story to write after all. Maybe she could escape her fate.

The girl tried to touch it, to feel another fighter, but the fish had fled from the large creature with the muddy eyes.

But that didn't matter, because she knew what to do.

Her bare feet slapped against the grass at night, creating soundless noise. Her heart was loud, but that didn't matter, because from this distance the village and the river were quiet. The girl had escaped in the dead of the night, except just then it wasn't dead to her. It was alive with possibilities.

She had done it. With the moon winking at her from behind the clouds, she had done it. Her river had made her a donkey, tied up. But she had found a different path to follow. The path of a little black fish.

The girl ran in the opposite direction of the river.

*a garment that consists of a long piece of cloth that women, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, wear draped around their bodies.

Highly Commended: The Mill On The Hill

Anaiya Modha

The village children could always be relied on to make some noise. Making noise was all they did. It was normal. They wouldn't really be 'the village children' if they didn't make any noise. Aside from them, there were the mothers cooking food for the family in large pots full of warmth in their lowly huts lined alongside each other on the streets, in a very orderly fashion. And these streets were parallel to one another making the village look very neat. A mile or so away, the fathers were busily working: they were farming and hunting and digging and building and chopping to provide the village with everything.

You would always know when the fathers were back from their day's hard work, for the village erupted in a series of squeals and yells of excitement. There would be swarms of children coming to embrace them and share whatever leftover food they had stuffed in their pockets. The fathers would lift their children high up into the air with the little energy they had left and hurry them back to their huts, ready for a good night's sleep.

On the outskirts of the village, the trees filled the ground and there, sat a girl on a tree branch listening intently to the sounds of Nature. As dusk fell the air became still, the night silent but the girl stayed on her branch: she was going nowhere. Not until she had figured out what that mysterious sound was.

She closed her eyes and listened. There it was, she could hear it clearly now. A faint trickling sound. The sound of water.

A gentle breeze glided through. Nature's orchestra at work. The birds tweeting goodnight and the faint humming of the insects returning home after their day's work. The soft whirl of wind upon grass; the footsteps of the village girl hurrying towards the woodland trees. She could sense something special there. Following the yellow

butterfly (her favourite) through the trees, she saw it. Calm and untouched for what seemed like decades. She had heard stories about this haven from her grandmother. Of the fresh gushing water and the beautiful scenery. For days on end, she would try to imagine what it actually looked like. Now, she was finally able to find an answer to her question.

Vines were tangled together; trees formed an alleyway; an alleyway full of wonder. She stared and smiled. She had found the river. Now it was her chance to explore and uncover its lost secrets once again.

The flowers glowed in the darkness beside the river bank. It stretched out separating the two sides winding through the forest. Serene and calm the water flowed gently onwards. She dipped her finger in, sending small ripples into the current. It smelt pure and fresh. On the other side of the river, she saw a fox dart through the foliage weaving in and out playfully. A squirrel spiralled up a tree as she tried to coax it towards her. A kingfisher perched on a branch gazing down at the girl, watching her as she passed by. His colourful feathers ruffled in the gentle breeze. She looked up and smiled at him. By this riverside, Nature was free to play and roam, to grow and flourish. The green bushes scattered almost carelessly around. Flowers budding all over the place. If the river was still flowing, the mill would be working too. There was silence as she wandered onward; nightfall slowly descending. A slow, groan of age. There was something further up the bank. A creaking noise, one that a broken piece of machinery would make. A rattling noise. She hurried onward following the noise. A draped curtain of ivy blocked her path. On pulling it open, she saw a wheel, large and worn slowly rotating as the current pushed forward. She reached out her hand to feel this battered wheel. As she touched the wheel, she felt its power, and the power of Nature's hidden

beauties. Then, she looked around and saw - the mill. The mill on the river. It was there. It was working.

She ran.

The sky blackened and the village silent. The moon shone clearly. Penetrating through the wall of darkness. The rays shed light on the winding path towards the village. Her bounding steps ready to show everyone what she had found. She checked behind her to make certain it was there. She heard the faint trickle of water and knocked on the hut doors.

Within seconds, the message had spread as dense crowds advanced towards the area which was once where the river lay.

