



Chapel Arts Creative Writers

present

Poems, Stories and Plays

For the Buxton Festival Fringe

2020

# BUXTON FESTIVAL FRINGE

1-19 July 2020

Music \* Theatre \* Comedy \* Dance  
Art \* Children's Events \* Spoken Word  
Film \* Street Theatre ...and more!



Artwork by  
Hannah Webb

Sponsored by  
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[www.buxtonfringe.org.uk](http://www.buxtonfringe.org.uk)

# Introduction

Chapel-en-le-Frith is a small town in north Derbyshire, known as the Capital of the Peak. It lies a few miles north of Buxton and it's home to a wealth of creative talent. Chapel-en-le-Frith Arts ('Chapel Arts' for short) is an umbrella organisation covering a range of activities: visual arts and crafts, an annual painting and photography show, a film club, various performance arts ... and our writing group.

The writing group has been active for six years. Members meet once per fortnight, mostly over the autumn and winter period. In addition to the fun of socialising we try some serious writing, and last year we published a little booklet of our work, ***Chasing Shadows***, donating a slice of the profits from sales to the local hospice, Blythe House.

Encouraged by a member who's an organiser of the Buxton Festival Fringe, Stephanie Billen, we've prepared material for the 2020 Fringe (which will be mostly virtual this year because of the coronavirus restrictions). This document is a compilation of that material. Thanks to the recording skills and hard work of another of our members, Simone Hubbard, some of the stories, plays and poems you'll find in the following pages are also available on YouTube, performed by their authors and/or other members of the group.

We've divided this document into five sections: VE Day poems, Home/Refugee poems, Lockdown Play-Sketches, "Folktales", and Lockdown Poems. Needless to say, it isn't something to read from cover to cover. Please dip into it as you choose, enjoy it - and take a look at our YouTube recordings as well. The relevant links to copy into your browser are:

<https://www.chapelarts.org.uk/Home.php>

<https://www.facebook.com/Chapel-Arts-1476922725916223/>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEXNfILkPODx5i3phO9MbZw/about>

# **Part I**

## **The VE Day Poems**

**Before Covid-19 was acknowledged as a problem in Britain, we decided (along with other groups in Chapel-en-le-Frith) we would honour those who had fallen in the World Wars of the twentieth century by setting up a poetry trail around the town shops. This trail, and an accompanying public reading, was to be launched on VE Day (8<sup>th</sup> May). For obvious reasons the plan had to be abandoned, but some of the poems were written. We include them here.**

# Celebration

**Caroline Hardwick**

My mam made corned beef hash,  
Aunt Lucy, Homity pie.  
We all ate liver, onions, mash,  
Waved flags up to the sky.  
Nine o'clock I heard dad shout  
'My God! The beer's run out.'

We listened to the news that day,  
And were quite overjoyed  
At what Mr Churchill had to say.  
But granddad was annoyed.  
First forecast in a long long time  
Said rain, but it were fine.

We did not care if it did rain.  
We danced and gave good cheer.  
We had suffered, but not in vain.  
We no longer lived in fear.  
Blackouts curfews all would cease,  
As the world returned to peace.

I stopped still, as I recalled  
Reports and pictures newly seen.  
Last month we'd all watched on, appalled,  
To see such suffering, so obscene.  
Bergen-Belsen was liberated,  
Skeletal corpses, some animated.

Scraps of people, scraps in rags.  
Thousands dead, many soon to die.  
They could eat no food, wave no flags,  
Rejoice and celebrate like I.  
Millions had perished in this war.  
But if we had yielded, how many more?

## Memorial sonnet

**Mark P. Henderson**

Folk say round here he was a decent lad:  
Toiled at the mill and never missed a day;  
Quiet, unruffled, he did nothing bad;  
Went steady with a lass up Mottram way;

Each week he took a full wage packet home;  
He never left a workmate in the lurch;  
Enjoyed a pint or two when weekend come  
And laughed with pals, but never slept in church.

This valley, not the world, was his domain,  
And politics he left to greater men.  
Doing the right thing never caused him pain:  
When call-up came, he went, and would again.

And here you still can see him, carved in stone  
With a multitude of others, and alone.

# **V E Day**

## **Simone Hubbard**

Victory in Europe Day  
What would the soldiers say?

Nearly six years surrounded by death  
As eighty-five million or so took their last breath.

Nazis surrender - headline news  
After they'd murdered six million Jews

"Tuesday 8th May will be regarded as a holiday."  
Millions of people worldwide are in disarray

At three o'clock Churchill addresses the nation;  
Many families would never be reunited after evacuation.

Church bells joyously peeling;  
How would those suffocated with death be feeling?

Thousands of people gather at Buckingham Palace;  
In Europe many still suffering mindless acts of malice.

The crowds chant, 'We want the King';  
But not those who lost everything.

Red, white and blue bunting with flags to wave;  
Thousands lie in an unmarked grave.

Singing, dancing full of glee,  
But not the amputee

The King's speech was broadcast at nine  
And by now it really was party time,

Searchlights on and bonfires burning into the night;  
But in the Far East they still had to fight.

VE Day was for so many bittersweet;  
The war for everyone was devastation never to repeat.

So for all those who lost their lives in World Wars 1 & 2,  
**WE WILL REMEMBER YOU!**

# VE Day

## Stephanie Billen

They dance in the streets  
With a feeling of joy  
And a huge sense of peace  
That none can destroy.

Lip-sticked and skittish,  
Arms linked together,  
They wish that this moment  
Could go on forever.

For years in the palace  
They've reigned themselves in,  
Said prayers for the needy,  
Tried to guard against sin.

But VE Day is 'me' day,  
They've kicked up their heels  
And kissed a few strangers  
To see how love feels.

Now the princess is old  
And the walls have closed in.  
The country's in lockdown,  
Her husband is thin.

She looks back on that time  
As the best in her life  
And the loss of her sister  
Still cuts like a knife.

"We'll meet again",  
She has vowed to the nation,  
But deep in her heart  
Feels only frustration.

She signs off the plans  
From her castle at Windsor.  
VE Day once more...  
It's hard to convince her -

#

Can waving a flag from a doorstep or two  
Or staying at home to give private thanksgiving  
Ever compete with that coming together  
When freedom meant finally, joyfully living?

## **Part II**

# **The Home/Refugee Poems**

**One item scheduled for the Buxton Festival Fringe 2020 was 'Heart Art', a community project aiming to create 2500 hearts to raise awareness and funds for the 25,000,000 refugees worldwide. The exhibition was to link several venues including the Green Man gallery during July 2020. Everyone hopes that the exhibition will be resurrected during the autumn.**

**It was suggested that we offer a few poems to go with this exhibition, taking the theme of Home or Refugees. Six of our members responded in different ways to the invitation. The results are typical of our Chapel Arts writers: a considerable array of talent, but endless variety and individuality in style and in the interpretation of themes.**

# Home

**Stephanie Billen**

I lie in a patch of sunlight and call it home  
A melancholy mistle thrush questions the silence  
    Shaking branches unfurl new leaves  
As spring inches forward outside my window

I feel rooted to the spot, solid as a rock,  
Nothing can happen to me right here right now;  
The four walls of my body, my house, my country, my life  
Are still standing tall round my fluttering soul.

What must it be like to have to move,  
To break out of this pressure-cooker cocoon,  
To embrace the dangerous flesh of loved ones,  
    Feel their briney breath mingle with mine,

And next to walk with an army of strangers  
Bedraggled and beleaguered and closing in?  
All those six-foot gaps rushing to be filled,  
Touching fingers anointing every surface.

Will there be nobility in this risky exodus  
As we cross the raging seas of infection,  
Refusees becoming refugees like so many before us,  
Seeking a promised land in a world with no promises?

For now I fill my ears with disembodied voices,  
Feel the warmth of my friends as the shadows lengthen.  
I lie to myself in the patch of sunlight I call home.  
    I will make it all right in a poem.

# Home from Home

Simone Hubbard

It was dusk when the cat stumbled upon a gathering in the wood,  
A heated discussion from creatures in the neighbourhood.  
It was their favourite topic of who had the best home.  
‘Oh, not this again,’ the cat did groan.

‘We have a nest,’ squarked the magpies,  
‘And can gaze all day and night into the skies.’  
The animals could not help but tease:  
‘And what happens, magpies, when there’s a breeze?’

The squirrel was next, boasting about his drey,  
And in the trees he too would sway.  
‘But what about your second home?’ they enquired,  
As a backup in a tree hollow was frequently required.

‘Our homes are quite simple,’ the parliament of owls did hoot  
‘Any old nest or cozy place will suit;  
We also like perching on a branch with a view  
So we can quickly pursue a tasty shrew.’

The honey bees buzzed about their fancy hive:  
‘There’s sixty thousand of us working hard to survive,  
But the mice try to join us when it gets cold  
And the nasty pests have to be controlled.’

The mole’s head appeared on top of his new hill  
Felling a newly-flowering daffodil.  
‘And what happens if there’s a flood or frost?  
Well, actually, I have a fortress, so all is not lost.’

The foxes boasted about their dens,  
But the others didn’t answer because the foxes killed the hens.  
In daylight the bats were happy to hang about -  
Upside-down in their roosts, no doubt.

Rumour had it that the frog sat on a throne,  
But he was adamant he lived under a stone.  
‘I’d like to make this clear forthwith:  
It’s nothing more than a fairytale and myth!’

The rabbits lived in warrens, the badgers in a sett,  
Both of them continually under some threat.  
Their destructive nature got them into trouble,  
But in the storybooks they were very loveable.

The hedgehog had a nest of moss, grass and leaves  
In the depths of the brambles prickly interweaves.  
The creepy crawlies were mostly happy in the dark,  
Hiding in the ground or under leaves and bark.

And 'What about your home?' they asked the cat.  
'Wherever the sun shines seems to be your habitat.'  
'Yes, but I also live in a house with staff,'  
To which the other animals didn't know whether to cry or laugh.

# Home

**Sarah Lionheart**

I stopped  
stayed at home

then  
after some days  
dug earth  
planted seeds

saw a newt drying himself on a rock by my pond.

I need this:  
new life blossoming around me  
whilst others struggle for air

I would rather it had happened a different way.

I used to eat, sleep, shower, go.

I have ventured into roaming my own home,  
discovered the pleasure of a hot shower in the bright spare bathroom  
yoga in the 'yoga studio' attic room  
writing in my study which I had almost forgotten existed  
daydreaming in the living room  
sewing in the back room  
sitting and watching seedlings grow in my new greenhouse  
walking each evening to watch the rabbits on the hill behind  
listen to guided meditation each afternoon at 3pm  
with countless others around the world.

