



Creative Writing 2020-2021

An anthology by our
creative writing groups

LEARNING FOR LIFE & WORK
LET'S DO IT!

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A STEP UP by Denise G.

Roll up ladies, in this box,
A pair of pretty, pointed props.
Designed to take you to new heights,
and elongate those shapely thighs.
Relinquish diets and exercise.
Rapid results at half the price.
With built in powers to entrance
all men with your own devils dance.
Guaranteed to improve posture,
you'll teeter on twin peaks of torture.
Ride the pain and feel the bite.
Step up, feel these lethal spikes.
Embrace the crush of bone on bone
with promises to firm and tone.
Complete with stylish, silvers zippers.
Roll up, step into Satan's slippers.

A Year in The Outside Wood

A children's story by Tracey R.

March

"Mr Willow, Mr Willow, it's me Sylvie Blue Tit again, can you hear me.....can you help me?" said a little voice that Mr Willow remembered.

"Of course, little one, how can I forget you? What can I help you with?"

"Mr Willow, my ma said that come spring there would be berries aplenty to feed me up and my own little ones"

"Ah, little one, your ma was right, there will be berries and fruit too but Sadly Rain has been crying for the whole of March and the berries have stayed asleep."

"Oh, Mr Willow, what will I do. I haven't eaten for 2 days now and I no longer have the strength to fly".

"Do not worry my pretty Sylvie, just look at my pantry, I have catkins you can munch on and they are full of all sorts of goodness that will provide you with nourishment and strength until the berries and fruit wake up."

"What are these catkins you talk of?"

"Look closely amongst my leaves Sylvie and you will see little white ponies' tails hanging down, these are my fruit, you may eat these and make your body plump and your feathers bright and colourful.

And with that, Sylvie tucked in to the catkins with relish.

"Don't forget little one, drop by whenever you are a bit peckish", encouraged Wise Willow as she took flight again.

July

"Is that you down below, little Sylvie", asked Wise Willow, "Have you come to visit?"

"I am so thirsty in this sun drench place Mr Willow, all the streams have dried up this summer and I can find no place to quench my thirst, I don't know what to do"

"All the animals are suffering the same and even my roots have spread out as far as they reach but can find no moisture".

"So how do you manage Mr Willow"?

"Ah Sylvie, I am well built by Mother Nature", answered Mr Willow, "Look up and you will see that my leaves point up at the tip so can form a kind of cup to capture the early morning dew. I use this to cool me down and absorb all that I can drink."

"You are lucky but what can I do, my friend?"

"Well come back to see me as dawn breaks and you too can drink from my little reservoirs" answered the wise one.

"I'll be here as soon as I wake Mr Willow", answered Sylvie feeling her worry disappear. And with that Sylvie took flight. And come morning, not just Sylvie but also her young ones arrived promptly at 4am calling, "Mr Willow, Mr Willow we are here".

"And who is this calling on me on this beautiful morning, I see not just Little Sylvie but three other little ones".

"This is my family, Mr Willow, I have three daughters and we have come to drink the dew", answered Sylvie, "Introduce yourselves to our friend Mr Wise Willow girls".

"I am Nancy", said the largest chick, "and I am Beauty", spoke up the chick blessed with the most colourful array of feathers, "and I am Tiny" whispered the smallest and most delicate of the daughters, "I am the smallest of us three".

"I see," answered Mr Willow, "Welcome one and all, now place yourself on a branch and I will tilt the branch above each of you so you can capture each leaf on that branch and pour the moisture in to your mouths".

"Thank you, Mr Willow", chorused the three daughters as Sylvie looked proudly on.

All took their fill and singing their songs took flight.

October

Dylan, the wise willow tree plaited her branches to form a protective umbrella against the howling wind and ferocious rain of autume.

The wind was chuckling, deciding which of her tricks she could use, her breath undressing the deciduous trees of their summer clothing and hovering the paths of The Outside Wood.

All the critters rushed to secure a safe place to hide but Sylvie the tiny blue tit shivered with her feathers wet and belly hungry. The wind was too fierce and angry and laughed as for Sylvie struggled to fly. Her claws became entangled in the bracken in the undergrowth and she started to cry.

"Now, what's to do, little one?" as he bent to encase Sylvie under his hanging branches.

She shivered and stuttered, "I'm s-s-so cold"

"Rest assured I will warm you up " said Wise Willow as he bent forward and cupped a leaf to scoop Sylvie in to a knarl in his trunk, where she burrowed inside as Wise Willow packed moss inside the hollow to warm her up. "Sleep and when you wake this storm will be over.