The landscape murky and vague. The air stuffy and silent. Where was Nature? Gone away into hiding for the night. The village throng advanced carefully examining the landscape in search of this mystery. Some paused to gaze at the few plants glowed by their torchlights while others chose to march onward and explore. Soon the villagers stopped. Here was where the river was supposed to be, but it was not there. Confusion arose. Where could the river be?

The girl looked around. It was gone. She was sure it had been there. She had found the river.

The villagers began to get restless. They began to get angry. Desperately trying to pacify these furious swarms, she showed them her wet dress. She swore on her life she had seen it; it just - disappeared. A childish excuse. It was pointless trying to persuade them. They were angry at her for taking them on this tiresome walk to find no mill. No river.

No mill. No river.

She turned her back on the commotion and sighed.

There, perched upon a branch, was the kingfisher gazing down at her. Just how she first saw it.

Commended: The River Horse
Bobbie Bartle

Set December 1900

One stormy night in a barn close to the Thames, a mare whinnied loudly, attracting the attention of several passing cab-horses: she was foaling. An hour or so later, a young foal, just born but still a brilliant shade of pure, clean white, scrabbled around on the hay. A farmer rushed in, afraid the mare had died, but she was soon up, her foal suckling at her side. He gasped as he saw the colour of the newborn: a brilliant, luminous white- there was something wrong. The foal turned to look at him: it had red eyes!

February 1904

I was separated from my mother a while ago, though I still miss her. This morning, a man came and started prising my mouth open, rubbing my legs and opening my eyes. He gasped when he did the latter, which made me spook slightly. A few days later, a new, hard-faced man approached. When he saw my eyes he bared his teeth in a way that radiated joy-and menace- simultaneously. He asked my owner "is he Halter Trained?" I had no idea what Halter Trained meant. My owner replied "if you want him, training start Tomorrow" with another baring of his teeth, he said "I'll take him, 100, just like you asked" I had no idea what he meant but my owner moved his head up and down solemnly. The next morning he approached me with some strips of something that smelled like cows. He tried to put it on my face so I moved sharply away. He grasped a bit of my mane and pulled me back. He stuffed the thing on my face and I snorted. He started trying to pull me around on it, but I remembered my mother used to seem happy when this was put on her, so I followed obediently. He took me to another place and tied me up. Then I felt him put his coat on my back! How rude. He took it off and on again, off and on until I was comfortable with it.

March 1904

The day after all this, he came to me with the cow-strips, but this time they had a large grey bar that smelled like the lock on my stable door. He put the strips on me, then led me away, bar dangling. The next moment, before I could react, he thrust this evil thing, as thick as his finger and with long dangling, hard pieces into my mouth! He gave me an apple but I did not know how to eat it with this on! He then proceeded to put some

massive cow-strap on my neck, which was very heavy, he then crisscrossed my body with the things! He put squares of cow-strip on the sides of the ones on my face, so I could only see forwards. This annoyed me, especially when he picked up the long strips leading from my mouth to all the way behind me, then got the brushing-man to pull the cow-strip that was attached to the thing with no metal, which I shall call the Soft One, and tied it to this one, deemed the Hard Thing. He lead me out, but suddenly my longest strips, the Tight Ones, were pulled sharply, causing me to jerk my head back. I stopped, and got pats and an apple. This was ok, but then, instead of me being lead forward, the Tight Ones came down on my back with an almighty crash, causing me to pick up a brisk trot. However a moment later they were gently tightened, causing me to slow to a quick walk. He used these later to turn me, and soon the brush-man left. One day, I felt a new cow-strip, which I shall call Cow, for short, was placed on me. It went from the back of my head to the middle of my back, and was tightened so that my head was held in a very uncomfortable position.

July 1904

(this was done over the course of a Many-Day) the man came and took me! He pulled me away from all I had ever known, after giving my owner some metal circles, and took me to a large, curved thing sitting on water, with people inside who gasped upon seeing me. I noticed, ahead of me, a horse with a similar physique to me being pulled away by the Loud Ones. I was tied to this great curved object, which I shall call Water One, and my Tight Ones shook, making me go forward. This was very heavy, especially with my head held so unusually high, and what made it wierder was the Man walking next to me holding a stick with a piece of Cow on it. Whenever I stopped or slowed down, or even for no reason sometimes, he flicked the stick, making the Cow fly at me, which, when it hit me on my back, stomach or neck, stung with a dull, lasting pain, causing me to hurry up a bit.