My outer barriers dissolve along with the concept of days  
Social times gone  
interactions ~~are~~ few  
I let go of making conversation

quiet days, companionship with my husband  
grateful

I don't want to go back to how it was;  
how it was hurting me.  
This slow, restful being

is bringing me to my senses,  
warm coconut wafting as I stroll through gorse,  
gritty fecund loam between my fingers as I plant the tiny mustard,  
nutty moist homemade choc muffins with chia,  
a smile inside that melts me

# Home

**Mark P. Henderson**

Leaking boat, starving beach,  
Stinking crowd, huddled ground:  
New land, barbed wire welcome,  
    Semiautomatic tongues  
Yelling Christian curses, 'Move,  
    'Not wanted here, move on';  
Trudging miles day after day,  
Drudgery, hunger, hate, disdain,  
Dragging paltry battered packs  
With all that remains of all that was:  
    'No, not here, either. Move.'

And then at last our paradise  
Of lightless cellars dripping cold  
To rest our heads, pitiless eyes  
Condemning us, pitiless climate  
Crushing us, pitiless citizens  
Mocking us, pitiless bureaucrats  
Weighing us in the balance  
And leaving us wanting; not here.  
    No, never here, where all  
The words ground out are *No recourse*  
    *To public funds for you because*  
    *Unless you serve our menial needs*  
    *You don't exist, you are non-people.*

Home's not a place. Home is what  
Remains in mind and heart when all  
Is half a world away, forever gone.  
Home is left in our togetherness,  
Our tales, our tongues that no one now  
Around us speaks. Home is within us.  
Try as you might, who take us in,  
    You'll never take it from us.

# **My Home is my Refuge**

**Kate Briant**

My home is my refuge  
Where I lick the wounds  
Caused by careless words from outside people  
Who neither see nor care.  
Outside I feel vulnerable,  
But behind my front door I am me,  
Calm and content,  
Untouched and untouchable.  
Inside I read my books  
Or listen to music  
Or write my stories  
Or telephone friends.

But I think of the refugees  
From war zones around the world,  
Of those who flee from guns and torture,  
From men whose every feeling is hate,  
Who cannot see balance,  
Who love only holy or unholy causes,  
And burn with fires of zealotry.  
Their victims, bereft of family,  
Must run  
To uncaring places  
Across indifferent deserts and seas  
To seek peace, protection, places to lay their heads  
Without fear.

# **Mahamatar**

**Jill Radcliffe**

A humming of honey bees  
as the bells ring to call the faithful.  
A fair-haired child rests his head on the  
pillow of his mother's breast.

The pilgrims, nomadic, trudge;  
carrying their children and their crosses.  
Those who cannot walk, do not.  
Those with strength will support.

Snow, ice or stone –  
some crawling on all fours,  
anguish and pain urging them on.

Women and girls, their hair braids beribboned  
in red, green and white,  
carry armfuls of joyful flowers  
whilst others drag themselves on raw knees.

Tears are quick to spike tired eyes;  
desperate hands reach out to touch  
their god  
for, at last, for each,  
blessings can be sought.

**set to the music from Werner Herzog's film,  
*Pilgrimage*  
In celebration of Sir John Tavener's MAHAMATAR**

# Finding Home

**Caroline Hardwick**

At first I didn't feel it. Why should I?  
That pull, that longing;  
From place to place we roamed,  
The new, the unknown.  
It was the people who were constant,  
Not houses, not places.  
Being gone did not make me sick.  
I was free of a place to call  
Home.

Then, when least expected, I felt it. Why?  
The calm, the restfulness,  
No need to wander for wonder.  
The known, the familiar,  
It was the place that was constant now,  
Not travelling, not journeys:  
Where I had grown, not where I was made.  
I had a land I called  
Home.

Time moves forward and I must too.  
Not land, not place;  
They remain, but I am there no longer.  
The past, the memories -  
I was there and perhaps not forgotten,  
Not soon, not yet?  
Without me it is no less, no more.  
But I will no longer be coming  
Home.

## **Part III**

### **The Lockdown Plays**

**One of our members, Anne Cawthorn, has a penchant for writing short plays that lend themselves to in-house readings as well as staged performance. Most of her comic mini-dramas concern two friends and neighbours, Ethel and Doris. The latter is a widow and the former is married to the fortunately easy-going Fred. The dialogues among Fred, Ethel and Doris are delightfully observed slices of ordinary everyday life.**

**Not that everyday life has been ordinary during the lockdown! Anne responded to the coronavirus with four of her little plays, which follow. The first two of these plays are performed on YouTube by Simone Hubbard (narrator), Anne herself (Ethel), Pete Stelling (Fred) and Stephanie Billen (Doris).**

# Coronavirus Lockdown

Anne Cawthorn

- Narrator:** Doris and Ethel are two elderly neighbours who normally meet up each morning for a chat over a cuppa. Doris has been a widow since her Bert died four years ago and Ethel lives with her long-suffering husband, Fred. They stopped meeting when lockdown was imposed, but during the weekly doorstep clapping for the NHS, Doris said how lonely she was. So they hatched a plan...
- Fred:** Hurry up, Doris. Let's get the kitchen door shut before that miserable old bat across the road sees you and dobs us in to the 'lockdown police'.
- Doris:** I think we're okay for an hour. She's just gone out for her daily walk.
- Ethel:** I hope so. She's already reported the young chap across the road for letting his girlfriend stay over last Saturday night. The police came and spoke to him. But they seemed to be laughing when they got back in their car.
- Fred:** I bet they understood that the poor man just wanted his weekly conjugals. I mean, who could blame him? A man has needs, coronavirus or not.
- Ethel:** Never mind His needs, Fred. Me and Doris Need a cuppa and a piece of that banana bread she's just made. Put the kettle on, love.
- Doris:** I made it specially for you, Fred. Everybody seems to be making it at the moment, so I got my old recipe out.
- Fred:** Well, I'm looking forward to it. I'm not sure that Ethel should have any, though. She's been getting a bit chubby since lockdown.
- Ethel:** I'll give you chubby, Fred! I'll go on a diet with everybody else when lockdown is over.
- Doris:** That could be a long time for us old 'uns.
- Ethel:** True. (*Picks up her cake.*) Thanks, Fred. This looks lovely, Doris.
- Fred:** Anyway, I'm pleased to tell you that we're sorted with our shopping now. I've managed to place an order with Iceland. I clicked on to where it said delivery for the elderly and vulnerable. Not a good image to have, but at least we're sorted. So if there's anything you need, Doris, I'm your man.
- Doris:** Ooh, well, I could do with some toilet rolls.
- Fred:** As it happens, we already have a stock of those.
- Doris:** Not been stockpiling, have you?
- Ethel:** Not exactly. But before coronavirus struck, Fred went to the supermarket for a newspaper and came back with two packs of 24! I wouldn't mind, but he'd never bought a single roll in 50 years of married life.

**Fred:** True, but I do like a good bargain.

**Ethel:** And then the man across the road brought us a big pack last week, saying ‘they were as rare as hens’ teeth’. He was so pleased with himself I hadn’t he heart to say ‘no’.

**Doris:** Well, I’ll have a few, please. I’m also running out of wine and gin, but they’re hardly essential. In fact, too much alcohol intake is definitely not led by the science that the government keeps harping on about!

**Ethel:** They might become essential if this lockdown goes on much longer. Fred gets my wine and his whisky delivered by Aldi. We can easily get you some wine and gin at the same time.

**Doris:** Blimey, you two have got it sorted.

**Fred:** We decided to make the most of lockdown, being as though we’re not driving anywhere.

**Doris:** No, but we’re better off than poor Boris. He’s still in hospital with coronavirus.

**Ethel:** Yes, I’m sad about that. I imagined him being like Churchill during the War, leading us triumphantly out of this nightmare.

**Fred:** Hopefully it won’t be long before he’s back clapping the NHS on the doorstep of Number 10.

**Ethel:** With his mop of blond hair, which is getting wilder by the day. He isn’t the only one whose hair is getting out of hand. I thought mine was bad, but some of the people who are zooming on the telly have really let themselves go.

**Doris:** Gosh, is that the time? I better be going before the old bat across the road comes back from her walk and spots me.

**Ethel:** See you next week. I’ll bake the cake next time.

**Fred:** *(laughing)* Don’t forget to wash your hands for 20 seconds when you get home!

**Doris:** *(laughing)* And sing Happy Birthday – twice! *(She goes out singing Happy Birthday to Doris and Boris etc.)* Cheers.

## **Coronavirus Lockdown (2)**

### **Anne Cawthorn**

- Narrator:** As lockdown remains firmly in place, Doris makes another daring visit to Ethel and Fred and have a Coronavirus catch-up over a cuppa and Ethel's freshly baked cake.
- Fred:** Come on in, Doris, and sit down. You look flustered.
- Doris:** I am. I nearly got caught by the old bat across the road. She'd just set off on her daily walk, so I thought the coast was clear. But as I was about to sneak through the gate, she turned back for her umbrella.
- Ethel:** What did you do?
- Doris:** Well, I bobbed down behind the hedge until she was out of sight. And I nearly toppled over.
- Ethel:** Funny you should mention her, Doris. She rang the other day saying that she needed to speak to us – in person. It was a command, not a request.
- Fred:** So we met her on the drive - two metres apart, of course.
- Doris:** I bet you wondered if she had spotted me sneaking into your house last week.
- Ethel:** Well, we knew it was serious, just by looking at her. She'd got her arms folded across her ample bosom.
- Fred:** And a 'face like a slapped arse!'
- Doris:** What had 'rattled her cage', then?
- Ethel:** Well, our Aldi booze order had been delivered to her house, instead of here. To say she was indignant was an understatement. She kept saying that the neighbours would think SHE was an alcoholic.
- Doris:** What did you say?
- Fred:** I told her that I would tell them that the booze delivery was for us and not to worry, as they already knew we were alcoholics.
- Doris:** Does that go for me, Fred?
- Fred:** Yes, definitely. That's why we're friends.
- Ethel:** Well, as it's only 11 o'clock here, we'd better just have a brew and a piece of fruit cake for now.
- Fred:** Good idea. I'll put the kettle on.
- Doris:** Things are getting really bad now with this coronavirus. People are dying right, left and centre.

**Fred:** It seems to be getting us old 'uns, especially those in nursing homes and those poor NHS staff who come from abroad. And Boris, of course.