And as the Wise Willow foretold, the weather changed to sunshine when he lifted her down to start the next day. Lucky little Sylvie!

January

Winter is the darkest time, short days and long nights with black rain filled clouds looming up above. In The Outside Wood. Mr Willow lifted his branches up and asked,

"What's that noise little one, your cheerful song is now sad and I see tears in your eyes, tell me what's wrong".

"I'm scared friend Willow, my little one is lost, I have searched and called and cannot find her and now it is so dark I fear she is lost forever".

"You mean Tiny"? questioned The Willow.

"Yes, my smallest chick, she never usually leaves my side, she's not confident you see, being so small as she was the runt of my litter".

"Let me see if I can call on help from my woodland friends", said Wise Willow and with that he shook his branches and rustled his leaves to make the sound of speech that was heard and answered by the trees in the wood.

"I've not seen her", called out Tall Cyprus.

Big Oak joined in with, "Nor me".

And so it went on until the prickly Holly Bush, 'She's here Wise Willow, amongst my leaves, hiding out of sight".

"Go Sylvie, Holly is in Farmer Joe's field, you know the one, just up from here" urged Wise Willow to Sylvie.

And with that she flew as fast as an arrow to find her chick.

Next morning, Wise Willow awoke to the beautiful song of the blue tit and Sylvie asked, "You have helped me so much Mr Wise Willow, "Is there any help that you need?"

Willow thought and answered, "I could do with some help removing some of the moss that is suffocating my trunk, if that is possible, little Sylvie"

"My pleasure Mr Willow" said Sylvie and sang her song long and loud to call upon her friends to come to help.

The Wise Willow found his trunk free to breathe again and Sylvie and her friends feasting on the moss.

Abandonment by Julie W.

It was relative luxury
to metal cage from plastic bags.
Food and warmth, the basic needs,
with bedding thin and threadbare rags.
You bounced in shining faced and smiling,
happy family, loving, kind.
Oohed and cooed enraptured noises,
everything I'd hoped to find.
Delighted with my glossy softness,
black silk fur and pink tipped tongue.
"Can we hold him?", you almost whispered,
"I'm sure he's going to be the one".
Softly, gently you all caressed me,
you breathed me in as I smelled you.
Sharing glances, eyes contacting,
agreeing what you want to do.
You took me home. I fell in love.
My perfect life was full of hope
then Covid eased and life restarted,
you claimed you could no longer cope.
That's why I'm here, abandoned, lonely.
No longer cute, a bedraggled wreck,
Raw weals that weep with pus and blood
where you tied the rope around my neck.
I thought you loved me as I loved you
but now I know that cannot be
as you wouldn't have left me there to die
Fastened to an ancient tree.
Nearly dead from thirst and hunger,
I won't forget the dreadful pain
And more than that I hate all people
I'll never trust or love again.

An inanimate object by Julie W.

Softened snail like trails of gelatinous gunge
Slowly descends the smooth and tapered length,
Emitting odours of fruit and festive flora
Time expanding the pungent strength.

Hope held high in dreaded darkness,
Flickering flame expels the fear.
Aroma influencing mood and motivation,
A visual calm, no sound to hear.

Black sands by Asha R.

The music was blaring, the floor jumping the crowd bouncing in ecstasy, the lazer lights in blue, red, green, turquoise, and yellow bounced off the sea of sweaty bodies in front of me. Sandy expertly lined up the next record to drop it in after this tune. One of her personal favourites, 'God's great dance floor'. She loved being the resident dj in this place. She was stood at the alter, the crowd her congregation all as high as kites on God's pure joy. The Holy Spirit was moving. Their joy was infectious and Sandy was loving every moment. Music had saved her. She reached for her water and swigged a big gulp. It sure was hot work but she loved it.

It was a massive change from her previous BC life. She would have been dancing her heart out in a converted church to dance music and she may have been sipping water but only because she was off her face on ecstasy. Her past life made her shudder now and it had taken time but through prayer and repentance she knew she was forgiven. Who would have thought that God would use evil and turn it around to do good. It's true he is a truly compassionate and loving God and like the shepherd will always come after the one sheep who has lost her way.

Sandy remembered those confirmation classes she had tagged onto with her step mum when she was 18. She just saw it as a chance to get out the house, learn a bit about religion, spend some time with Isabelle, meet some new people. In the last class the vicar was talking about christenings and confirmation and Sandy gulped, 'erm that's not what I signed up for', she thought slightly panicked but there didn't seem to be any turning back from this point without causing a hoo har and she never did like conflict. In her usual way she forced the lump down and adjusted her mind to accepting the situation. 'What harm can it do?', she thought convincingly, 'I'll just go through with it', 'I'll get presents, a church service', it'll be cool.