January 1906

One day, there was a new man next to me, who used the Cow-Stick far more often, and harder. I had been pulling this for a long time now, and could hardly remember Home. But this was the last straw. I wasn't letting him tell me what to do. I stood still, bracing myself for his reaction. He slapped my back hard, but I stood. Realising this wouldn't work, he strode forward, grabbing my Bar and dragging me with it. I still didn't

move and another man came and said “it’s useless. Take him to Jones” I was confused as to why they were letting me go, and when I was walked away, I noticed something I had been missing: a barn! Upon entry, I noticed that it was poorly lit, the stalls far from big enough for the horses there: all of them looked the same as me, except for their black eyes, and the fact they didn’t have white coats. I was put in one of these and immediately inquired with my neighbour: ‘hello, what is this?’ He snorted at me and replied: ‘the place where work-horses come to be used up if we refuse our job on the canal.’ I asked what the Canal was and he replied that the canal is what the Curved thing, or Boat as he called it, floated on. I noticed that, from what I could see, we were all still covered in Cow, or ‘Tack’. My new neighbour was called Cheif, but here he was known as ‘007’. He said that, In time, I would fade to little more than a ‘number’ too.

April 1907

I was taken out along with Cheif, and tied to a large thing with wheels, or ‘Cart’. This had lumps of heavy brown blocks, and we were made to pull it. I noticed that I was taking a lot of the weight, and Cheif was faltering. A loud Ca-nap! Rang out as he was hit on the shoulder by the new man’s Cow Stick. I neighed loudly at the man, but he got down, tightened my newest cow strip, the neck to back one. When we got where we were going, we were both panting and shaking in the cold. A new man came to my head and started stroking me gently with his calm hands. He said “is he for sale? And what about the other one?” The man who controlled us said “yes, for let’s say...50?” The man stroking me moved his head up and down, and we were untied and lead into the comfortable new barn. We were put to work the next day, carting anyone who wished to sit on us up and down the canal. Would I ever be free of this infernal water? I hoped so.

December 1910

A lot of Many-Days later, Cheif left, and I was returned to the Canal to pull the boat. The men were much nicer now and I worked there for years, until one day, my legs buckled from underneath me and I fell. My ‘bit’ was pulled and I stood upright, before falling again. A man came and examined me carefully. “Tetanus” he said sharply, before checking my ‘bit’ “of course, a rusty bit” he said scornfully. He lead me away slowly, and when I tried to neigh to him for his kindness, I noticed that my jaw was stiff

and felt tight. When we got to the Man's home, a weird-smelling, large building, I was put in a clean, warm stable and left momentarily until he came back with something small. He patted my neck hard until I couldn't feel that bit anymore. When the feeling came back, a tiny little bit of my neck stung. Soon after I had arrived, about a Day, my legs stopped moving and they tied a large thing around me and secured that to the top of my stable so I was dangling by a piece of pink stuff.

July 1912

Every day he patted my neck and I felt a bit of pain, and over a Many-Day, I started losing movement in more places, until he put a line in my mouth and squirted paste through it. A few Many-Days later, I was able to give a gentle snort, it got better from there until another horse was brought in: a beautiful, old-looking yet elegant mare was brought in. Her eyes lit up and she neighed at me. I stood looking at her, confused entirely. Until she threw up her head. I saw it- the white patch between her head's bottom and her neck's top. Mother! I neighed back and was lead to her, where we greeted each other. After a while, her neck was patted hard, like mine, but they stuck something small in her neck, squeezing it. She slowly fell to the ground, and I went and layed with her. She neighed weakly, until she just...stopped. The light had left her eyes and she simply wasn't there anymore. I was very sad and annoyed by the fact I had to go back to the Boat now. I remembered the last words my mother said to me: "I love you, son. Always be kind to other horses, I'll see you soon." These were the same words she'd said to me when we were separated.

