

M É L A N G E



A sixth collection of stories, poems and
descriptive writings, produced by the
Creative Writing Group
in celebration of 25 years of the
Countesthorpe u3a
September 1999 - 2024

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NOTE:

Each month we write to a theme, which may be a single word or a short phrase. One of the things that we find constantly surprising within our group is the huge variety of writing that results from a single theme.

With this in mind, we have tried to share a little of this with you, and thus you will find that some pieces in the booklet are written around a single topic. Examples of this are “Treasure” or “Blue”. Other pieces stand alone as examples selected as some of our other favourites.

We hope that you will enjoy reading our efforts as much as we have enjoyed producing them. If so, why not come and join us? No special talent for writing is required, just a willingness to commit your ideas to paper and to enjoy the efforts of others.

We meet on the third Monday of the month between 2 and 4 pm in the residents’ lounge at Brook Court, Countesthorpe.

EYES

Beth stared and the girl stared back. They did not speak, just looked, a mesmerising look, deep and searching, longing to know who they are or were. Silence screamed across the decades, eyes beckoned - come in, come and find out if you dare.

Those eyes, such innocence framed by beribboned tresses drew Beth forward irresistibly towards those questioning eyes. What lay beyond, within the youthful mind, what could be found looking backwards from where Beth came?

Young eyes asked Beth but she had no answer for what might have been. That fresh-faced youthful soul waiting for what was to come looked at the figure that was to be. The gulf between the girl that was and the aging woman was crushing. Such wistful pain, the freedom of the past and the constraints of the arthritic now.

Glances detached, each quickly ventured back to their place in time. The album closed. Blank pages in the mind remain.



© Ruth Westley

THE QUEST

It is well known that most fledgling knights or squires who aspire to be knighted must one day go on a quest. It is not compulsory, of course, but it does wonders for your reputation and put you and your Lord on the map. However, it is fair to say that not all quests go to plan. Take the Holy Grail for instance – total disaster from start to finish. The knights never found it and it did Arthur's status no favours. All I can say is that when they returned empty-handed, that infamous round table was hacked up to make several small, rectangular tables so that the knights did not have to sit together. Bad atmosphere in Camelot, and do not even get me started on Lancelot!



Then there was George; he might not have been on a proper quest, but he was certainly one of the more fortunate ones. George was not exactly brave, handsome or interesting. Those who knew him would imbibe vast amounts of ale just so they did not have to listen to his boring stories – which were mostly about horses or women. George seemed destined for mediocracy until he stumbled across the dragon. Let me tell you, this was not a fierce dragon. Like George, it was slightly overweight and happy to snooze all day. However, the townspeople had decided – for one reason or another – to sacrifice a virgin to the thing. Along came George who, apparently, with a mighty blow from his sword killed the beast. To be honest, it was probably asleep or too fat to run, but that did not stop old George becoming not only a sir, but – on his passing – a saint!

So there you have it. Now I, Sir Percival of Pevensey (*I know, I know, it is a mouthful and I do not even live there – I live in a small hamlet two towns over but my liege lord thinks it sounds noble, so I am stuck with it*) have been ordered by my lord to find a magical object that is lost somewhere in the vast forest that covers our land. What is this object, you ask? Well, no-one knows, which is not very helpful when trying to find it, but my lord found out that it will grant three wishes and therefore he decided he wanted it – badly! Frankly I do not know what he wants magic for – he has a huge castle, a beautiful wife, three strapping sons to continue the family name, and more money than sense. I did try to dissuade him, but to no avail and here I am, on the edge of the forest, about to start my own quest. I can only hope it goes better than the Holy Grail and if I do meet any mythical creatures, they are too old or too plump to bother with me.

* * * *

Three days in and there is no sign of anything remotely magical; the only plus to this is that it is spring, and the weather is mild, so it is not too uncomfortable for me to ride in my armour. My horse and I sleep under the trees at night, and I light a fire to heat up my meals. I have plenty of supplies and my friend, the cook, gave me a whole boxful of sweetmeats, so I am well fed. We travel fast, but we travel far, and the forest seems endless. I leave a bright stone here and there and tie ribbons to certain trees, so that I do not lose my way. It would feel like a pleasant journey if only I could find the object that I seek.