At that moment of commitment to God in those lost moments of her 18th year, is where Sandy believed it all started. Well for today anyway. Sandy wasn't sure if that was the final answer but for now that explained why God had been so good to her, how she'd ended up a Christian again

Her life may not all be in order but this part was perfect and it had been her saving grace. She was lucky she was here, here at all. Things could have been very different.

She'd even managed to go back to the place. The place on the beach where she had been saved by a complete stranger. Her friend Sasha said it was providence, God's great plan, that she had been praying but God was already there saving her in the form of a stranger, like the good samaritan.

It was good to go back. It was kind of metaphorical really, we, being me and Victor, my 5 year Spanish boyfriend, couldn't get parking at the actual beach in Black Rock sands so we ended up driving to the next beach along, but it meant that as we strolled along the beach and set up the picnic, Black sands was behind us and I was looking forward. My eyes are on Him. God had saved me.

China Plate by Natalie L.

Old and naked,

the china plate is waiting.

Translucent hands-

cartilage and elemental bone;

ham thin, tracing paper skin-

feebly etched.

You tremble under the weight

of saccharine lemon cake-

a clock; 4 uneven quarters, *hesitantly cut.*

Cautiously, you hand me the

'quarter to' slice, a fat slob of heat and cheap butter,

margarine, maybe, from the co-op. Knowing you.

You pass me the bigger piece:

'You need it more than me/ besides I need to keep my figure/ you never know who I might meet.'

And then together, *we laugh.*

I don't laugh because it's funny. I laugh because it is kind.

I laugh because your laugh will be all that's left behind.

Crumbs will be scraped into bins and tossed,

china plates wiped and then knowingly washed,

packed into boxes then charity shops.

So many infinite things so eternally lost.

But you you you you. Oh wonderful you.

Oh marvellous, miraculous you.

You are laughing at your own expense.

I never knew how you did this, looked death inside his face.

But I had youth on my side. I still had the luxury of fearing death. Back then, I was convinced that:

NO! I would not go quietly into the darkened night- I'd hustle, I'd scrap, I'd bloody well fight! *Just as I had done my whole damn life!*

But how little did I know then. *How so very little did I know.*

And, when- my heart, it is time that I must go,

I will not indeed go quietly, I will be

Laughing.

Chortling.

Clapping.

Forget-me-nots pinned into threadbare hair,

Skin snowy with talc and the cleanest country air,

I want sugar round my mouth

I want cake inside my face,

I want shaky aging hands,

I want tiny china plates,

Old and naked-

Waiting.

Customer Service!! by Tracey R.

Jed took his coffee in to the coffee to enjoy the early morning sun.

"Coo-ee" said a frail voice.

Oh no, not noisy Phillamena, Jed groan inwardly and said out loud "How nice to see you this morning" whilst his inner voice echoed, '**as I do every bloody morning!!**'

"And I've a little gift for you, just hang on a minute" and she stumbled inside on arthritic hips and Jed thought what now..... the remains of her half eaten Sheppard's Pie and over ripe banana or more stale custard creams!

He heard her steps shuffling painfully back outside, badly fitting slippers flopping off her feet, "Some of my tasty polenta and cabbage cake, a little experiment which I made last Tuesday, Father Michael said he really enjoyed it, you might like it with your coffee"

'*Not bloody likely*' thought Jed, and gainfully said, "I take it inside right now and get a fresh cup" and '*get away from you before you start on one of your lengthy stories*' he thought as he squashed to cake between his palms in disgust.

"Let me know what you think", requested Willamena hopefully.

He chucked what were now crumbs inside a piece of kitchen towel on to his worktable and went to refill his coffee.

Of for God's sake, that just about makes my day "get out of here you mangy piece of vermin" and he tried to shoo the pigeon from his desk where he was eating the cake back out of the French window.

Jed settled himself before his chessboard and tried to slow his breathing, his painting would just have to wait until he calmed down and his game would do trick.

'*What's gone on here?*' he questioned aloud as he looked at what was now checkmate on the board. Peering out of the window he saw the pigeon looking back at him sage and proud.

He threw the remains of the polenta and cabbage cake at the pigeon whilst saying, "Well I wonder if?????"..... "They did carry messages in the was didn't they?????" and he sat down to plan a training plan for a pigeon to partner him at chess and from then a blog and possible to enter championships and appear on TV.