June 1920

I lived the rest of my life pulling the barge, until the last day I remember: I tripped on my ropes, and flipped into the river. I had been trotting and the Boat surged forward, it went black and suddenly I was galloping with my mother, overjoyed, and even more so when Chief joined us! Were still there, me, mum and Chief. We play all day but pull the Moon at night. That's ok now: we never get tired anymore, or hungry: we eat and drink for the pure joy of it! Nothing ever hurts, and we live happily now..,

The end (Story ends 1920)

Glossary

Cow-strip: leather.

Bar: bit.

Soft one: halter

Tight ones: reins

Hard one: bridle

Crisscrossed cowstrips: driving harness.

When his neck gets numbed: injections.

Many-day: week.

Cow-stick: whip

Baring teeth: smiling

Massive cow strap: driving collar

Squares of cow strip: blinkers

Loud ones: mules/donkeys

Ca-nap: sound a whip makes

Curved thing: boat

Heavy brown blocks: brick

Commended: Riverside Rivalry

Musya Cheruff

It was a beautiful summer morning down by the river. The sun was shining and the blue sky reflected on the water.

There was a gentle and refreshing breeze and all was quiet and tranquil, except for the honking of the geese in the distance.

In this serene surrounding sat a group of juvenile painters, calmly creating their masterpieces.

"What are you guys painting?" asked Jo. "I'm painting the river." "What about you?" she asked Daisy.

"The swan." answered Daisy.

Suddenly, out of the blue, William and his cycling friends turned the corner, shattering the peace and quiet with the noisy squeal of brakes. Before they knew it, Jo's easel with her lovely painting was gently floating downstream.

William, who had knocked the painting over, looked unconcerned and just rode off, followed by his sniggering friends.

Jo was fuming with rage. She could not stop herself from shouting: "Cowards!"

They did not react, they did not answer back, they didn't even care.

Her blood was boiling.

The rest of the group stood there gaping. They had never seen Jo so angry. Then, under her gaze they turned back to painting, as if nothing had happened.

Her anger quickly turned to dismay until she heard a quiet voice in her ear. It was Daisy, she had an idea.

"Telling mum is silly." Jo said, "Let's go teach them a lesson"

Daisy shook her head.

Half an hour later, Jo and Daisy cycled silently. Jo's anger was slowly changing into determination. Her feet were pedalling furiously. Her heart was drumming loudly in her chest as her whole being filled with resolve. She was determined to get back at them and teach them a lesson. However determined she was, Jo still did not know what she would do when they arrived at their rivals den.

As they neared William's riverside hideout, they felt something was amiss. It was too quiet. The den was normally alive with laughter and shouts but now all that could be heard was the gentle gurgling of the river.

The peace was shattered, abruptly, as a gang of boys jumped out of the bushes and flew straight towards Jo. Daisy took a step back, as Jo took a step forward. Then a scuffle began: hands and legs were flailing, voices were raised, people were being pushed and shoved to the ground. Chaos ensued!

Suddenly, with a loud splash, silence descended and all eyes turned towards the river. Jo gasped - it was Daisy!

She wanted to run to save her, but her legs were stuck to the ground. She tried to scream but her voice did not work. She turned around, she did not want to watch but something within her *made* her turn around.

Two drenched bodies lay on the riverbank. One of the bodies was Daisy's but it was only as she got closer that she realised who the other person was...

"William! Thank you!" Jo shouted as she ran over to hug Daisy.

He stood up and put his hand forward "forgiven and forgotten?"

Jo hesitated. A few tense seconds passed, then Jo Stretched out her arm and said, "forgiven and forgotten."

They both knew that it was not 'happily ever after,' but a silent truce had been made. So, for now, peace would prevail between their two groups.

The next day, it was another beautiful summer morning. As beautiful as the previous one. Jo and Daisy strolled up and down the riverside path, taking in the lovely scenery. All was calm. The sky was blue, there was a slight breeze and the sound of honking geese in the distance. Everything *seemed* perfect but Jo and Daisy knew the trauma of the day before.