After a week, I find a large ruby buried beneath an oak tree; it is beautiful, deep red like blood and it twinkles in the dim sunlight that filters through the leaves. I pause for a moment and breathe deeply, that that ‘this is it – I have found it’ and I hold it up, talk to it; I even kiss it, but after a fruitless five minutes I must concur that this is NOT the object I seek. However, it will come in handy if I

return empty-handed and am banished from the realm. It must be worth a small fortune, so I pack it up in my saddlebag and continue on my way.

A day later, I am riding through another thicket of trees when I see a small cottage amongst the foliage. There is smoke pattering from the chimney, and it looks very homely. However, I am no fool – I know that cottages in the forest usually only mean one thing. I will not say it out loud, but the black cat on the doorstep sort of gives it away. Therefore I am very uneasy as I knock on the door, and say my prayers under my breath. The woman who finally answers peers out at me through filmy eyes, wrinkles so deep it is hard to even guess at her age. She looks distressed rather than frightening and explains to me in a quavering voice that her cooking pot (which looks suspiciously like a cauldron) has cracked and broken and she does not have the strength to lift it off the fire and replace it with a new one. I figure that I am too big to fit in either pot, and lend her my hands. Within an hour the old pot has gone, and a shiny new one sits in its place.



“Thank you, brave knight”, the woman says and sits me down to a huge meal that smells divine and tastes even better. I risk asking her if she knows of the magical object that lurks in the forest, and she nods sagely. I then ask her what it is, and she shakes

her head sadly. “No-one knows, good knight, but take this gift instead.” With that, she gives me a flask that is never empty, and fills up with any liquid of my choice. It is a remarkable thing to have and, along with the ruby, might be the very making of me.

A whole month has passed and I am growing weary. I am now tempted to take my new possessions and leave the forest forever. There are other castles and other lords; but somehow, I keep going, feeling now I have started this thing, I must end it.

Then I see the sparkling of water through the trees, and I dismount, walking through the bushes and brambles to find myself at a small but beautiful clearing with a clear pond right at the centre of it. Burying my pack under some leaves and tying the horse up so that he can comfortably drink from the water, I strip naked and plunge into its icy depths. It is so refreshing that I stay there, dipping my head and body beneath the surface until I feel clean and refreshed. As I dive down and float up for the last time, I realise that there is something on my head. I reach up and pull down the mangiest creature I have ever seen. Dirty brown feathers, a mottled green throat and a bright orange beak. It is not very comely, but it might be very tasty. I run my hand across it trying to work out just how much meat is on its bones when suddenly stars burst out of the sky, rainbows fill the forest and there is music floating on the air. Instead of the ugly thing that was going to be my lunch, there is a beautiful maiden and she smiles at me and speaks. "You have saved me, good knight, and now I will grant you or whoever you serve three wishes."

Well, I am totally shocked, and delighted with this outcome. All that searching, all those days and nights and all I had to do was just to rub a duck!

(Editor's note: The theme for that month was "Rubber Duck"!)

CASCADE

Your birth,
Headwaters in glacial meltwater,
Glittering,
Tranquillity at sunrise, sunset.
Lake dwellers take flight to the south
As you, an escapee.
Striving, thrusting, charting independence
Through gentle flow, gentle gradients.
Falling, slowly falling.
Tumbling, unfettered.
Rippling
Swirling in whirlpools as you descend.
Gaining force
You leap, swollen with heavy rains
Forcing your way through narrow cleft,
Hurling now,
A torrent, roaring, thundering, crashing
Through boulders.

Abruptly you reach it,
Giving rise to your being.

Steep and craggy
The ageless rock face
Greedy for your waters,
Your continuing performance.

What secrets you harbour!
Mystical caves,
Hidden homes,
Mosses and ferns,
Their rich green adornment.



Your fine mist
Yields magical rainbow.

Foss,
Invigorating power of nature.
At which we marvel.

Thomason Foss is a picturesque waterfall between the villages of Goathland and Beck Hole in the heart of the North York Moors National Park.