**Ethel:** Yes, they say poor Boris is in a bad way and has been moved into intensive care. If he dies, it makes you wonder who would be Prime Minister.

**Doris:** I hope it won't be that funny little man who campaigned on the bus with Boris for Brexit.

**Fred:** No, I agree.

**Ethel:** We used to watch the government's daily briefing at five o'clock, but we've stopped now. It depresses us.

**Doris:** Oh, I used to watch it whilst I was having my tea-time gin and tonic, but I decided not to bother. I just have my G&T now instead!

**Fred:** Very wise, Doris.

**Ethel:** They say the same thing every day: stay safe, stay home and wash your hands.

**Doris:** Well, I'm going to keep self-isolating. You don't know who is a "super-spreader", do you?

**Fred:** It could be anybody, so don't be sneaking a Toy Boy in, Doris! (*Laughs*)

**Doris:** (*Laughs*) I should be so lucky. It's a long time since I had any excitement like that, Fred. (*She laughs and winks.*) Anyway, thanks for the brew, I better be off before the old bat catches me sneaking out.

**Fred:** Stay safe, Doris, and don't forget to take the gin and wine order with you.

**Doris:** Oh, thanks. I'll be able to have a little tippie at tea-time, but I don't know how safe my liver will be at the end of lockdown.

**Ethel, Fred & Doris:** (*All laugh*) Cheers!

## Coronavirus Lockdown (3)

Anne Cawthorn

- Narrator:** As lockdown remains firmly in place, Doris makes another daring visit to Ethel and Fred to have a Coronavirus catch-up over a cuppa, bringing with her a freshly baked cake.
- Fred:** Before you come in, Doris, I'm just going to spray you with disinfectant.
- Doris:** (*Looks shocked*) Really?
- Ethel:** No, Doris, he's just kidding you. (*All laugh*) He was doing what Donald Trump said on the telly. Did you hear him say that bleach and disinfectant could kill coronavirus?
- Fred:** The sad thing is that some people believed him and did drink it and a few people injected it, like he told them to!
- Doris:** Yes, I heard that; and now he's saying he's taking that anti-malarial drug, hydroxychloroquine, and that he's OK and hasn't died yet.
- Ethel:** Yet... (*pause*) Unfortunately! Is that what you and Bert took that made you feel really poorly?
- Doris:** It certainly did. Dreadful. We stopped taking it.
- Fred:** Anyway, shall we have a cuppa and a piece of your lovely banana cake?
- Ethel:** Yes please.
- Doris:** Whilst he's doing that, I'll tell you something. Do you remember I was having some women's problems down below and was seeing the doctor before lockdown?
- Ethel:** Yes, I do.
- Doris:** I had a letter from the surgery the other day saying that the doctor wanted to examine me.
- Ethel:** And did you go?
- Doris:** Certainly not! Last time I went to the surgery for a blood test they took the blood through the car window. I certainly wasn't going to have them examine me through the car window!
- (*All laugh*)
- Fred:** You are a caution, Doris!
- Doris:** I bet you wouldn't do it either, Ethel!
- Ethel:** No way! There are houses across from the surgery, with nosey neighbours.

**Fred:** (*Laughing*) Spoilsports! That would have given them something to talk about during lockdown!

**Ethel:** How are you managing to keep yourself busy now the weather isn't that good and you can't sit in the garden?

**Doris:** Well, I'm not as lonely as I was at first. Some of the things I used to go to have started up on Zoom.

**Fred:** Like what, Doris?

**Doris:** Well, my reading group have started a Zoom meeting every three weeks. So I've started reading more so I have something to talk about.

**Ethel:** Oh well, I'm just reading *Normal People*, which everyone is talking about. I think the youngsters are enjoying it better than us. It seems to be just about sex.

**Doris:** I tried it, but it wasn't for me.

**Fred:** Well, it was for me. I'm not much of a reader, as you know, but I'm watching it on the telly. I have to get my excitement where I can these days!

**Ethel:** Trust you, Fred! (*Pause as they all laugh.*) Do you do anything else, Doris?

**Doris:** Well, as we can't go to church at the moment, we do a weekly Zoom hymn singing every Sunday.

**Fred:** I can't imagine what that sounds like.

**Doris:** You wouldn't want to! It did sound dreadful at first; we were all out of time with each other. But we sorted that by muting everyone and people were given individual verses to sing. It was easier for the couples, though.

**Ethel:** So do you sing a solo, Doris?

**Doris:** Good God no! I used to be a good singer, but sadly not any more.

**Ethel:** Me too. I went on a singing course a few years ago and the lady made us sing on our own, to see if we were sopranos or altos. I told her I used to be soprano. Then after I had sung she looked at me and said, 'Sadly, not any more, dear'.

**Doris:** Were you an alto, then?

**Fred:** No, worse than that Doris. She'd become a tenor.

**Ethel:** And worse still, she went on to say that 'If I wanted to be in her choir, I would have to be one of her 'tenor ladies'!

**Doris:** That conjures up an interesting image of those adverts on the telly!

**Ethel:** Yes. So when I'm singing I might start in one key, then have to go down a key or two to stop me sounding like a strangled cat.

**Fred:** It's not a good sound at all. She's up and down like a bride's nighty!

**Doris:**           *(All laugh)* Well, on that note I think I'd better sneak off home.

**Ethel:**           See you next week, Doris. My turn to bake the cake.

**All:**             Bye! *(Wave.)*

## Coronavirus Lockdown (4)

Anne Cawthorn

- Narrator:** Doris makes another visit to Ethel and Fred's house to have a coronavirus catch-up over a cuppa. Now lockdown is starting to ease, they are able to discuss what this might mean for them.
- Fred:** Come in, Doris. No need to sneak in. Boris says you're allowed to visit us now.
- Doris:** It's a shame, really. I quite liked the excitement of creeping over here, trying not to get caught.
- Ethel:** I wonder what the nosey old bat across the road will do now that some of the lockdown rules are being lifted.
- Doris:** Oh, she'll still police us. She stopped me the other day, asking who the strange man was who'd been visiting my house. When I said I didn't know who she meant, she said, 'You do – the one with long grey hair and a beard'.
- Fred:** Well, who was it, Doris? Have you got yourself a man-friend?
- Doris:** No... *(pause)* it was my brother, our Cyril. *(Laughs)* He hasn't had a haircut for about four months, and he's grown a beard.
- Fred:** What does he look like?
- Doris:** An ageing hippy. Not a good look at all.
- Ethel:** What does his wife think about it?
- Doris:** Well, you can imagine; she doesn't like it. She's such a miserable woman.
- Ethel:** She always looks like she's sucking a lemon.
- Doris:** Like this! *(Both Doris and Ethel take her off by sucking in their faces.)*
- Fred:** *(All laughing)* You two will stay like that if you're not careful!
- Ethel:** It makes you wonder why he married her. He's such a lively chap.
- Fred:** Oh, I know why. *(Smiling and tapping his nose)* Cyril once told me and Bert what attracted him to her, when we were down the pub one night. *(Both Ethel and Doris turn to look at Fred in anticipation of his answer.)*
- Doris:** Go on Fred, what was it? I've never fathomed it out!
- Fred:** SEX.
- Doris:** Sex? *(Looking puzzled)*

**Ethel:** Trust you to say that, Fred.

**Fred:** No, it's true. He said she was 'a bit of a goer' before they were married, so he thought he was on to a good thing. But sadly, after their son was born, that was that.

**Doris:** Poor soul. Let's talk about something else.

**Ethel:** Boris was on the telly last night saying that pubs, hairdressers, cinemas and other things would be opening up. The problem is, though, the virus hasn't gone away.

**Fred:** No. He told us he was going to 'wrestle it to the ground', but he hasn't managed yet.

**Doris:** No. When Boris mentioned wrestling the virus, I had an image of Rod Hull and Emu wrestling Michael Parkinson to the ground on his chat show.

**Fred:** Yes, and Parky shouting that he never wanted the bloody bird on the show in the first place. Hilarious! They still show that clip now (*All laugh*).

**Ethel:** I'm just hoping there won't be a second wave that will come to bite us on the bum.

**Fred:** It might, with all those people crowding on the beaches and demonstrating for black rights. No social distancing there.

**Doris:** Well, I don't mind telling you that I'm nervous about going out.

**Ethel:** Aye, Doris. Did you see Donald Trump on the news being asked about the growing numbers of people testing positive for Covid in America? He seemed so pleased with himself when he said, 'It's simple - I just told them to stop testing'.

**Doris:** I did. You couldn't make it up, could you. He'd no idea how stupid he sounded!

**Fred:** He reminded me of one of those yobs in the pub. They spout a load of nonsense when they're drunk. But I must say, to be fair to them, they don't remember it the next morning.

**Doris:** The problem is, Trump was sober, in charge of America, and he meant it. He's barking!

**Ethel:** Yes, I agree. The papers say he's a narcissist – all me, me, me. Our Italian friend says he is.

**Fred:** To be fair, Ethel, she isn't as polite as them; she calls him an armhole, but usually she uses the other word beginning with A that sounds like armhole!

**Doris:** Your friend is right. And on that note, I'd better go home.

**Ethel:** Shall we go back to what we did before lockdown and meet up in each other's houses every day?

**Doris:** Good idea, I've missed our daily cuppa and a chat.

**Fred:** See you tomorrow then at yours, Doris. (*All wave*)

## Part IV

### The “Folktales”

During one of our “virtual” creative writing sessions during April 2020 (our meetings have been by e-mail since March, not face to face, for obvious reasons), we looked at the difference between traditional orally-communicated folktales and written, literary stories. The analysis was based mainly on the work of the great Danish folklorist Axel Olrik in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We then had a shot at writing our own pseudo-folktales, and here are some of them. You can also hear the shorter ones on our YouTube recordings.

Julie Harratt produced a story in the voice of a young boy who hates spelling tests and becomes involved with a Cornish Pixie. Stephanie Billen used the exercise to explore environmentalist themes. Kate Briant and Pete Stelling gave us pieces that could well pass as genuine traditional tales, and Simone Hubbard produced her own idiosyncratic take on a real Peak District folktale (the Nine Ladies of Stanton Moor). One of Caroline Hardwick’s two stories is a gem of misdirection: you’d think it’s a real old story until you recall that bikers meet at weekends in Matlock, or Matlock Bath, and Bandits and Fireblades are motor-bikes – and until you read or hear the punch-line. Her other is a lovely portrait of a young man travelling to find himself. Mark Henderson’s spoof story introduces an element of magic realism into a very modern setting.