Commended: Flowing Through Time

Trisha Gangolli

Rivers are the roads of the forest; they guide people to their destination whilst curving gently round the trees. A ribbon of time, endlessly weaving its way through the city of nature. The subtle, jewel-blue sweep of a painter's brush merrily dances through the forest. Like a river of liquid silver, it's so delicate one touch and it'll come crashing down. Melody enchanting my ears as it harmonizes with the animals and dances with the trees. Butterflies flutter over it lazily, their wings like whispers in the wind.

Crisp scarlet leaves flutter across the forest only to gently land on the ice-cold water. Reds and golds danced across the forest like a party of fire. The trees transform into a vibrant tapestry of gold, amber, and crimson leaves. Crisp air is filled with the earthy scent of decaying foliage. Sunlight filters through the thinning canopy, casting shadows on the forest floor, now blanketed with fallen leaves that crunch underfoot. Squirrels scurry about, collecting acorns, whilst birds prepare for their journey south.

Early morning fog lingers, creating a mystical atmosphere, it swirls around the forest like a ballet dancer twirling on the stage. The river glimmers under the sun, reflecting the brilliant colours of the foliage above. Occasionally, a gentle current can be heard, flowing smoothly over polished stones. The banks, which were dotted with mushrooms, and wildlife preparing for winter, add to the serene scene. As the sun sets, the river is bathed in a warm glow, casting shadows and creating a peaceful atmosphere .

As time goes by the forest becomes a peaceful shelter, blanketed in a thick layer of glistening snow. Tall evergreen trees stand majestically, their branches decorated with frost and delicate icicles that catch the light. The air is crisp, fresh and filled with the quiet essence of a snowy landscape. Animal tracks weave through the bushes, uncovering life beneath the serene surface. A gentle breeze stirs the branches, causing snowflakes to flutter softly to the ground - a moment of pure tranquillity.

As the water flows, it cuts through the silent landscape, revealing patches of dark, flowing currents amongst the ice. The ice crashes into itself as if all its anger coming out in waves. With no wildlife to be seen the forest is eerily quiet, the cold air casts a gentle mist over the water, little drops forming on the river's frozen surface. I drag my hand over the ice only to feel the cold oozing into my skin, numbing me to the bone.

Sparkling in the sunlight the river looked serene and calm, but the frostiness sent shivers down my spine.

As the chilly air becomes warmer, and the ice begins to melt, lush pastel flowers bloom across the forest. Awakening after its long nap, nature is displaying its vibrant colours to the animals stretching. Sweet fragrances fill the air with a confetti of wildflowers like daisy's, violets, lavenders and more. Wildflowers bloom in bright colours, creating a mosaic among the undergrowth whilst butterflies flutter and bees buzz, pollinating the blossoms below.

The river awakens from its slumber, warm sunlight shimmering off its cooling embrace. The air carries the earthy scent of damp soil and blooming flowers. Its surface sparkling like scattered diamonds with water rushing in eagerly whilst hopping over smooth stones. As days warm up, the forest transforms into a playground for all, offering shelter and food. Animals leap boldly into the cooling river sending ripples dancing across the surface. Birds fill the air with their melodies, celebrating the new season, while squirrels chatter as they scamper up trees. As the sun sets and the pink, orange hues dance across the forest, the river turns into a liquid mirror reflecting the beauty of dusk.

Becoming hotter and hotter as time goes by the river glistens like silver under the sun, while the banks are alive with wildflowers and lush greenery. The sun glares into my eyes as I stroll along the edge of the bank. The heat brings a sense of laziness, with sunlight shining on the ground through the trees. I dip my toes into the cool water, (refreshing against the sun's heat) whilst laughter and splashing from children nearby fills the air with joy. I closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the sun mingle with the coolness of the river. As the sun begins to set, fireflies flicker to life giving the forest a magical glow.

With one last look, I turned and walked away, the sound of the water flowing behind me, a gentle promise that life, much like the river, always finds its way home.

Poetry Category

1st Place Poem: I Long For The Teeth of Lions

Esme Blue

Sun-yielding, gilt-yellow-tongued petals, tapering,
drip liquid buttery light, becoming miniature suns
in themselves – gifting gold-plated
memories of my not-yet-forgotten summery playfulness.