© Mikki Wilde



THE WISH

Mark blew out the seven candles on his birthday cake, but as fast as he blew them out, they re-lit.

Everyone laughed and encouraged him to keep blowing, so that his wish would come true.

"If the candles don't stay out when I blow them, does that mean my wish won't come true?" Mark asked.



His mother concerned that he was getting upset, so tried to reassure him. "No. No. Your wish will come true for each time the candles went out."

Mark went very quiet and left the trick candles to burn out on their own.

His mother asked, "Why didn't you blow the candles out, Mark?"

He looked up at his mother with a worried look on his angelic face.

"I don't want that many kittens. I only wished for one."

© Teresa Morgan

TREASURE

I'm my husband's little treasure,
I always tell him so.
I'm off to town in a minute,
I'll tell him before I go.

I'm his very favourite person,
I think that's safe to say.
I mention it now and again,
Well, several times a day.

I get little or no reaction,
He doesn't blink an eye.
I'm not sure he even listens,
He doesn't seem to try.

I'm sure I'm his favourite person,
He has no other friend.
I wish he would interact more.
It drives me round the bend.

I think that he agrees with me,
That might have been a nod.
But he's not my little treasure,
He's a miserable little s...d!



© Patricia Brown

Note from Patricia: This is a work of fiction. All characters are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental – honestly, Michael xx

RISING

I am rising to the occasion. It is a continual struggle, but needs must!

I am a child of the 1950s, having been born during the war years. It was a time, if not of poverty, but not much money around. The essentials of life were the priority, and what you wore in the way of clothing was basic. Divi-day was a day in the memory. Mum collected the Dividend payment at the Co-op Hall and I clearly remember then going to the Unity Buildings (our Co-op department store) where clothes were purchased. The choice centred on what I was to wear daily for school, so white shirts with grey trousers and blazer. I realise now that these were my “formative years” – the style of choice of clothing for later life was being set in concrete.

After school was college at the local Technical College. Again, the style of clothing was white shirt, always with a necktie, dark trousers and a jacket, or a suit. The came working in engineering, and whether I was in the design office or on the shop floor, still the same uniform mode of dress.

My career path was fortunately progressive, and as you join the ranks of lower management you dress accordingly – the business suit, and never without a necktie and white shirt.

Then comes retirement, and for me that meant the same mode of dress, except that the business suit was replaced with a pair of slacks from M&S, and an open-necked shirt – still white, of course.

After my wife died of multiple sclerosis and I re-joined the wider society, I met June. How my life has changed! Now there is an abhorrence of white shirts. I am encouraged to wear “casual” clothes, like chinos, Levi jeans and jumpers - without a shirt beneath!

I am rising to the challenge – and even if I admit it only quietly - I am enjoying it!

© David Norris

FRAGMENTS

Julia, brittle as finest porcelain, stood in her new, shiny and very expensive kitchen. She looked out over the well-tended garden. Although it was Oli's fifth birthday she'd snapped at him that morning on dropping him at school. Imogen, seven, who was usually at war with her brother had admonished her. Julia realised she had been quite at fault in their tense departure at 8.40 am. It had preoccupied her throughout the last few hours as had other matters. Fortunately Claire was going to collect the kids at the end of the school day.

She felt very alone as she prepared items for Oli's birthday party while awaiting an online grocery delivery. Twenty children were expected at 4.00 pm. Hopefully the puppeteer booked for the occasion would arrive promptly. James had assured her from his hotel in Edinburgh at 8.00 am that he would be back in time, flight and taxi permitting. Oli was so looking forward to seeing the surprise present his Dad had promised.

A few of the Mums would stay for the party, she assumed, so that would take some of the loading off her. Anticipating twenty boisterous, excited children filled her with a great sense of foreboding. Helen, her closest friend, was currently undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy so their contact lately had been somewhat reduced. That bout of treatment was coming to an end so for Helen there would be some sense of respite. Paul, her partner, had been very supportive.

With sadness, Julia's thoughts turned to Helen, hoping that all would be well and the treatment successful.