I'll get Phillamena to bake some more of that polenta and cabbage cake as an incentive and reward for Pesky the Pigeon, as he was now called.

How has it come to this? by Patricia G.

This cell is so restrictive: I have paced its length and breadth time and again over the last few days.

I am used to organising others but when it comes to me, that is a different story. For years I was personal assistant to my father, ensuring he met with the right people in the business world and kept up his profile in the public eye for the right reasons. I reached a secure place in life- I had connections with celebrities and even royalty- Prince Andrew amongst them. I was able to live a lifestyle few could afford- I loved collecting art and gazing on masterpieces in The Louvre, when I visited my mother.

Yes, Jeffrey had been a complete surprise along with his connoisseur's eye; it was refreshing to meet someone so aligned to me. I was naturally attracted to his charm and charisma; I bathed in the love and attention he offered me. Saint Tropez was a wonderful summer and we draped ourselves around the smart set of The Cote d'Azur. I got a deep colour from idling on the beaches. Ah, those parties we attended with lovely people and so many bright young things with talent and skills, wanting to meet others. It seemed such an idyllic way of life and I gravitated to Jeffrey. Knowing how the papers gossiped, Jeffrey and I got engaged and this made my role of personal assistant so much easier. The public had no inkling of how layered our life together was. Being a socialite means weaving your way in and out of friends' lives and facilitating introductions where they are sought. It requires that you constantly attend parties and gatherings, talking and mingling. Of course, there is a responsibility to host parties yourself, and gauge friends compatibility. Being a successful socialite involves planning and psychology; it takes a special kind of person.

In the Name of Science. by Julie W.

Walking through the shopping mall Leah swung the sheet of jet black hair around her shoulders as she knew that her dark exotic looks drew attention. It did nothing to detract from the pretty face she was also fortunate to have. She had been aware of her looks since hitting the teen years and had been tempted to exploit it and accept at least the odd invitation for a date but her mothers piety and devotion to the church was enough to put a leash on her natural instincts of wanting to spread her wings.

Leah only had less than a year left at high school before going to university. She was going to study forensic science, not just an interest to her but a passion. Her Mum said everyone on the television that did it for a job was in danger of being murdered, but she wouldn't stop her and would pray for her. Perhaps when she started uni she could have some fun with people that were not aware of her mothers devotion to their local church with her flower arranging and altar polishing, that had drawn such sarcastic comments from some of the other students at her high school. Leah had already constructed a list of societies and clubs she was going to join, she couldn't wait.

"Mum, I'm home", she shouted dumping her back pack onto the hall floor making sure it hit the rug rather than scratch the highly polished parquet flooring.

"In here love". Her mother was in the front parlour. Leah realised they must have company as that was the only time it was ever used. Mum kept the spotless, little used living room for 'best'.

Realising it was Wednesday she immediately knew that it would be Father James their local priest. He was okay as priests go and had a good sense of humour. His family was local and she had known him all her life, marrying her parents and christened her. He was a regular at their home for dinner as he seemed to enjoy her mother's excellent cooking. His niece Ella was in the same form as Leah and was as humorous as her uncle, often having the class in stitches with her dry sense of humour.

"How was school?", Father James asked as he did on all his visits.

"Good, really good thanks Father", she replied. Leah sarcastically thought that she could just make a tape of the conversation they always had virtually word for word and play it when he visited, it would save them the effort of actually speaking .

The back door opened and her Dad shouted, "Anyone in?". Those were always his first words as he came through the door even if he had been in the garden all afternoon. The sight of his grinning, sun burned face cheered her up every time. Her Dad asked if anyone wanted a cuppa as he was putting the kettle on and came in to greet them not seeming surprised at all that Father James was there relaxed and at home in front of the fire. They nodded a greeting at each other.

"Father".

"Don't you be sitting down on my best sofa with those dirty work clothes on", her Mum scolded. Obediently he went straight upstairs to the bathroom knowing protesting to have his cup of tea first would get him no where. It hadn't for the last twenty years and it was unlikely that was going to change.

The subject at the table while eating their meal was regarding some of the reading for the course Leah was going to study and her mother's lips pursed as if she was sucking a lemon. She occupied herself with serving the meal on the best china and straightening the frills on her pinafore as if they could take off of their own accord.

"I really don't think you should be doing this you know, but it's your life", her mother spat out in such a manner and tone that would have convinced no one. "I don't think we should mess around with nature". This was a theme running through her mothers life. There was little Leah could discuss with her as she did not want to inflame her wrath and Leah strove to get the most peaceful life possible for her and her father. Most of their interactions kept to the factual and the day to day minutiae of life. With her father she could discuss anything and he supported her totally, she knew she was lucky and would

miss him terribly when she left home.