Thriving in wild hopes of a gilded wilderness,
summer suns send wish-blown seeds scattering on
chance breezes, whilst autumnal suns tint the tips of golden
beech leaves, as these soft, sunburst, starry heads
shimmer in random undulations. I imagine

deepening, into the deepest parts of wintery ices, where hard
darkness shadows the creeping icy waters, tameless crowns of
feathery clockhands floating beneath the thunder of stormwinds.

Beside star-sparkling gleams of riverglint
where shadowy trout dart in and out,
out and in of the glassy-clear streams' caverns,
and on the banks, in mossy glades, starry with little
primroses, the little stars of the dandelions silhouette
the kingfishers' turquoises. I see

those spectral birds, whose sparks of blue
glow in sapphired and tigerseyed feathers,
dive into the clearlistening pure river here.

Haloed in lions teeth, ruffed in saw-toothed edges
of emerald greens, dents-de-lion, teeth of the lion, wait.
Nom de guerre! Teeth of the lion. *Dens leonis*.

Shooting down roots, tough as iron, adroit yet delicate
as any urgent morning breeze, the dandelion soil, enriched,

enriching, allows roots to slip further down through the muddled
and shattered earth to the golden core gently. I think ...

Dandelion - alias of all brightness above – river borne.

2nd Place Poem: By The River
Abigail Edwards

The river at the edge of the park
Down at the bottom of the hill
We loved to visit, in the dark
While all the world was quiet and still

I ran my hands through currents cold
And traced sweet dewdrops through your hair
You wove your heart through painted stones
Left artworks to dry in summer air

And as I sit, now all alone
The skylark's call still rings so shrill
I weep upon these faded stones
Down, by your grave, at the bottom of the hill.

3rd Place Poem: The Story of The River Thames

Freddie Seymour

For many years, since the start of time,
I have moved through London town
Some happy times but also sad
Even saw London Town burn down

Now, I take you back so many years
30 million when I was ice,
A tributary to the river Rhine
Who knew then of my sacrifice

The population grew and grew
From tiny fort to city
The amount of waste expanded
Day to day, was such a pity

The year was 1600
And all I was was gone
I carried the dirt the grime the disease
But I managed to travel on

As time went on new transport came
And my waters started to run clear
A hopeful time for me at last
Getting cleaner and cleaner each year

Now I'm growing, day by day
Rising taller every year
I worry I may outgrow the banks
How terribly I fear

For if I do rise up and flood
The city will be no more

Destruction and death will come to all
Impossible to restore

Highly Commended: Veins of The Earth
Raya Mohammad Ali

The river bends where the land forgets,
A silver thread cutting through dust and stone.
I stand here, watching it ripple,
holding its secrets, carrying everything it touches,
without asking.

You cross the bridge, and the sound of water
fills the silence, steady and constant.
A paper boat drifts by, its edges worn,
like a letter left too long in the rain,
its words blurred, its story slipping away.

We pass a man by the shore,
his stick stirring the water,
not waiting for it to answer.
The river moves like an old song,
repeating, never quite the same,
untouched by time, unaffected by us.

There's a line between here and there,
a place the river can never reach.
The sun sets, casting its colours

across the water, as the horizon
fades, as if it were never there.

And in the distance,
the river continues,
unconcerned with who watches,
or what is left behind.

END.

Highly Commended: The Rapids

Theo Holder

Life moves quickly, like the rush of a current,
in the tumbling rapids, and the swell and the torrent.
The hustle, the bustle that we have created,
it shapes us and makes us like a river of fate.
No time to stop, no time to heal.
We thrash and splash till suddenly it's still.

However just once, or twice, it will calm,
shimmering brightly, it stands.
When it rests at the edge of the shore in the sand
and it sits there,
like a dream in the palm of your hand.

You think it's all fine till suddenly it's not,
you're crashing over the gushing white waterfall drop.
There is no escape from the current we made
we're stuck in this trap, the river of fate.

The banks, seem close but are ever so far,
wherever we flow, wherever we are.
We struggle and scratch and try to be free,
but no one gets past a life to the sea.

The current, it pushes, moves, and it twists,
taking us with it, the river Styx.
We see no end till it's far too near
and we hurry and scurry away with the fear.
But no one leaves this river we made,
No one thinks differently,
no one can be swayed.