She glanced at the clock. 2.45 pm. All preparations were complete for the party. The delivery had been on time. Just waiting now for the entertainment, kids home and party to be over. Why hadn't James contacted her again during the day to give a progress update?

3.30 pm. Claire arrived with charges in tow. Julia rushed to give them both a long cuddle asking how their day had been. Oli seemed

to have forgotten her earlier sharpness, as he recounted a good day. Still no James, but the puppeteer was installed in the lounge, multi-coloured balloons at the ready for party games to follow.

“When will Daddy be home?” shouted Oli from the hall.

“Soon,” Julia responded. Desperate that that be so.

Children arrived, excitement ensued as presents were piled high. Vast quantities of party food were consumed.

“I’m vegetarian. What can I eat?” queried Chloe. Not at all seduced by the traditional small sausages. Other possibilities were pointed out, so she tucked into a cheese sandwich, after examining it closely.

With tummies full and chaos left behind in the kitchen to be cleared later, everyone trooped into the lounge.

Oli sitting next to Ben, his best friend, again asked after his Dad. All Julia could do was reassure that there must be a good reason why James was late on such an important day. Claire raised an eyebrow at Julia as she heard this exchange. The gesture was not lost on her.

The puppeteer had come recommended and was a great success. Expensive but worth it. The clock ticked on. 5.54 pm and time for party bags to be distributed. By this time balloons had migrated all over the house. Yet there were enough for each child to take one home with some left about the kitchen.

Oli was tired and ready for bed, though resistant because the family was still incomplete; utterly disappointed that Dad and the present had not been there at his party. Julia was very on edge by 6.45 pm as she ushered her children upstairs. This time Imogen kept asking about James. All that could be given was what Julia felt was diminishing reassurance. It took quite some time to settle them down with Oli shedding tears as she tried to soothe him.

By the time James turned up at 7.45 pm looking very tense, Julia was on her third glass of Pinot Grigio.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“We were delayed.”

“You could have called surely. Oli was so upset.”

Their conversation became more heated as it turned out that James had had a drink on the way home from the airport delaying him further. At this Julia seemed to lose all reason. At this point he shouted out.

“For God’s sake Julia. Listen!”

He picked up a paring knife, now on the worktop, and deliberately popped the nearest balloon.

“I’m leaving you.”

“What did you say?”

In that moment hopes for the future, her marriage, her sanity were gone. She could deny things no longer.

She heard him in their bedroom above as she stared at the fragments of the red balloon, lifeless on the kitchen floor. The kitchen, the former hub of their family existence.

Numbness sustained her as she heard him come down the stairs, cross the hall and slam the recently painted front door. Oli’s present left on the console table.

© *Mikki Wilde*



WINDOWS

A man came to sell me windows
Triple-glazed or double
I said I didn’t want any
That started all the trouble

I told him I'd no money
He said that was OK
He could get me finance
And with luck I'd never have to pay

He measured all my windows
And included my front door
He said it cost fifty thousand
But he'd do it for four

Now that seemed reasonable
So I said we'd go ahead
He measured up my portals
But that filled me with dread

When the day finally came
For the installation
My heart skipped several beats
In fear and trepidation

Trevor and Glen, installer men,
Arrived at half past nine
They were over an hour late
But said it would be fine

Between their liquid lunch breaks
And several stops for tea
The men did very little
Two days and still window free

The wind blows through the holes
Where my windows used to be
So I've nailed up sheets of chipboard
But it's much too dark for me

The salesman has telephoned
To apologise for the delay
The men will be back "as soon as"
But it could take until May.

© *Chad Barnsley*

MARTY'S BALLOONS

Marty loves balloons. Marty is six years old. Today is his birthday and, as is custom and practice, he is having a birthday party for about 10 of his friends. Marty's Mum and Dad have gone to town in decorating the house with balloons. Balloons of every size, shape and colour – an absolute riot of colour. Dad has run out of breath and Mum's fingers are sore with tying up the ends, but – there they all are, floating merrily to delight their little boy!

“Hold tight, Marty” calls his Mum, as she hands him a great mass of balloons, all tied together into one glorious explosion of colour.

Marty looks up at them with delight all over his face. He takes the strings and, clutching them tightly, floats up into the clear, blue sky.