It was her Dad who had given her the money and signed the permission slip for the biology project they were doing as the top science group. They were studying their ethnicity and had submitted a DNA test. She did not mention it to her Mum as it would have caused another row about nature and she wouldn't have listened to or tried to understand the wider argument. Leah was sure that she was as British as she could get but didn't want to be the only one in the science group not to participate. Anyway it would be fun and interesting to do. Secretly with her dark good looks Leah hoped to find she was the great grand daughter of a flamenco dancer or an Arabian princess but in reality knew that she had the typical colouring of the Marches area where they lived. It had been fun all spitting into little plastic tubes, the boys in the class had deliberately made gross noises making the girls pull their faces and their stomachs turn.

Six weeks later they were waiting for the results to be delivered on line. Mr Gee the science master had asked that people wait until everyone's test results had come through so all the students could start the project together. Frustratingly Jordan Gibbs' hadn't come through on the Friday with all the others. It took until the following Wednesday to arrive by which time a dozen teenagers were impatient and exercising great control by not sneaking a look at their e-mails.

Wednesday afternoon, double biology. Everyone was on time, which was a first. Passwords put into their computers and their accounts accessed initially it was so quiet you could have heard a cat's whisker twitch. All students were instructed to go into their DNA ethnicity section. There was murmuring and muttering but no real shocks to anyone, most people who had expected to had a high percentage of British heritage. The printers buzzed into action as the results were printed out ready for the full class analysis and any historical references they wanted to add to the project.

"Now we have accessed the results we wanted to achieve class, you are free for the

next period to explore the rest of the DNA site. Good work”.

Able now to take her time and look at the various sections on the site Leah clicked on to familial matches. Realising that time was of an essence she didn't study anything in depth but tried to take in as much as she possibly could all at once. There were a couple of her first cousins she recognised and one of her mums cousins name as well. Who would have thought Aunty Lizzy would spit into a test tube? She had no idea this information was provided with the DNA they had submitted, this was pretty fascinating. There were a lot of names she had not heard of but that was no surprise at all as there were people as far back as seventh cousins. Quite a few people had done their family trees and clicking on the results Leah saw that her cousins had researched a few generations further back than their great grandparents. Her mother's family had been mostly local as the map on the site showed. All this information took a long time to process as there were technical terms she was not sure what they meant and using a search engine was eating into the time she had left to browse.

In her haste Leah knocked her pencil case onto the floor. Everyone turned in the direction of the noise. Ella glanced over at Leah giving her a reluctant smile and sympathetic glance. Leah turned back to the computer and went back into matches with shared relatives. Ella had obviously deciphered the analysis quicker than her.

Getting through the door into the hallway Leah dumped her bag on the highly polished floor.

“ In here”, her mother shouted from the front parlour.

Father James smiled up at Leah as she pushed the door open . As expected he had his cup of tea in hand and his legs outstretched in front of the fire.

“Good afternoon Father”, Leah's voice cracked as she added,“Or should I say Dad?”.

Object by Asha R.

With a coat of many colours

It stands like an eagle's foot clutching it's prey.

Digging it's talons deep into the pile, sucking the life from the concrete beneath.

Stable and sturdy it stares from its place.

Holding it's poise with authority and grace.

A miniature version but no less imposing

Rainbow dappled feathers for clothing.

Above the clawed feet towers its versatile body

Like the great Eagle awaiting activity and action

It's regal, round eyes waiting to pounce, its prim yellow beak poised to capture.

Standing solid and firm in stature

Not to be moved. Not to be shaken.

Not to be stirred from its haven.

An effortless stance

Owning its place, unwilling to dance.

Reading The Dream of Gerontius by Cardinal John Henry Newman by Patricia G.

Strangely I was drawn to the intriguing title of which my older brother spoke

He was enquiring after the composition by the venerable saintly writer.
I made it my mission to ascertain The Dream of Gerontius to gain its treasure.