We made these problems, we must fix them ourselves
but the destruction and greed, they're pulling us down.
It's no use to scramble and try to be free
because we are the problem, the problem is we.

Commended: The Letter I'll Never Send
Vihaan Singh

Beneath the moon's soft, silver gaze,
The river winds through ancient ways,
Its water speaks in gentle song,
A tale of where the earth belongs.

Each ripple carries stories old,
Of mountains high and valleys bold,
Of skies that weep, of stars that shine,
In currents deep, both yours and mine.

It winds through forests, wide and green,
A path where all the world is seen.
It kisses shores, then drifts away,
To seek the sun at break of day.

The river hums in rhythm true,
A dance of life, both old and new.
Its whispers speak of time's embrace,
Of past and future, a boundless grace.

With every turn, with every bend,
The river journeys, without end.
It holds the secret, wild and free,
Of nature's timeless unity.

Commended: Our Chalk Rivers

Rowan Sumpter

What do you think of when I say chalk?
Perhaps a lump of white stuff you scrape across a board,
What do you think of when I say river?
Perhaps a fast flowing ever going long water sliver,
Had you ever considered the two might go together?
It seems hard,
They're so different,
It's crazy, but it's true,
So unlikely, whoever knew,
But when you merge the two you get a natural phenomenon,
A crystal-clear, running river that goes on and on,
You think, what could possibly go wrong?
With this glassy, diamond river I speak so highly of,
This chalk river.
It holds species varying from frog to faerie,
But those creatures are in danger,
Let me tell you something scary,
We're losing them.
Our chalk rivers are slipping and sliding and running away,
We have around two hundred on this present day,
But that can change,
They can and will die,
Run dry.
Climate change, no, we,
Are stopping the rain and snow,
Halting the river flow,
Drying up this endearing, alluring, striking, sapphire glow!
Or we could tip the scales,
We can make change!
And save our chalk rivers.

Commended: River

Molly Thomas

Fresh .Lovely. New

Spring spreads across the woods as baby flowers bloom
Nestled into the woodland, a small stream begins to flow
Yawning ripples, sparkling blue, spreading joy as it grows
Three animals call the stream friend its ripples lap the bank like honey
Enjoying the company of the fox, the mouse and the bunny

Summer. The young river retreats from the heat
The brutal dry waves stealing clear water like a thief
The young animals have nothing to drink
The thought of their lost friend makes their heart sink
They sit out alone, just by their house
The fox , the bunny and the mouse.

Autum. Striking beauty. Deep warm leaves
Float and sway from the trees
A stout diamond river flows; no longer a stream
It has grown with the earth where its blue waves gleam
Its friends are older but wiser, sitting by the bank
Watching as the yawning water made their worries and fears sink

Winter. cold and bitter. The river is old, paving a lazy path
Frozen over and solid, the ice a cozy scarf
The iridescent waves stuck in time; the hazy blue coats its body
The animals old now, grey lining their fur
Their life with the river a seasonal blur

The river turns dark, a long silky stream
The bones and ashes inside it gleam
The animals join hand in hand, putting biology aside
Remembering better times, they take their stride

Old and crippled they smile as they leave life's docks

The mouse, the bunny, the fox...

Commended: The Salmon's Exhibition
Abdul-Wahaab Khan

A salmon swam against the tide,
As the river shoved it back.
Relentlessly, the salmon went up again,
The mischievous current veering its track.

Eagles, sharks, and looming threats,
The salmon had seen them all.
Yet onward it fought, its journey set,
Unaware of fate's cruel call.

It paused before a looming shadow,
A hostile six foot bear,
The river roared as the salmon leapt,
The beast giving it a hard stare.

The bear drooled at the sight of its prey,
A maw ready for lunch.
The salmon fell into the abyss of its fate,
All that was heard next was a crunch.

The bear relaxed as he ate his meal,
As the salmon's arduous journey was done.
But as the predator looked back at the stream,
His servant, the river, sent him another dream.

The salmon's struggle, the bear's feast,
Mere ripples in the river's endless flow.
For in its depths lie voices hushed,
The past which we will never know.

Under the waves, the river sings,
A silent keeper of tales untold.

Its currents whisper of lives now passed,
Their stories lost in the cold.

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

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