# **The Pixie and the Spelling Test**

**Julie Harratt**

Grownups seem to take great pleasure in filling children's time with pointless work activities. Mrs Bagshaw is the worst. Every Monday she gives us a list of ten words. We have to learn how to spell and pronounce all ten. Exactly. On Fridays she selects five of the ten words to test us on. Just five. She grins. She knows that five words we don't need have eaten up our time for footie, exploring and playing-out. It wouldn't matter so much if Mum didn't take the results of the weekly word test seriously. Mrs Bagshaw sends them to be scrutinised. She's devious. Doesn't she know how the sellers of comics and sweets, and the people who run Taunton fair, rely on me doing well?

One week I decided to guess which five of the ten words Mrs Bagshaw would choose for the Friday test. The weather was good. Adventure called. There was no time to waste. But oh dear... only two of my five were tested. So a 'very poor show' was reported. No comics that week. No sweets. My visit to the fair was threatened. Mum said that what I'd done was gambling. She hoped I hadn't inherited the gambling gene from Uncle Danny.

That got me thinking. Uncle Danny once told me, after he'd had a really big win, that he'd bumped into a Cornish Pixie on the way home from the Oddfellows Arms. The Pixie had told him which horse would win the Quantol Gold Cup.

I'd never seen a Pixie, but there's plenty of Pixie activity at the bottom of the garden. Uncle Danny often takes young ladies there to see the Pixies at play. I'm not allowed to go with them; everyone knows three is a very unlucky number in the Pixie world.

I thought: if I set a trap, I could catch a Pixie and ask him to help me find the five words that Mrs Bagshaw will pick for the test. I found a box, cut a hole in the lid, and put clover, shiny beads and a water bowl at the bottom. When the Pixie tried to get the beads he'd fall in and be trapped, but he'd have water to drink and clover to eat so he'd be all right.

I sprinted home after school on Monday, clutching the list of ten words, and rushed to open the box. There was a jolly little chap inside: pointy ears, swinging arms, legs that couldn't stop jiggling. I explained about the spelling test and asked him to tell me which five words I needed to learn. 'No problem, laddie.' His voice was shrill and reedy, and his jolly dance didn't stop when he spoke. But he hadn't told me which words to learn. I put the lid back on, disappointed. But when I looked at the dreaded list that night, five of the words were glowing!

On Friday I scored top marks in the test. I went straight to the end of the garden to thank the Pixie. He was no longer jiggling. He looked ghastly. Maybe he just needed fresh air and a run in the garden, so I lifted him out from the box and he staggered away into the bushes. I replaced the clover and water, sure he'd come back to help me again.

On Monday, clutching my list of words I ran to the garden. The box lid was askew. I could see movement in the box, and green like the Pixie's jacket. Yes, he was back! I lifted the lid.

I only glimpsed the deadly coils before the adder struck, sinking its fangs into my right hand, which was gripping the list of words.

My screams brought Uncle Danny running.

After two days in hospital, at least I was excused from the spelling test. But I felt ill and couldn't use my right hand. As I was leaving the ward, a very stern nurse gave me an appointment to visit physio the rapist the very next day.

Now I knew this wasn't a good person. I'd heard Mum and Aunty Madge talking about one who lived in Taunton; an absolute monster, they said. So why would I have to visit one? Surely I'd been punished enough for cheating and cruelty to Pixies.

I sobbed in the car.

'Is your hand still painful?' Uncle Danny asked.

'Just a bit,' I cried. 'But I've learnt my lesson. Please don't make me visit a monster as well!'

I carefully read out the instruction to meet Physio the Rapist the next day. The car rocked with Uncle Danny's laughter.

'Perhaps the best lesson, laddie, is that time spent learning spellings and pronunciation is never wasted!'

# **The Tale of the Girl who Loved the People AND the Places**

**Stephanie Billen**

There was once a little girl called Hannah who lived with her mother and father in a hovel in the hills. They didn't have much money but her mother was a storyteller and her father was a cartographer and between the two of them they filled her head with wonder about the beautiful world in which they lived. Her parents saw that their little blonde daughter, their only child - and all the more special for that - was beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent. As she grew older and began to look toward the distant mountains, she announced that she wanted to become a wizard and to study the whole of the earth, the people and the places and their effect on each other. Her parents supported her but had no money to send her on her way so she took herself into the nearby village and called in at a sweet shop where the owners were happy to give her a job. She worked there for several months and earned many pennies, and the owners saw that she was indeed beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent. At the end of the tourist season, when they had no more work for her, they thanked her by giving her a special present, saying: "Take this magic sweetie. Should you ever find yourself in difficulty, pop it in your mouth and things should become easier for you."

Hannah counted her pennies and realised she needed more, so she called in at a nearby bookshop where the owners were also happy to give her a job. She worked there for several months and earned many pennies and the owners found her beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent. At the end of the Christmas holidays, when they had no more work for her, they thanked her by giving her a special present, saying: "Take this magic book. Should you ever find yourself in difficulty, bring it out of your pocket and things should become easier for you."

Hannah counted her pennies and realised she could now begin to apply to wizard schools. After several weeks of writing application forms she was invited to the dreaming spires of the South where she was interviewed in a turret by a fat woman and a tall man. The fat woman was generous and smiled at Hannah's answers. The thin man, however, reclined on a giant lizard puffing smoke rings and frowning. After every response from Hannah he would say: "But what exactly do you mean by that?" Before long she heard that they were unable to offer her a place and she decided instead to apply to the Mountain of Gwybodaeth, a place of great knowledge in Wales. But once there she found they spoke to her entirely in Welsh. In a panic, she started sucking her sweet and found she was able to say one sentence: "Dw i'n joio siarad Cymraeg". The panel, a fat man and a thin woman, smiled at her encouragingly, pleased that she enjoyed speaking Welsh, but after that things went downhill as she could not understand anything they said to her. Before long she received a letter from them that she did not understand, but it was just one sheet in an envelope and her parents explained that it was too thin to be an acceptance letter.

Disheartened, but too determined to give up just yet, Hannah applied to the great Castle of the North where she was interviewed by two thin wizards and a small fat dwarf. They sat behind a vast marble desk adorned with a single cactus and listened respectfully to what she had to

say. At the end of their conversation they told her right there and then that she had a place with them if she wanted it. But the taller of the two wizards leaned forward at the end, positioning himself carefully so as not to be attacked by his precious prickly pear pot plant, and announced gravely: “There is one condition. You can choose to study the people of the earth *or* you can choose to study the places of the earth, but if you ever try to study both at the same time you will find yourself back in your hovel!”

So Hannah took herself home and discussed the matter with her parents and her mother said: “Surely the people of the earth with their wonderful art and ideas would be the most interesting to study”, but her father spread out his beautifully painted maps on the flagstone floor and pointed to the glittering blue ice of the north and the teeming jungles of the south and assured her that she should study the places of the earth. In the end, because at school she had studied the places of the earth, the forces of the earth and the organs of the body, but had had to drop the writings of the people of the earth, the art of the people of the earth and the history of the people of the earth when she was sixteen, she wrote to the great Castle of the North and said she would study the places of the earth.

For the first two years all went well. She studied the places of the earth and travelled with the wizards and the dwarf to see the glittering glaciers of the north and the teeming jungles of the south. She grew even more beautiful, even cleverer, even kinder and just a little taller. But in her third and final year she was asked to write a very long story on a subject of her choice. She thought back to her travels in the Arctic and she decided to write about the effects of sooty deposits from witches’ cauldrons on the glaciers, which she’d seen were starting to melt and become grey. The tallest wizard narrowed his eyes when she told him what she wanted to do.

“So are you saying you want to write about the Arctic the place or about the witches, the people, who live nearby?”

“Please, oh great one, I wish to write about both and their effect on each other!”

The wizard reared himself up to his full height and banged his staff on the floor three times. The sky outside the window darkened and plumes of green smoke started to come out of his ears. He opened his mouth. Quick as a flash Hannah whipped out her magic book. The clouds cleared abruptly and the wizard sat down heavily, exhausted by his recent rage. He looked at her steadily, noting how beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent she was.

“I think you have forgotten the strict condition on your studies here. I ought to send you back to your hovel. However, because of your general loveliness, I will allow you to pursue this misguided project if, and only if, you speak to all twenty of the great wizards of the Arctic and include all their words of wisdom in your story.”

Hannah thanked him profusely and agreed before he could change his mind, but as the weeks went on and the deadline came ever nearer, she checked her messenger owl’s beak every morning and more often than not found he had nothing for her. In the end only five of the wizards of the Arctic replied to her. What’s more, they all told her that the witches’ cauldrons had no effect on the glaciers. With great trepidation she wrote up her story, on her mother’s

advice, including a footnote explaining how she had contacted all twenty wizards of the Arctic but only five had replied.

The two tall wizards and the fat dwarf read through her story gravely and agreed that it deserved only a poor mark. The tallest wizard even suggested sending her back to her hovel, but for some reason his eye alighted on the smallest book in his bookcase, the little one Hannah had left on his desk, and he found himself picturing her earnest, determined face.

“I think perhaps in view of her excellent studies on the Arctic the place and the jungles, the place, we can afford to award her a wizard’s hat, albeit a silver one rather than a gold one.”

Delighted with her silver wizard’s hat, which sat prettily on her now long, dark gold tresses, Hannah bade farewell to the Castle of the North and travelled to the big chimneys of the South to find a job. Flying over the landscape with the other passengers on the big green dragon service, she noticed that the colours of the earth beneath her were not as bright as they had been in her childhood, the flowers were wilting and the faraway mountains were no longer frosted with white.

Arriving at the chimneys of the South, she headed for the Witches’ Cauldron Research Institute. A top-hatted man interviewed her and explained how the organisation was considering the longer term effects of cauldron soot as well as the effect of broomstick travel on the earth’s breath and how the chimneys of the South might be making the colours fade, the flowers wilt and the ice melt. They talked for a long time about the whole of the earth, the people and the places and their effect on each other. At the end of the interview, he told her he was impressed by her wizard’s hat and would like to employ her, but he needed references from people with whom she had worked. Hannah gave him the name of the sweetie shop owner and the book shop owner and left the Institute with cheer in her heart.

After a week, she was called back to the institute and the top-hatted man announced that both shop owners had described her as beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent. However, he said that all new employees required three references. Who else might she suggest they send an owl to? Hannah’s eyes misted over. She was so close to getting this job, but she could think of no one else to give her a reference and she didn’t even have any mini-magic she could offer up to ease her situation. The top-hatted man drummed his fingers on the table.