On the cusp of death an old man imagines his transition to the afterlife,
describing his journey to Judgement, his encounter with heavenly angels,
Passing an unruly mob of downcast demons before settling in safety,
Purgatory, a place of purification until completely prepared and holy
To gaze on the countenance of The Creator, bathed in absolute contentment

This hymn of praise embodies outstanding faith and exalts in ultimate happiness

The verses did not disappoint, spiritual calm soothing my inner self

Darn Beautiful - Poem by Susan H

High up in the attic upon the top floor
A big heavy slab, industrial and grey
Mum sat behind, head bowed night and day

The cast iron peddle rocked back and forth
Patterns were copied to match our peers
So we wouldn't feel ashamed and have less fears

The repetitive drones seeped through the walls
Floor shook beneath for most of the day
Whilst mending our clothes to keep the rips at bay

Not a drama was portrayed
When dad removed the needle from her thumb
She just carried on, that was our mum

A map of the world hung high on the wall
For future lessons to be learned
Kids roller-skating in the attic, once earned

Her caring pale blue eyes, squinting to see
A cup of milky tea, always by her side
Full of sugar to keep 'Alma' abide

Such a wonderful and selfless gift
I wish I could tell her so
Instead I will go visit
and whisper to the stone

Disclosure- Short Story by Susan H

She had noticed it whilst in the shower. A sense of dread came over Helen, as if a heavy dumbbell had attached itself to her heart and started to swing inside her chest. Even though the water was warm, goosebumps appeared on her arms and her hairs stood up like hundreds of tiny little soldiers standing to attention. *Now don't panic* she told herself. After a few deep breaths, she checked again. It was still there - a hard pea shaped sized lump in her right breast.

She had quickly dressed and hurried downstairs to her husband who was lay sprawled out on the settee. Their black and white cat had settled comfortably on his thighs, pawing at his *Mountain Biking Monthly* magazine. Helen hovered in the doorway. Ben had been working so hard lately, doing such long hours, it was rare to see him relaxing. The forthcoming Christmas break was just what he needed. She felt her eyes burn and prickle and quickly blinked so the tears wouldn't fall. As he reached for his glass of wine, he noticed her watching.

"You OK love?" Ben smiled.

"Yea, just had a shower, felt a bit grimy." Helen replied.

"Fancy joining me for a glass, before I drink the bottle." he laughed.

Helen smiled and shook her head, she didn't trust herself to speak.

It had been Christmas Eve night and earlier that evening they had watched Joe their three year old son, tear open one of his presents. He had squealed with delight as he spotted the dinosaur on the front of his *soft touch* pyjamas.

"Want to wear them Mumma." He had demanded as he pulled off his tee-shirt, so he could wear them immediately. He had gone to bed exhausted, his cheeks all rosy as he curled up to his favourite tyrannosaurus-Rex.

They had plans to relax once Joe was in bed, watch a cheesy Christmas movie and order take-out. How could she tell him what she had just found. He looked so relaxed and she didn't want to ruin the evening. He deserved this break, and what was the point of them both worrying anyway. As she walked into the kitchen, she had a firm word with herself to put this nonsense out of her mind and deal with it next week when the holiday

season was over.

That had proved more difficult than she thought. No matter how busy she was, as soon as she had a moment, her thoughts would always boomerang back to what she had found. She had to stop ruminating, didn't they say on those daytime TV shows – that most lumps weren't serious, it was probably a cyst or something.

It had took an agonising week before Helen could get in at the doctors. She had seen a lady thankfully.

“I know its not easy, but please try not to worry. The majority of lumps are nothing to be concerned about, but we do need to refer you on to the hospital to see a breast specialist, to have it checked over more thoroughly.” she had said as she patted Helen's clammy hand. *Easy for her to say*, Helen thought.

That had been two weeks ago. Helen was now outside the hospital, waiting to go in. As she got out of her car, the biting wind nearly took her door off as she grabbed her oversized *doctor who* scarf and wrapped it twice around her neck, like a comfort blanket. The sky was a clear brilliant blue, with not a hint of a cloud anywhere. On the drive down, she had noticed a park with a lake and made a mental note to have a walk around it after her appointment and blow away the cobwebs. She had not told Ben about what she had found, she hadn't wanted to worry him. She would explain it all once she'd had it checked out and got the all clear.

The breast specialist put her at ease immediately. As Helen explained her symptoms, the lady started to sketch on a headless diagram of where Helen had felt the lump. As she did, her huge diamond solitaire sparkled in the light overhead. *Gosh she must have a very generous husband* Helen admired as she gazed at the ring.

“OK my love, I am going to ask you to hop onto the bed with everything off above the waist and can I have your hands over your head please.” Helen undressed tentatively. She shivered as she lay there waiting to be examined, feeling vulnerable and so exposed. *Just think about that lovely sunny walk and maybe a coffee and a big fat slab of cake to treat myself after this is over* she told herself.

Helen stared up at the ceiling as the specialist's hands expertly checked her over. Helen squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

"Is that the lump you can feel?" the specialist asked.