Over the greenhouse, over the neighbour's garden, over the fields, over the woods and streams, over the villages – higher and higher. The people look like ants; the cars and farm animals look like the toy versions with which Marty loves to play. People look up at the little boy tightly clutching the vast array of coloured balloons. They wave and call out to him, though by now he is so high that he can hardly hear them.



He is like a bird, soaring over the treetops, swooping and swirling as the wind blows him. Marty shrieks with delight – his beloved balloons are giving him the ride of his life! He flies over the rookery in the park, much to the consternation of the rooks who have young in their nests. Suddenly, the rooks take action and take to the air. Flying higher than Marty, and then in a big group, they sweep downwards and with their sharp beaks peck at the balloons, bursting them one after the other.

Marty feels himself falling and cries out in terror. The ground is rushing up to meet him and he is petrified. “Wake up, wake up, Marty” says his Mum, shaking him by the shoulder, I think you were having a bad dream, but it’s time you were up and getting ready for school! Marty rubs his eyes and gazes sleepily around him. He’s safe in his bedroom, with the big balloon murals on his wall, and there in the corner is the great bunch of balloons left over from the party. “Yes, Mum, I dreamt I was flying in the air holding the balloons, until the big black birds came and pecked them all, and I fell down!”, said Marty.

Twelve years later, Marty is once more flying over the over the fields, over the woods and streams, over the villages – higher and higher. The people look like ants; the cars and farm animals look like the toy versions with which he used to love playing. People look up at him, wave and call out – though he is so high that he can hardly hear them.

He looks around in wonder. The burner sends a huge flame up into the brightly coloured canopy causing the hot air balloon to rise higher and higher into the clear, blue sky. Around him are lots of other balloons, all gently rising; all different colours and sizes, and all equally awesome. He can hear the ‘swoosh’ of the burner flames, as the balloon ballet continues to drift over the countryside.

For this is his eighteenth birthday and, as his present, Marty’s parents have bought him a hot air balloon ride, to happen during a balloon festival. He never lost his love of balloons all through his schooldays, and so it seemed a fitting present for him.

Another twelve years later, and Marty is once again at the same balloon festival. In the interim, Marty has trained as an airline pilot which takes him all over Europe flying Boeing 737 aircraft taking people on holiday and business. However, this time it is *his* hand on the balloon’s burner jet – for Marty is now captain of one of the

balloons. In addition to his pilot's licence, he has now qualified to fly hot air balloons.

Marty is once more flying over the fields, over the woods and streams, over the villages – higher and higher. The people look like ants; the cars and farm animals look like the toy versions with which he used to love playing. People look up at him, wave and call out – though he is so high that he can hardly hear them.

As they drift silently over the treetops and villages, Marty fondly remembers the way that his parents always made sure that balloons featured in his birthday celebrations. He thinks back to that dream on the night after his sixth birthday, and reflects that it would take a lot of very large rocks to bring down his present balloon.

Yes, Marty still loves balloons.

© June Norris



JANUARY

An anaemic sun rises reluctantly behind the shivering silver birch, a stubborn milky sky suppresses birdsong as winter holds the land in time-long fingers; the world suspended in frosty seasonal chill, waiting, waiting for stronger cosmic rays to induce release.

Bulbs will waken, birds will pair and the rising sun's new sharp light will brighten, lifting the human psyche, sap and blood responding to promised warmth. Life stirs. Our planet's tilted rotation will work the magic of a dawning spring.

© Ruth Westley

TREASURES

Annie sat quietly in her chair gazing out into the sunlit garden. The sunlight dappled through the trees and played on the grass; shadows formed, melted and reformed as the breeze shook the leaves and branches above. Her mind slipped into the past, and she saw a little girl approaching a wicker chest, opening it, and standing there with a rapt expression on her face. She clapped her hands in delight and reached into the chest, pulling out a large, decorated straw hat and a pretty flowered dress. She put them on and danced around calling out the words of a nursery rhyme. Other children appeared, reached into the chest, bedecked themselves in a variety of costumes and joined in the nursery rhymes. Treasured memories of early schooldays.