“Is there not someone from the Castle of the North who could vouch for your general loveliness?” he asked.

Hannah thought of the great tall wizard banging his staff on the floor in anger with green smoke coming from his ears.

“There is one wizard, but...”

“Excellent,” said the top-hatted man, and before she could think any more about it, he had opened the window and launched his swiftest owl into the smoggy air.

A week later she was summoned once more and the top-hatted man said: “Good news. The wizard said you were beautiful, kind and fiercely intelligent and you had shown great bravery in contacting all twenty of the Arctic wizards as well as several evil witches.”

So Hannah was given the job and worked hard at the institute. In time she decided to throw away her silver wizard's hat and made herself a beautiful silvery blue top hat hand-embroidered with faces and flowers because she realised that being a wizard wasn't enough and what she really wanted to do was to save the planet; and for that she really did need to study the whole of the earth, the people and the places and their effect on each other. And more than that, she decided she needed to live among the people and even the witches, encouraging them to love each other and to love the earth so that in time the places that had become faded and hostile would love the people back.

Up in the Castle of the North, the two tall wizards and the fat dwarf found they could never forget their former student. One day the taller wizard announced that he had been feeling strange of late. His two colleagues looked alarmed. They had never known him to feel anything at all before.

"I've come to a decision," he said. "I've decided that we will now offer three courses for our new students. They may study the Places of the Earth. They may study the People of the Earth. And from next season they may study The Earth, the People and the Places and their effect on each other."

The others gasped, and then they smiled, for a beautiful silvery blue light had suddenly filled the room and the prickly cactus on the wizard's marble desk began to bloom for the first time in fifty years.

# The Pedlar and His Wife

Kate Briant

A pedlar called Samuel Nethercott came home after several weeks' journeying, his pack lighter and his money pouch heavier. He took bread and cheese from his pack and a wizened apple from the pantry. The room was cold. Perhaps it was time to take a wife.

"It would be good to have hot meals waiting and a fire burning in the grate," he thought, "but I would have twice the expenses. Can I afford a wife?"

He slept on the question, but his longing for comfort won over his parsimony. So he surveyed the unwed women he met on his travels. In the end he chose, courted and married a sensible widow with good teeth and a strong back, still young enough to be biddable. She was a pleasant enough wife, quiet and dutiful. Two months after the wedding he set off journeying again.

"Now watch yourself, woman," Samuel told her, "don't invite anyone into the house or visit any other."

When he returned, several weeks later, he noticed a subtle change: she seemed cheerful, and he heard her humming as she pegged a colourful rug. Samuel thought long and hard about her and his suspicions grew. He'd left her on her own. Surely she'd have been lonely and sad. Had she consoled herself with someone else? Was she cooking hot meals for another? Was she making a fool of him? The more he thought, the more convinced he became that she was betraying him.

On his next journey he sought out a wise woman. She handed him a small copper dish.

"It's a singing bowl", she told him. "Place it in your home, and when your wife goes out, fill it with water, run a wet finger around the rim and say:

*Singing Bowl I say to thee,*

*Is my woman true to me?*

The bowl will answer your question."

The wise woman held out her hand for payment. Samuel hesitated. It was a lot of money. But he needed to know, so he counted three precious silver shillings into her palm.

When he got home he placed the little bowl on a shelf. When his wife went to milk the cow, he tipped water into the bowl, ran his moistened finger around the rim and recited:

*Singing Bowl I say to thee,*

*Is my woman true to me?*

There was a silvery tinkling sound as the bowl sang back to him:

*Pedlar, I say to thee,*

*Thy wife is true as true can be.*

Samuel was satisfied and put his dark thoughts aside. He ate his hot dinner and warmed his feet by the fire.

Soon it was time to set out on another journey. One night he stayed at an inn where a serving wench quenched more than his thirst. He made his usual rounds of farms and village markets, selling and bartering, but on his way home he stopped again at the inn to reacquaint himself with the serving wench.

He found his wife in good spirits and his dark thoughts returned. When she went out to fetch water from the well he reached down the little copper bowl and water jug.

*Singing Bowl I say to thee,*

*Is my woman true to me?*

Again, the bowl sang back to him with its silvery tinkling sound:

*Pedlar, I say to thee,*

*Thy wife is true as true can be.*

Then the door opened and his wife entered.

“Who was that singing?” she asked.

“No-one, wife. I was whistling.”

His wife gave him a strange look but said nothing and went to prepare dinner.

Samuel wanted to return to the inn.

“Wife, the markets will be thronged with people,” he said. “I must be on my way again.”

Once he had gone his wife reached down the little copper bowl. She’d seen him with it. She’d heard what he’d asked and what the bowl had answered. She filled it with water and ran her wet finger round the rim.

*Singing Bowl I say to thee,*

*Is my husband true to me?*

The bowl sang back in its silvery tinkling voice:

*Pedlar’s wife, I say to thee,*

*Thy husband’s false as false can be.*

She was sad, for she’d enjoyed having a husband and a home of her own to care for again. As she went about her chores, she pondered.

Samuel returned some weeks later. She noted a spring in his step.

“Welcome home, husband,” she said, and placed a dish of beef stew before him.

He greedily spooned the rich goodness into his mouth. Weakness struck him before he’d finished eating.

“I must go to bed, wife. I am ill.”

Samuel staggered away from the table and collapsed on to the pretty pegged rug. He was dead within minutes.

His wife waited for darkness to fall, then emptied his pack and laid it on his body. Then, when the moon rose, she dragged the rug with its burden out of the house and along to a deep old mine shaft.

“It’s a good thing I’m strong,” she thought as she pushed body and pack into the gaping black hole. “And it’s a good thing that he bolted his dinner down so fast he couldn’t taste the hemlock.”

# Lockdown and a Folktale

Pete Stellings

When lockdown was announced I knew just the place to go: a remote farmhouse used as a holiday let. Perfection! I could self isolate for eternity. Well, at least, I could safely stay there for at least three months. I arrived with my supermarket stash, which took hours to unpack. I was probably the one who cleared all the shelves.

The first couple of nights were OK. I had busied myself collecting wood for the burner and various tasks that left me energy-sapped, so I slept well. The third night, though... well, I heard all sorts of noises, like people arguing, seemingly distant, coming from the field beyond the barn. At the weekend I ventured out at night, tip-toeing towards the barn; at which point the noises ceased.

On the Sunday morning I rang the owner/letter of the property.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘that's Masceranus, the lodger with the old tenant farmer and his wife.’

He then related the tale to me. Masceranus had arrived from one of the poorer European states seeking work. The farmer employed him and found he was a very hard conscientious worker. He could turn his hand to anything: tractor driving, looking after the sheep and cows, milking. Whatever task he was given, Masceranus performed it well; so when the farmer went to market he said to Masceranus, ‘Make sure you look after my wife while I’m away’.

Masceranus did. In fact, he did it so well that the farmer’s wife encouraged her husband to go to market more often. The time came when he’d had a good drink with his farming colleagues and he would stay away overnight.

Unfortunately, Masceranus and the wife slept in one morning and were caught in the act.

There was evidently a set-to in the Barn during which the farmer shot Masceranus. To dispose of the body he put him in the slurry tanker with its revolving blades and spread all the fields on the farm. The wife left, never to be seen again. The farmer was so overwhelmed with work he now had to do on his own that he gave up the tenancy.

Then the letter/owner said to me, ‘Wait until it rains, then ring me again,’ adding ‘light a candle in the barn with the name “Masceranus” on a piece of card. The night noises will go.’

I did this and the noises stopped. I slept well thereafter. As for the rain, I had to wait three weeks for a really good shower. But then, the following morning, a fresh flush of grass grew on all the surrounding fields. A week later they were covered in blood red poppies.

I also survived Lockdown.

# Simon the Pieman

Caroline Hardwick

Many moons ago in the parish of Wirksworth, there lived a carpenter called Simon with a long-suffering wife called Ann. Simon worked hard and travelled the area on his trusty steed Bandit. One day, as he was enjoying a flagon of ale at the local inn, a stranger spoke to him. He was called John. John was also a woodworker who whittled wooden spoons and bowls, and he too travelled on his favourite mount, Fireblade, which he'd bought from the local blacksmith. But John was much thinner than Simon.

"Do you go to Matlock Village on Saturdays?" asked John. "There's a pie shop that bakes pies that can't be bettered. Many men gather there. They all have worthy steeds."

"I haven't yet been," Simon admitted, "but on the next fine spring Saturday, I will."

A few weeks later the weather was clear and so Simon readied Bandit.

"Husband, dear, where are you headed this fine morning?" asked Ann.

"I'm off to Matlock to meet a friend. I shall bring back pie."

He set off gently so his heavy frame wouldn't injure Bandit, but soon he was galloping towards his destination. What John had told him was true! Many men with fine steeds gathered at the pie shop. He complimented their saddles as they complimented his bridle. John wasn't there. Simon consumed two of the pies he'd purchased and rode home.

"Only one pie?" said Ann.

"Yes, my love. I was hungry from the ride."

The same thing happened the next week, and the next. John was never at the pie shop. Simon's girth expanded and Ann had to adjust his waistcoat. She started to despair.

Then Simon met John again at the inn.

"Haven't you been to Matlock lately? I've been, and it's true: an angel could feast on those pies, and there are many mounts to admire. But where were you?"

"At what time of day were you there?" John enquired.

"In the morning. I left after noon."

"Ah! I usually arrive in the afternoon and leave by early evening," John explained.

They chatted more and then John left on his trusty Fireblade, followed by an old spaniel.

Next weekend, Simon went to Matlock on Bandit and arrived in the afternoon. He bought pies, but he saw nought of John. The same happened the next weekend, and the next. He always returned with only one pie. His clothes ceased to fit. Ann sighed.

"I need money, dear husband, to buy you new clothes. I can't let these out any more. Haven't you seen your friend? Are the men who gather by the pie shop all as portly as you? Is John?"

“Yes, the men at Matlock are all large. But John was thin when I last saw him.”

When Simon saw John again at the inn, he exclaimed: “I’ve been to Matlock a dozen times this summer and still not seen you! You are still thin. Do you no longer go and eat pies?”

“Yes, I go. I took to going in the morning in the hope of seeing you, but I never did.”

“Ah! I took to going in the afternoon in hope of seeing you.” Simon laughed.

They agreed to meet at noon the next weekend. As John was mounting Fireblade he patted his slim torso.

“I only eat half a pie because Mabel is partial to them and she always comes with me.”