"Yes, yes, that's it." Helen confirmed meekly, while trying to hold her breath.

"I would like to take a biopsy of the lump, if that's OK with you Helen. I'd like to examine the fluid and do some further investigations." The lady looked kindly at Helen.

"OK." Helen's voice sounded a million miles away in her own head.

As the needle dug into her delicate skin, Helen clenched her left fist so tight, that her fingernails dug deep into the palm of her hand. *Soon be over* Helen kept saying to herself. The specialist excused herself and came back a few minutes later with two more people. It was then that things seemed to speed up and go on fast forward the more people entered the room. Helen plucked up the courage to look into the specialist's eyes. She could smell the change in the room, as if everything had shifted to another level somehow. Her instincts were on high alert, she knew something was wrong, it was written all over their faces, as much as they tried not to show it.

When Helen eventually left the hospital and walked back to her car, she felt like a completely different person to the one who had arrived not a few hours earlier. The mention of the *Big C* had thrown her, like a Ferrari hitting a Mini at 100 miles an hour. She should be going for a walk now, enjoying the winter sunshine, stopping for that cuppa and massive piece of cake. She didn't want to do that now. She felt stunned after all those examinations, scans, talks and leaflets. Everything felt warped and uneven.

Once she felt steady enough to drive, she headed for home. Even pulling up onto the drive felt different, like it wasn't how she had left it. The thought of seeing Ben and Joe made her face crumble, but she shook her head, she had to be strong, for them at least. As she opened the front door, Ben was in the hallway, emptying the waste bin.

"Hey hon, what you doin' back so early, had enough of your Mum already ave' ya.'" he smiled with his cheeky grin. Helen dropped her bag on the stairs and walked slowly towards him.

"What's up love, what's the matter." he tilted his head to one side and looked confused. She instinctively put her arms out towards him. She couldn't speak, it felt like

a burning fireball had lodged itself right inside her throat. She buried her face into Ben's chest, feeling the warmth of his thick green jumper, so familiar, safe and secure. She wanted to zip him open and jump inside, like a baby kangaroo.

“Let's sit down love, I'll explain.” She looked up into his chocolate brown eyes, all creased with concern. She knew he would be devastated, as she was, but they would get through it. They had to!

Teatime Trauma by Julie W.

There we were eating our tea
with meal trays balanced on our knee,
waiting for our soaps to start,
knives and forks poised near the heart,
when flashing on the screens we see
a pert grey bum and talk of wee.
They bend and stretch
and cough and retch.
This miracle pad we cannot see
can hold wee in and soak it up
and where it goes a mystery.
No sigh or moan or yell or squeak
to give away that bladder leak.
The blue gel swells and saturates,
while beef stew cools upon our plates.
The last thing that we want to see
is how much better we can be
when wearing pads absorbing wee.
Playing games and lifting weights,
smiling, standing at school gates.
Houses full of female dancers,
cheeky winks and bold romancers.
No longer ladies damp and wet,
incontinence we can forget.
Though maybe we would rather be
a piss free zone when eating tea.

The Singing Lady by Denise G.

I'm driving home. It must have been summer because my hairs plastered to my head it's so hot and clammy. As if a storm's brewing. And I'm drawn to these pink flashing lights in front of this roadside pub. The sign says 'The Singing Lady'. So I pull up outside.

The stale smell of alcohol and smoke hits me as I approach the bar. I have a quick look round while I wait for the bar tender to serve me, wisps of sparse, grey hair poking from underneath his sombrero. There's a few couples dotted around and a group of men playing cards. Just behind them I see the backs of this skinny man with a Stetson dangling at his back, and a tall, well built woman wearing a long, flowing skirt, playing darts.

I'm stood there waving my ten pound note when the scrawny, pock faced guy from the darts match swaggers up behind me.

'Same again, Bob' he barks over my shoulder.

'Comin' right up, Joe,' the bartender says, and with a bent cigarette dangling, stuck to the corner of his lower lip, he heads off to pour the drinks. As if I'm invisible!

Now it's obvious the bartender knows I was there first and, although I'm a patient sort of guy, hell, I was parched. And I wasn't in any mood to let that weedy, ignorant moron push in before me.

'Scuse me, mate,' I say politely. Then, when he doesn't even acknowledge me, I poke him on the shoulder.

'Do you mind waiting your turn,' I say.

The background chatter stops abruptly. Just like when a headmaster walks into an unruly classroom. Heads swivel and suddenly all eyes are turned on me. I feel like the villain in a theatrical production with a script I haven't read. The bartender's glaring, his eyes are like saucers and he starts shaking his head. Really slowly. And I realise I've made a big mistake.