Later, Annie reached for a stout grey cardboard box, with metal reinforced corners which sat on the side table next to her chair. She opened the lid, and began browsing through the contents. A few old photographs set her mind off once again on well-worn paths, bringing back memories of times gone by. A wedding, new baby photos, a hand-knitted christening gown, pictures of family holidays, a Scout's neckerchief and woggle, and myriad other small items – all treasures beyond price to Annie.

Susie came in and asked if she'd like a cup of tea. "Yes, please, dear, and I'd like a custard cream as well", Annie replied. "For sure! Just a minute", said Susie. She returned quickly with a delicate china cup of tea, and the requested biscuit lodged on the saucer. "Can you swap this box for the wooden one, please?" asked Annie. Susie duly obliged, and put a wooden box onto Annie's lap, and took the grey cardboard one away before leaving Annie to enjoy her tea and biscuit.

Annie opened the wooden box, and sighed gently. A smile played on her lips and she began sorting through the little treasures that this

special box contained. A few various cards, a man's wedding ring, a wedding headdress and yet more photos amongst other small items. Annie gently took out two tiny toy rabbits – obviously much loved and looking a little well-worn but very happy. She sat contentedly with one in each hand, and gazed out into the garden once again. The sun was beginning to go down now and the light was starting to fade, with long slanting rays of sun managing to find their way through the leaves.

Sometime later Susie came to collect the empty teacup. She found Annie sitting in her chair, with a gentle smile on her face. The tea and biscuit remained untouched. The two tiny rabbits lay on the floor, noses together, where they had fallen from Annie's nerveless fingers.

© June Norris



THE STORY OF THE TRAMP

It is five o'clock in the late afternoon on Christmas Day and a tramp is seeking shelter in the church porch. The church will give him shelter. The spire rises high over the valley, a beacon for wanderers. He is a wanderer – a man of the road.

Two paths lead to the ancient church. The first has a gate and some semblance of a path over which weeds have grown but the tramp takes the second path, a lane overshadowed by the trees and bushes.

A man with a dog taking a walk along the first path then through the churchyard and passes the net door of the porch that keeps out birds and animals. The calmness of the Christmas afternoon had replaced the anxiety of the previous weeks and he walked gently, quietly holding the dog's lead.

The tramp sees him.
“Good evening, sir,” –
he was a polite man.



The man with the dog’s
relaxed grip tightens as
he hears the tramp’s
salute. The dog barks.

At that moment a
second man appears
through a small iron
gate from a house

adjoining the churchyard. Now there are three men and a dog.

Frost has covered the grass; the stones seem lonely. The three men allow that the night is very cold. The first man hurried home with his dog to bring cake and Christmas fare. The second man offered a room for the night, that special Christmas night.

“With walls I cannot sleep.”

“Therefore I will fill your flask, provide blankets and return at daybreak.”

The third man – the tramp – is content.

As the night passes and the light gets clearer the tramp, man of the road – can be seen in the church porch enjoying a breakfast brought to him on a tray. Here are slices of buttered toast, exclusive marmalade, hot sweet tea, freshly boiled eggs and a glass of wine.

“Where are you bound for?” asks his host.

“Boston” says the old man.

“Why Boston?”

“Because I’ve never been to Boston.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you,” he says as he picks up his flask, puts it in his pocket, gathers up his stick and bag and slowly wanders down the path with a gate, on his way to Boston.

© *Margaret Issitt*



HAIKU – STRENGTH

Russian might assails
While ruined cities smoke, yet
Ukraine’s strength prevails

Pandemic rages
Ordinary folk suffer
NHS stays strong

© *June Norris*

THE FRUIT BOWL

The newly replenished bowl of fruit sat on the dining room table when the silence was broken by Orange. “You do realise” said a rather haughty voice, “that I am the ideal fruit. I am a perfect sphere, my skin is flawless, a dazzling orange colour and covers the juiciest fruit anyone could wish for.”

Apple spoke next, “What about us. We are spherical too and...” before any more could be said Orange interrupted saying, “Huh, call yourself a sphere, I’ve seen rounder conkers fall off a horse chestnut tree. As for colour, you can’t even decide what colour to be; sometimes you’re red, sometimes green, and sometimes yellow. You need to make up your mind on that one.”