The next fine Saturday, Simon was preparing Bandit when Ann said, “Husband, I worry. You’ve grown so fat you may soon need to purchase a larger horse. Have you see your friend again yet? Has he also widened?”

“Dear wife, Bandit is strong enough for two of my size. Yes, I did see John. He remains slim, but his wife Mabel goes to Matlock with him and shares the pies.”

“Then I’ll come with you today, dear husband, and do likewise.”

Simon had no choice; he’d told her that Bandit was strong enough to carry them both and that John’s wife would be in Matlock. So off they went.

Ann forbade him to gallop. When they reached Matlock they drew stares; there were few women, and none around the pie shop. They dismounted and admired some of the horses. Then up galloped John on Fireblade.

“Where’s your wife?” asked Simon.

“At home, of course.” John bade Ann, “Hello”.

“But you said she came with you and ate pies!”

“No! I said Mabel ate the pies.” John laughed and pointed at the old spaniel that trotted behind him.

Simon laughed as well, but didn’t tarry and returned home with Ann in good time. The damage was done, though. Within a year, Simon’s heart gave out as he tried to drag his bulk on to Bandit’s back one cold winter morning.

But he is not forgotten. To this day on fine summer weekends, men still gather in Matlock for lunch, many on Fireblades and Bandits, to admire each other’s rides. Some bring their wives. But still the question remains on everyone’s lips: “Who ate all the pies?”

# Nine Ladies Dancing

Simone Hubbard

*On the ninth day of Christmas my true love sent to me*

*Nine ladies dancing ...*

Well, they *were* dancing - until one fateful night ...

Forestyne was the lady of the forest. She loved dancing, especially in the clearing away from the trees. The nine ladies who followed her had all heard the old wives' tale: they'd be turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath. But the Sabbath was the only day they could meet, and dancing was their passion. They weren't going to heed old wives' tales.

Forestyne led them into the forest. Radella the elfin counsellor spotted them and leapt out to block their way.

'Where do you think you're all going, dressed up to the nines in your long white robes?'

Forestyne was annoyed.

'Radella, you know full well where we're going. Not that it's any of your business. So please move out of our way.'

'Gullvieg the head witch will turn you all to stone,' sniped Radella.

'You're only jealous because you have two left feet,' Forestyne told her.

The nine ladies giggled.

'Well, better two left feet than no feet at all,' Radella replied, and moved out of the way.

Forestyne and the nine ladies went on, gathering tree branches and twigs that they could use to make a fire. It was growing dark over the forest. Mist swirled. They'd need light for their journey home so they carried torches. Forestyne led them to the clearing where Diana, Goddess of the animals, was dispersing her little woodland friends before the ladies threw their firewood into the middle. She spoke softly:

'I'm not sure this is a good idea, Forestyne, as tonight is All Hallows Eve. It would be better for you all to go straight home or sit quietly.'

'Diana, my dear Goddess, please don't worry, we'll be fine. We just need Fira to light the wood.'

'Fira won't come tonight. She says dancing on the Sabbath when it's All Hallows Eve *and* a full moon is asking for trouble. She left you this to light your torches to go home.'

Diana passed a lit torch to Forestyne; but Forestyne used it to light the branches and twigs they'd collected. Diana shook her head and left.

Then the ladies formed a circle round the blazing fire. Forestyne stood in the middle as near to the fire as she could and tapped her drum gently and slowly. The ladies began to move to the rhythm, twisting and turning, lifting their arms in the air. They chanted, quietly at first. Then Forestyne's tapping grew faster and the ladies danced faster and leaped higher. The drum-beat grew louder. The chanting grew louder. The ladies started to strike their hands together in time to the drum.

But in the distance, a storm was brewing. Forestyne slowed the drum-beat and the ladies slowed their dancing. The storm grew closer. The wind rose. It blew their robes. Their long hair became tangled. Autumn leaves swirled around them. The embers of the fire flew away into the menacing darkness, and the wind smothered them, and blackness engulfed the dancers. Forestyne could feel and hear the wind but she could see nothing. Then came a huge crack of thunder and a blinding lightning bolt. For a few minutes she was blinded and deafened.

Then the storm died as quickly as it had risen. The sky was green. A bright light shone over the forest. It shone on to the clearing.

The ladies had vanished. Nine stones surrounded Forestyne. From far away she could hear the cackling of Gullveig and the other witches.

Forestyne was standing on a flat stone in the middle of the circle. In the strange green light she could see writing on it: *There are none so blind as those who will not listen.*

Consumed with grief, she fell to the ground.

# **The Boy Whose Dog Died**

**Caroline Hardwick**

In the land of brown and green where mountains tower and streams burble between the woods and fields, there lived an unhappy youth called Anders. He took no joy in the sunrise, the sunset, the sound of birdsong or the warm sun on his face. His father bred horses and his mother baked bread and cakes. Their home was always filled with delicious warm smells and took in the views of the surrounding fields with the mares and their foals galloping and cantering, but still Anders looked sad. Neighbours would pass him and remark, "What's wrong, Anders? Did your dog die?" He would reply, "No! I haven't got a dog." They would laugh and say, "Yes, we know." Anders did not know where the sadness came from. He just felt as if something was missing from his life.

On his seventeenth birthday nothing had changed; the streams still bubbled, the sun still shone, birdsong filled the morning air, and Anders was still morose. Then a stranger appeared at the stables asking for work. The man was tan and gold, his hair the colour of summer straw and his face the colour of autumn chestnuts. He worked hard and smiled always. His name was Jasper. Anders envied Jasper his happiness. He would sit with him after supper on the front porch of the house hoping to discover the secret of his perpetual good humour. Jasper told tales of his homeland far away, a land of blue and gold, where the sun shone with great heat and a deep ocean lapped the shores. Exotic animals and brightly plumed birds filled the air with constant noise. A man just had to put a net into the sea and he could feed a family for days. Great ships arrived bearing spices and strange people from foreign lands. Anders was filled with wonder and curiosity. He became more animated. His mother remarked one morning, "Why, Anders, I do declare! You look almost happy!"

Rumours abounded in the village. Had Anders found a girl? Fallen in love? Hit his head on a branch? Then one morning his parents were at breakfast when Anders appeared with a large saddlebag and declared, "I have decided I must travel and seek my fortune and a new life in the land of blue and gold by the ocean." Anders's mother wept and his father was sad but they both agreed if he thought he could find happiness there it would be the best thing for him. His father gave him a sturdy mare and a bag of gold coins and his parents waved him farewell. As he passed the far field heading for the road out of the village he saw Jasper with a couple of the young horses. Jasper looked up and waved his hat, a big smile on his face. Anders gave him a large grin and a frantic farewell wave. All was well with Anders's world. He was on his way to a better place. He would have great adventures and meet interesting people.

For the first few days Anders and his horse set up camp every evening by a stream and he ate the few rations of bread and cheese he'd brought with him. Passing folk from the surrounding villages knew him and bade him "Good Day", asking where he was heading and wishing him a safe journey. On the fourth evening he found a small tavern in a town he had heard tell of at market. He ate a hearty meal and spoke of his plans to the landlord. The round-faced jolly gentleman told him he had offered hospitality to many travellers from the big sea-port in the land of blue and gold and all had told him of its wonders and riches. He himself had never

been, but he told Anders that he just needed to continue due west for a cycle of the moon or less and he was bound to reach it.

The further Anders and his mare travelled, the wider the road and the larger the villages and towns became. He had to use more of his gold than he'd anticipated to obtain food for the horse as the fields were now barren of grass and protected by thorny hedges. He would ask local house owners if he could camp on their property for a gold coin. Some would offer him a meal but often he had to buy his own food and cook over a fire. His physique lost its puppy fat as he became wiry and muscular from the riding and walking. His face had become tan and his hair light from the ever hotter sun. He worried that the horse would become lame, but she was steady and sturdy and took the miles in her stride.

The fields gave way to sandy desert, and large tree-like green plants with fat succulent leaves protected by huge needle-like thorns provided the only shade. Anders had brought a large hat to keep the sun from his head but the mare began to flag and he struggled to carry enough water for them. He passed white bones picked clean by the large birds that circled overhead screeching throughout the day and he began to despair. Then suddenly a cool breeze was in his face and more and more fellow travellers appeared. Donkeys pulled carts laden with silks and fragrant spices. He had been warned to beware of those who might rob him, but he realised that he himself, with his thin countenance and tired animal, must look very like a thieving vagabond to these people. They avoided him and ignored his greetings. Those who did respond spoke in strange accents and often in foreign tongues, so he had little if any understanding of their replies.

At last, thirty days after he had set out, he crested a hill and below him spread the white, gold and red of the place they called Jaduz, next to the deep blue sea. He was awestruck! As he approached he could hear the noise and bustle. Songs from birds and humans filled the air. In the relative cool of the morning everything was moving, fast and alive. He cantered through the white arch of the city wall and dismounted. The buildings were packed together with narrow streets providing shade. The smell hit him like a wall: food, spices, pungent scents, overlay the stench of fish, decay and excrement. It made his father's stables pale in comparison. His mare was nervous. He needed to find somewhere to tether her. He made his way downhill towards the sea, and finally the throng of humanity thinned and the smell became more that of the ocean and its creatures. He took in the scene of huge white sails, wooden masts and exotically painted ships anchored offshore. There was so much activity with all manner of people coming and going to the boats. He looked south along the shore and saw a small row of houses that seemed quieter and somehow apart from the port. He decided to head that way, leading the mare. He found himself in front of a row of brightly-painted cottages with a couple of small boats on the sandy shallow beach opposite.

He hammered on the door of the first cottage, to no avail. He moved on to the second; still no joy. At the third, a wizened stooped lady answered his knock. She spoke at first in a tongue foreign to Anders, but when she heard his speech she switched to an understandable version of his language. He asked if he might make camp beside her house and maybe pay for some food and water until he could find work. He opened the bag of gold coins and proffered the few remaining. She nodded and invited him into the modest cottage. Over a cup of mint tea

she explained that her husband was a fisherman and was out selling his catch at the port but would return soon. He was old, as she was, and their son who used to help them had left a few years previously to work on a large ship and seek his fortune in foreign lands. Her husband was becoming infirm and life was a struggle. She said what a fine strong young man Anders looked and asked if he would be willing to work with her husband, if he was agreeable, in return for a bed and food. He could keep the horse as it would be useful to take the catch from place to place to sell. To bring a small boat into the port was nearly impossible now as the larger vessels took all the moorings.