That Joe feller's blazing, his bloodshot eyes bulging. His face goes purple and his mouth stretches into this menacing sneer. He grabs hold of my shirt collar and lands a bone crunching punch to the side of my nose.

Next thing I know, I'm sprawled on the floor, blood dripping from my chin. And that Joe's evil, twisted face is looming over me.

I just freeze. I'm hoping that if he thinks I'm seriously injured, or even dead, he'll back off.

Then I hear this gruff voice shouting 'Where's Jean? Go and get Joe's wife.'

And just as that Joe guy starts to bend over me, presumably to finish what he started, this enormous hulk of a woman strides over from the dart board. She's got tattoos all over these big, muscly arms and a ring through her nose. And she's she stood over me. Long, pointed boots pinning the edge of my shirt tail to the floor. And I'm trapped. And I'm terrified.

But then I hear this bewitching sound, like the tinkling of a stream, getting louder and louder. And I realise it's Jean. Singing the most beautiful, uplifting ditty I've ever heard.

And, like the sun rising from behind a cloud, Joe's evil grimace is suddenly transformed into this wide, cheesy grin. I'm confused so I try out a tentative half smile of my own, barely detectable, in case Joe misinterprets this and thinks I'm laughing at him.

But he doesn't even notice. He's nodding his head to and fro, his bony hips swaying in time with the rhythm of that captivating tune.

All around us, the bar folk start tapping their feet, clapping, humming and rapping on tables in time with the beat.

Then suddenly, Joe lunges at me, grabs my arm and yanks me upright. I'm trembling so much I think my legs are going to give way. Then, he links his skinny arm in mine, and next thing I know I'm twirling around this tiny dance floor with Joe. One by one, the others get up. Women with their skirts hitched and swirling behind them. Men slapping their thighs, hopping and doffing their hats as they pass the ladies.

Jean's there in the centre, her falsetto voice booming, hands on hips, stomping one leather, spike heeled boot on the wooden floorboards. Like a whirlpool spinning around her, we're all drawn in by the rich, dulcet tones of that voice as Jean belts out song after song.

And I'm jigging around the room with the best of them, amongst this frenzy of arms and legs. I forget all about the pain from my nose and the immobilising fear I felt minutes earlier as I'm carried away. Entranced by the music, movement and an indescribable, giddy, heady atmosphere engulfing the room.

Just as I'm in full swing, Jean throws her arms in the air in a final flourish as the song rises to an electrifying crescendo. Everyone freezes, like a video on pause, until the music gradually fades and Jean bows her head, those huge arms gently dropping to her sides.

Then Jean picks up her darts and casually strolls off back to the dartboard. And the mood changes just like that. And everyone returns to their seats as if nothing has happened!

My nose starts throbbing then and the fear creeps back over me again. I sneak a sidelong glance at Joe, who's passing Jean a pint of beer, apparently having forgotten all about me. Now, I'm not stupid, and although I'm still thirsty as hell, I'd discovered how unpredictable Joe could be and didn't want to risk provoking him into coming back to finish the job. Call me a coward if you like. You weren't there! So I edge my way backwards towards the door. The bartender gives me this sidelong look and tips his hat as I leave.

And needless to say I never went back there again.

Until today I never told a soul about that night. I didn't think anyone would believe me. I even began to think I'd imagined it. But, months later I bumped into this old mate of mine, Les, in the supermarket and we got chatting.

'Anyway, then this massive woman starts singing,' he lisps through broken teeth and a split lip as he limps alongside me.

So I doubt he'll be going back there any time soon either.

Hail Stones by Julie W.

Mouse grey skies descend to hill tops.
Darkening streaks ribboned by sunlit beams.
Frozen gunshots bombarding the earth with ice
pinging, pelting ricochets on window panes.

Enclosing atmosphere, shroud like and enveloping.
Captured, attacked from every angle.
Freezing bee stings pounding bodies,
round, red rashes tingling heat.

Flattened fields, confetti covered.
Wintry wounds of water shows
shallow scars on verdant landscapes,
rotund bullets liquid flows.

Bushes blown and broken stumps.
Flowers shredded stalks of colour.
Branches blitzed, no pit marks left
Except evidential watery meres.

Tarmac glistening black pearlized pools,
Cars skidding and sliding on frozen marbles.
Frightened looks of nervous drivers
clinging tightly to retain control.

Faces soaked by tears and iced rain.
Sleeves pulled over hands wipe clean
the debris' stinging surplus
of the stoning pock marks left by hail.