Then it was Banana's turn to speak, "Well no-one could call me a sphere by any stretch of the imagination but at least you know I am ripe when I change from green to yellow. I am certainly consistent colour-wise."

Next a faint, rather pathetic voice was heard from the middle of a bunch of grapes. "We are like little spheres," it said "and we come in different colours like Apple." Another interruption from Orange, "Please will someone explain to that little green thing exactly what a sphere is."

Pear decided to join in the conversation saying, "I don't know why I always get the blame when things go wrong. Why can't things go apple-shaped or grape-shaped instead of pear-shaped?"

Just then the dining room door opened, and the three children of the



household headed straight to the fruit bowl. "Mum said she has refilled the fruit bowl and we can help ourselves," said the eldest. "I am going to have an apple" said one, "and I'm going to

have a banana," said another. The third child stared at all the fruit in the bowl and then said slowly, "I think I will have ... a pear."

They turned to leave the dining room and as they did so there was an audible sigh from the fruit bowl.

© Shirley Wilding

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MYSTIC MEG?

Whatever happened to Mystic Meg?
Did she win the lottery?
With her 'gift' for seeing things
That ordinary people cannot see?

She sat with veil upon her head,
Those magic numbers she declared.
The crystal ball beneath her hand,
Into the misty world she stared.

But who was she? Where did she go?
Did she guess the winning digits?
Did she vanish to far off lands,
To live the life of rock and roll bands?

Beneath her cloak and beaded charms
Was she a man with tattooed arms?
Was she a cleaner, or failed pop star?
Where did she go? Was it far?

I hope she won the lottery
And lived the life of sand and sea.
A luxury yacht and avocado
Prawn cocktail, Black Forest gateau.

Or did she vanish, sight diminished
To work amidst the factory floor.
Her secret life now sadly finished,
Her veil and props put into store.

If into the future we could see
Would we humans happier be?
The element of surprise,
Life unfurling before our eyes.
Bring it on, embrace each day,
Who was Mystic Meg anyway?

© Kathleen Dickman

A MUSE ON BLUE

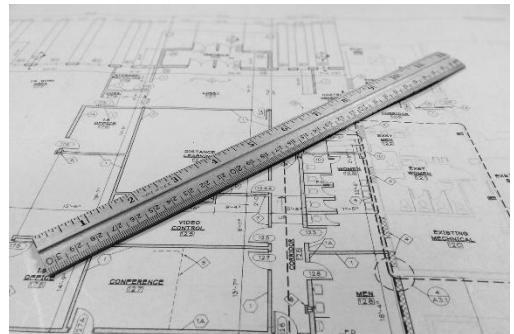
Blue skies
Blue-eyed boy
Feeling blue
Deep blue sea
Blue blood
Up the Blues!
Air Force blue
Blue with cold
A bolt out of the blue
Blue horizons
Talk 'til you're blue in the face
Blue rinse brigade
Blue collar
Blue-arsed fly
Blue sky thinking
Feeling blue
Singing the blues
Blue humour (oops!)
(Hoist) the Blue Peter
Blues and twos
A bolt out of the blue
Into the wild blue yonder
Blue around the gills
(Scream) like blue murder
Blueprint
Turn the air blue!

I only do this sort of thing
Once in a blue moon!

*Isn't our language wonderful that a word
can be used to convey such precise and
exact meanings?*

I can't wait to start on the rainbow.

© Graham Surman



JUST DESSERTS

Do you remember the sweet trolley, that wondrous collection of delights that stood at one side of the smarter hotel restaurants, the sort of place you probably couldn't afford to go to when the children were little but perhaps could when they were older and had left home? Such an hotel existed on the island of Herm, the smallest of the Channel Islands sitting close to France. The hotel may still be there catering for the more discerning guest. The accommodation was in the main building or in one of the converted fisherman's cottages along the front. A camping site close by provided most consumables from an open shop which was also supplied by the hotel. It was a well thought out business monopolising the holiday trade, as there were no other shops.