Later that morning the fisherman appeared, and even though his accent was again very strange to Anders's ear, he was able to converse and they got along well. He learnt that they were the descendants of the original inhabitants of the area. When it had been a small fishing village their families had lived a simple life. Then the foreign armies had arrived and built the port and the city and as generations passed they had taken over. The few families left kept the shore beside their houses, where it was too shallow for the great ships to use, and they had the right to fish the area south of the city.

Anders learnt to fish and loved going out in the early hours with the old fisherman in his boat. He would help around the house after they came back from market. He collected driftwood for cooking and tended the nets. After the heat of midday, when he would snooze indoors, he would walk into the city to take in the sights and sounds. He found much to see and would occasionally go into a tavern for a drink of cold ale, but he found little company. There were people who spoke his native tongue but they were often just arriving or leaving. Those he talked to listened politely to his tale of the village and the land of green and brown, but then regaled him with tales of other lands far away and riches and sights beyond imagination. He found he was unhappy again and his face showed none of the good humour of his early days in the land of blue and gold.

One evening on leaving the city he heard a ruckus behind him. A man shouted and cursed. A stone flew past his ear and he was nearly knocked off his feet by a streak of cream fur. The animal made a zig-zag path in front of him. He saw it was a painfully thin three-legged mongrel dog, carrying a stolen piece of meat in its mouth. It vanished around a wall to eat its ill-gotten gains. As he continued towards his lodgings he sensed something behind him. He looked around to see the dog was following at a distance. He ignored it. It would return to the city soon enough to scavenge more food. He returned to his bed and thought no more about it.

An hour before true dawn he left the house with the fisherman to get the boat ready and check the nets. As they approached the shore, the thin figure of the dog with its unmistakable limping trot emerged from beside the cottages. When they returned with the catch it was sitting on the shore, watching them. They loaded the cart and led the horse towards the port. The dog did not follow, but on their return it was still there. Anders could feel its eyes on him wherever he went. The old fisherman lifted a stone off the beach to throw at it, but Anders put out his hand to stop him. The fisherman shrugged and went indoors. Anders went inside to eat his dinner. When he'd nearly finished he took the small piece of fish and bread he had

left outside and walked towards the dog. It came to him and he fed it. Over the following weeks, much to the fisherman's disgust, Anders adopted the dog.

"The dog is very ancient and no use for work. Look: it has only three legs. I scratches all the time. You can see the insects jumping on it." The fisherman's wife shooed it away from the cottage where it had sought shade by the wall to sleep. Anders led it to the shore and he stripped off his cotton trousers and shirt, walked into the warm ocean and swam in the shallows. The dog was transfixed and followed. They both stayed there for an hour. When they came out they sat, Anders on the edge of the boat, the dog in the shade behind it to dry. No longer did the dog scratch. No longer did it harbour insects. From that day onwards the dog followed Anders everywhere. It guarded the boat and the fishing catch, barking a warning and growling if anyone other than Anders or the fisherman approached. It would swim with Anders each day and share his food. Anders became content, if not happy. He named the dog 'Dog' and it would come when he called. He would go into to the city in the evening, but Dog would not follow; Dog would wait patiently and meet him as he approached the cottage on return. Anders would sit and talk to Dog about his home and his village.

Time passed and Anders remained content. Dog became slower, and would mainly just sit by the boat in the shade. One morning Anders came out but Dog did not greet him. He could see a shape at the back of the boat. As he reached the boat it was obvious Dog was dead. He picked up the stiff, light little body and took it back near to the cottage. He found a patch of land and dug as deep a hole as he could with a small rusting shovel, then buried Dog; and using two pieces of driftwood lashed together with twine, he marked the spot. He shed few tears but he did not smile again that day, or for the next week or so. The fisherman and his wife tried to console him.

"The dog was old but it had a good life with you, Anders. You should be happy for it. It did not suffer and it died as all things do."

But Anders found he was unhappy again. He walked into the city in the evening but no one asked him if his dog had died. No one remarked on his miserable countenance. No one noticed the change in him, and even those he would regularly chat to showed not the slightest interest. They would tell him of their latest adventure or relate a tale about a stranger they'd met that day from across the ocean, but no one asked him if his dog had died.

After a few weeks, Anders knew what he must do. He thanked the elderly couple for their hospitality but said he had to go. He had to return to the land of green and brown. They were sad but understood. He took provisions and a small cart he'd made and set off eastwards towards his village with the trusty mare. They were soon through the desert, and this time he travelled in the evening and early morning, avoiding the worst heat of the sun. He soon left the busy throng of traders behind and the road became less travelled. He took pleasure in the moist cool of the woods and forests and smiled at the burbling streams. His spirits were lifted by the sound of birdsong in the morning. He stopped at inns along the way and chatted to the landlords and ladies about his homeland. He described his father's farm, the beauty of the mares and foals. He described the lovely breads his mother baked and the smell of her fruit cakes. He was happy and smiled at everyone. He made fast progress, and after only twenty-one days the hills that adjoined the farm come into view. He removed the cart, which was

now empty, and hid it in a wood. Free of encumbrance he galloped towards the homestead. His father was in the first field tending to the mares when he looked up and saw Anders flying along a huge grin on his face, waving his large hat. His father ran towards the house shouting, "Mother! Mother! Anders is home!" His parents ran together to hug and greet him. They all went into the kitchen and his father opened a bottle of homemade blackberry wine to celebrate.

"You seem so happy now, Anders. Did you find happiness in the land of gold and blue?" His mother studied him with her deep green eyes.

"I found happiness, Mother, but not in the land by the ocean. I found happiness in myself. I realised it was there all along. I just had to recognise it."

"What made you realise this, Anders? What miracle? Was it a wise man from far away?"

"No, Mother; my dog died, and I was sad; and nobody asked if my dog had died."

His parents looked confused.

"I realised I had left a place where lots of people cared for me and how I felt, and I was so selfish I did not realise it. I never really saw the things around me, listened to the sounds or smelt the scents. It was only when I went somewhere new, where nobody knew me and there were few who cared how I felt that I realised what happiness really was. I realised where I belonged and how sad I must have made you both and how much I missed home."

Tears of joy ran from Anders's eyes and those of his parents.

"Has all been well on the farm?" he asked his father. "I didn't see Jasper."

"Everything's fine son, the horses are fine. Jasper started to look a little sad last month. He decided to go back home. He said he'd travelled enough."

# The Rock Piper

Mark P. Henderson

Raymond's soul was full of music. He longed to join a rock band and share his genius with the world. He was a virtuoso on the air guitar, sending imaginary audiences of thousands into raptures with his dazzling riffs. But he was less accomplished on solid guitars. Practice failed to make him perfect. And his singing voice was neither strong nor accurate.

He took lessons. Joined classes to network with other performers. But they were all indifferent, except for Kind-Hearted Jack. Kind-Hearted Jack was the lead singer of a locally popular band called Gothic Jelly. Raymond loved Gothic Jelly, latter-day prog rock with touches of heavy metal. He attended every gig. He yearned to join them on stage, but not even Kind-Hearted Jack could encourage him.

Raymond searched for ads and notices in music stores and at venues. Went to open mic evenings and jam sessions. No one was interested. He visited websites – BandMix, Gumtree, JamKazam. Advertised through Craiglist. Searched social media platforms - Soundcloud and Bandcamp. Posted videos on YouTube. None of it helped.

Kind-Hearted Jack offered better lessons, but Raymond didn't improve.

'Perhaps you should try a different instrument, Raymond.'

So Raymond tried a bass, but the results were no better than with his guitar or his singing.

Then he tried a drum kit, but was handicapped by a poor sense of rhythm.

His dreams would never be realised. He went for a country walk to escape his sorrows. The breeze sang in the trees, a brook sang through its little valley, birds sang everywhere. The world was full of music. And his head, his soul, was full of music, as it always was. But while the world poured out its joys and sorrows in glorious sound, Raymond's music stayed locked inside him.

He paused at a stile beside a bridge over the stream, and sat. Glum. Then something in the grass caught his eye. He picked it up. A set of panpipes! He dusted it off and raised it to his lips, and the music inside him poured out. The breeze changed its tune to harmonise with his. The birds sang along with him. The stream played a backing.

He'd read somewhere that a band can attract more attention if it uses an unusual instrument.

'Jack! Listen! Listen!'

He played, and Kind-Hearted Jack's jaw dropped. He picked up his guitar and played a take on Raymond's melody. He sang words to it.

'Come with me!' he said.

Within an hour, Raymond was playing with Gothic Jelly. On the Saturday evening he joined them at a pub gig. When they saw a young man with panpipes at a prog rock gig, everyone laughed. But then the sound of those pipes rose over the guitars, the bass, the percussion, and

the songs gained new and mesmerising dimensions. The pub crowd fell silent. More and more people poured in from adjoining bars and stood enraptured, the music carrying them to lands of dreams.

Four weekends and four gigs later, Gothic Jelly had a recording contract. Their album went platinum. Every music critic, every journalist, every Radio 1 presenter poured out accolades for Gothic Jelly and their amazing panpiper. There were international tours. Pictures of Raymond and his panpipes appeared in adverts, at concert venues, on teenage girls' bedroom walls.

Oh, he needed a rest! Back in England, he took his country walk again. At the stile beside the bridge he sat and played. Once again the breeze harmonised with him, the birds sang along with him, the stream played its backing. Hypnotised by his own Orphean brilliance, Raymond fell asleep.

He awoke alone. The panpipes had vanished. He searched and searched, but to no avail.

'No matter,' he thought. The music shop was delighted to order the world's best panpipes for the Raymond the superstar.

But when he played the world's best panpipes, the sound was dull. Music no longer flowed from his soul. Gothic Jelly's performances became lacklustre. Critics grew harsh. Audiences thinned. Bookings became fewer. Within a year, Gothic Jelly were playing pub gigs again and Raymond was no longer with them.

They'd made one remarkable album and it sold CD after CD, download after download. Raymond had a copy but he seldom listened to it. It evoked happy memories. It made him weep.

## Part V

### The Lockdown Poems

Writers everywhere have been responding in their own ways to the coronavirus crisis and the accompanying lockdown, not only in Britain but throughout the world. In addition to Anne Cawthorn's little plays, we decided to write some poems about our own experiences of the lockdown, following the pattern "before – during –after", thinking of a particular *place* where we've been happy at some previous time, and a particular *person* with whom we shared that place and that happiness; then reflecting on what that place is like now; and then anticipating what it might be like to go there again when the crisis is over.

As always, the responses to this challenge proved imaginative, creative and highly varied and individual. Here are two poems each from Simone Hubbard and Jill Radcliffe and one each from Caroline Hardwick, Stephanie Billen, Mark Henderson and Kate Briant – plus three limericks from Pete Stellings. No compilation of work by Chapel Arts writers would be complete without some of Pete's limericks.

# A Girl and a Cat

**Jill Radcliffe**

There was a girl and a cat  
on the very first day.

Next day, the girl put on a hat.  
And sat with her cat.

Day three. The girl  
just sat with her cat,  
the cat wearing her hat.

Day 23. The cat ate a spider.  
While her eyes got wider and wider,  
the girl just sat.

Day 40. The cat ate a bee  
for her tea.  
The girl watched  
anxiously.

Whatever day it was next,  
it rained.  
The girl and her cat  
sat inside,  
the cat on the mat.

And so it went on.  
Day after day.  
Day after day after day.  
Rain or shine.

And so they still sat,  
girl and cat  
both starting  
to get fat.

The cat stopped hunting mice.  
She could hardly move.

The mice played and played.

They ran the cat ragged  
as she couldn't chase them  
any more.

The girl went to the house once,  
but couldn't get  
through the door.

Then it grew colder  
and a sharp snowflake fell.

Soon, more and more,  
thicker and faster

while the girl  
and the cat  
still sat.

Colder and colder  
until they froze.

Which was a shame,  
as lockdown finished  
the day after.

## **Appleton le Moors**

### **Simone Hubbard**

A quaint Yorkshire village with sheep roaming free  
Our cottage overlooking fields stretching for miles  
The two of us and a reluctant teenager in tow  
A few days away from the stressful routine  
Enjoying February's cold, crisp, short days  
Snowdrops emerging from winter adorning the verges  
Rugged up with coat, scarf, hat and gloves  
Perfect weather for exploring those hills  
Then returning to our cozy cottage to unwind  
Curled up, with a cup of Yorkshire tea and a scone  
Watching the weak winter sun setting

And what would it be like today?  
We're now free to travel the world  
But Covid-19 has stolen our time  
The world is on lockdown  
The cottage lying empty  
No one admiring the beautiful view  
The village sleepy and peaceful  
The sheep with lambs  
A beautiful day for walking  
Shorts, teeshirt, hat and suncream  
Trees in full leaf  
Blossoms and flowers emanating scents  
Into the clean air,  
And returning to the cottage  
Sipping a cool drink  
In the shade of a tree in the garden.

Maybe next year we can return  
Just the two of us  
Hoping the virus is buried for good  
In the depths of winter  
When spring is bursting at the seams  
Daffodils carpeting the verges  
Walking in the hills  
Watching the newborn lambs jumping about  
And returning to the cottage  
Curled up, with a cup of Yorkshire tea and a scone  
Watching the sun setting.

# Forcalquier

**Caroline Hardwick**

Warm spring scents, newly born  
Now a gentle zephyr, we rode the storm.  
His muscles relaxed, I felt, behold  
Our minds adrift on hills of gold,  
Stippled argent, speckled green,  
Lavender scents, now washed and clean.  
The pigeon tower met the sunset sky,  
Our clothes laid out in front to dry.

Now it's Sunday every day.  
The town deserted, none come to stay.  
No childish shrieks, no ring of bell  
They pray at home to keep all well.  
One lone white tent set in the trees  
A campsite empty, help them please  
To keep things safe for everyone,  
Until this tragic time is done.

The motorbike is dirty, we are tired.  
The long journey done, our senses fired  
With the scents so long anticipated.  
The shock of people congregated  
About the church. It's then we see  
A sign of how things used to be:  
Long peels of bells bless the air  
For a wedding in Forcalquier square.



## **Le Jardin Exotique**

### **Stephanie Billen**

Locked in time against a backdrop of blue  
This long-limbed lady is just like you.  
Head to one side with twisted up hair,  
Her alabaster face a quizzical stare,  
She rises above the cacti towers  
Facing the sea over sunbaked hours.

Her dusty ground is now unmoved  
The air unbreathed is strangely soothed  
While you behind your silver screen  
Are almost here yet still unseen  
I'd like to climb that hill with you  
And selfie us against that view.

Or is it best to leave it there  
A place where we without a care  
Could sketch and stroll and sweetly wander  
While you grew tanned and ever blonder?  
Let's share the sofa, stay at home;  
Together there's no need to roam.

# Lockdown

Mark P. Henderson

Evening spoke low and slow in a tongue we half-understood,  
sighed and purred as you squeezed it between soft palms:  
montage of flowers, mosaic of sun and cloud,  
odour of petrichor after showers, flavour of raisins.  
It was magenta time, a time for Mozart and Collins novels,  
a blackbird enchanting from a white poplar  
over a fractal sanctuary of garden. You wore shorts  
and t-shirt and lamentable trainers, and your eyes  
smiled fine and knowing over the New Forest:  
heathland, heatherland, ponies, deer  
grazed where we were grounded. We could hear  
breeze among branches, traffic faint and far.  
Could we, we asked, be happier than we are?

Noon simmers in solitude, muses under blue.  
I hold your hand a hundred miles away,  
watching grass grow, neighbours nod and doze;  
a somnolence of bees, a scent of amber,  
a taste of St Agur, Pynchon on the picnic rug,  
white anthems of Tallis lamenting  
the blackbird's sun-struck silence.  
Back of my eyelids, your imagined eyes smile grey  
at what we might find new in the New Forest:  
heathland, heatherland, ponies, deer  
wandering where we went. But now we'd hear  
silence; solitude; summer birdsong's spare.  
We'd but pollute the peace if we were there.

Lost leaves will whirl, brown as your hair once was,  
wind dreich from Denmark driving off the rime  
rigid on morning grass and ageing limbs.  
In that tomorrow, we will dream of dance  
but take our time, breathe, listen, taste  
and let the grey day grow at its own pace;  
drink tea, say what we'll hope to see, and then because  
we won't want all our recollections lost  
drive slow across the heathland, heatherland, hear

echoes of memory, see ponies, see the deer,  
and savour then the fading of the year.  
We lived in this place once. We loved it then.  
Let's hope to live and love it once again.

# Stokesay Castle: Before, During and After

**Kate Briant**

We sat in the disguised bailey of this doll's house castle  
surrounded by lawn and flowers; the air thick  
with the scent of lavender and  
the late spring sun hot on our backs.

All around us was the sound of blackbird and rook and rustling leaves  
And the voices of tourists exploring Stokesay's secrets.  
To our left stood the South Tower, hunched, grey and solid,  
once home to the castle guard, now a refuge for bats.  
Before us lay the Shropshire hills, cloaked in trees.  
My friend sat beside me, enchanted by the tiny castle.  
This was her first visit but I felt I'd come home.

Now the buildings are deserted except for the lone gardener  
perched on his mower or digging up dandelions.  
No sound of people talking, laughing; the only visitors  
are the birds and bats and the breezes that buffet the towers,  
and the gardener, maintaining his space for no one to see.

After the All Clear when people emerge from their homes once more  
and venture, perhaps nervously, into the world beyond,  
will they return to Stokesay to explore and photograph  
and delight in its smallness?

Or will our behaviour be changed, each watchful of coughs and wary of closeness?  
Will my friend come with me again to the miniature castle in the valley  
where bats swoop in the falling light and the air is full of lavender?

## Three Lockdown Limericks

### Pete Stellings

There once was a man in Lockdown  
who thought he would act as a clown.  
He put it on 'Zoom'.  
his ratings did boom,  
and now he's the talk of the town.

I'm shielding from Covid-19  
because I'm no longer a teen.  
I do social distance, at the government's insistence;  
the last time I tested was clean.

To travel by bus I need mask,  
trains too, what an onerous task.  
It's better by far,  
to travel by car,  
with coffee to go in a flask.

# Her World

Jill Radcliffe

Time is not quiet.  
It is turbulent, crashing and rushing  
to its own timetable,  
governed by tides and moons and mystery.  
It holds us in its web,  
like spiders strangulated  
in its gentle grip.

Do you see the icy sunlit droplets on the spider's web?  
Don't be deceived.  
Take a beautiful photograph if you must,  
But remember,  
it's an ugly trap for all who fly so hopefully into its softness.

Fly back, if you can;  
But you can't.

Yesterday, today, tomorrow  
are simply a magnetic force  
propelling us this way and that.

"Tomorrow's another day,"  
they cheerfully say.  
But what about yesterday?  
Gone, gone forever.  
"Learn from your mistakes," they say.  
But how?

Time has taken our yesterdays forever.  
Our past frozen.  
Our future uncertain.

"Time flies," they say.  
It flies onward,  
leaving us in its wake.

Time is a magpie,  
stealing our sparkly  
moments.

Or reminding us  
of what's gone.

But don't think that  
Time cares.  
She just keeps  
moving on and leaving  
us behind.

And now  
we sit,  
imprisoned  
by a virus  
who's claimed time  
as hers.

# Coffee Time with Pippa

**Simone Hubbard**

Docked at Stavanger - an early start.  
I draw back the curtains.  
Scenery lacking on the quayside;  
It looks grey and chilly  
But our spirits are not dampened,  
We're eager to explore.  
Our ferry leaves at 9.00.  
It's not waiting for the one who snoozes

Sør Hidle greets us with an explosion of colour,  
tranquillity and clean air.  
We amble through the gardens in awe  
Automatic mowers quietly snip the pristine green lawns.  
It's coffee time and we're the only customers  
Listening to the waves faintly lapping the shore.  
A bumble bee breaks the silence,  
busy in a purple delphinium,  
The sunshine peeps through the breaking cloud;  
This is morning coffee at its best.

That was August 2019 when life was normal  
When we could roam the world freely  
Unaware of a deadly virus lying in wait,  
Unafraid of breathing and standing near people.  
The very thought of our lives now would be absurd.  
We can't share a coffee in a quaint cafe  
Or even in our own home, so we Zoom,  
Connected visually via the internet,  
Cafetieres ready to plunge  
Top of the agenda -  
conversations about Covid-19,  
A new dictator to all mankind,  
Ruling our lives, clipping our wings.

I picture Sør Hidle today,  
The sun poking through the cloud,  
A pleasant 16 degrees,  
The air even cleaner,  
Trees reflecting in the ponds,

Birds singing and bees buzzing,  
Flying freely between the profusion of colour,  
Unaware that the visitors haven't come.

I would love to go back to the Fjords,  
Maybe next summer,  
Seeking out a perfect coffee stop  
And basking in the peace and quiet.  
But then, wouldn't the tranquility be shattered  
Just by us being there?