My husband and I arrived there by boat one afternoon after a two hour sail from Sark, and were immediately captivated by the island and the hotel. The first couple of hours, being exhausted, we lazed on the beach, changed, and quite early, headed for the dining room.

In the mid nineteen eighties very few hotels or restaurants had mastered the art of making dining an aesthetically pleasing experience. This hotel had done well, impressing me with a look of grand, yet cosy understated opulence. The room had windows down the length looking out over the beach and sea. The heavy velvet deep maroon curtains were tied back with cords and tassels. The chairs were upholstered in a paler dusky pink, the tables clothed in white, matching the beautifully folded napkins and some pink carnations stood proudly upright in little elegant silver vases on every table. It felt spacious, everything placed for ease of walking along the polished wooden floor. Entry was through large glass doors then down a couple of steps. The Maître d'hôtel, dark dinner jacket, bow tie, met the diners to lead them majestically to their allotted table.

I wore a soft green flowing cotton skirt and matching blouse, low heeled white suede shoes and held a small handbag. Husband was in smart nearly formal clothes and he was rarely without a tie. Thus we entered the dining room. We were obviously the first to arrive, all the tables primed ready for guests. A row of young waitresses, black skirts, white laced aprons, crisp white shirt tops, stood to attention. The Maître d'hôtel, greeted us and, bowing slightly, indicated that we were to follow him, so we did, making a little line one behind the other down the wide avenue between the tables and along the polished floor, towards our table by a window.

Suddenly and inexplicably, my left heel slid inwards making me quickly bring my right leg forwards to check my fall. Just as I felt equilibrium within my power, the heel went again. Still vainly hoping to maintain an upright posture, gathering speed in the effort, the inevitable collapse happened. Landing with my knees on my skirt, the forward projectory continued at a pace, my hands running fast in a crawling motion the better to keep up with my body, preventing my face meeting the floor. Ahead of me, in the middle of the room, stood the tall sweet trolley.

Raspberry surprises were standing soldier-like along the narrow top. Next tier down were the cheesecakes, Black Forest gateau and pastel shaded mould (I remember thinking that I had a jelly mould the same shape at home), and a large earthenware jug of pouring cream. The lowest level had fresh fruit salad, eclairs and the cheese board. It is strange how such details can be imprinted on the mind so quickly when in a state of stressed bewilderment, but I was at eye level with the bottom tier of desserts. My right shoulder hit a lower left corner of the trolley at the conclusion of my slide. The raspberry surprises did a threatening clatter but stayed put, the large cream jug however was more affected by the jolt and the cream made a 'shloiping' noise. Little spots of the stuff fell on my head and blouse and white blobs appeared on the parquet floor around me. Little rivulets dribbled down the now quivering pale mould and of course splodges added to the decoration on the dark chocolate cake.

I looked up from the lowly position of the Maître d'hôtel's trousered knees and he looked down on me. Have you heard the expression "I wish the earth had swallowed me up"? That perfectly describes how I felt. The lovely young waitresses, their faces like drooping sunflowers, peered at this strange woman. I thought of the nursery rhyme 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary' with her pretty maids all in a row. I scabbled to my feet, helped by my husband. After a bit of a fuss which seemed to involve more people than was necessary, we settled down to enjoy a delicious meal although I have no recollection of what I ate. I did notice that the sweet trolley had been tidied up a bit when it arrived at our table for the dessert course.

The shoes? I decided to throw them away. I didn't though. Expensive. Years later they were the cause of an unfortunate incident. But that is another story which involves a large blue hat.

© *Ruth Westley*

GAZING . . . (out of the window)

I loves a gaze.
You see the world go by.
There's her from 42,
Putting on a bit o' weight from the look of it;
Mind you she can tuck it away when she's minded;
Likes a drink an' all.
Still, she's kind to me.

Gazing helps me think.
You know when politicians do daft things,
Like Herbie, look at him!
Smart, brisk and flabby.
Why did he have an' affair with my neighbour?
She 'ad to move, an' I liked her.
Left her bedroom curtains open of a night, she did.

Keeps me in touch, gazing does.
I sees when something's 'appenin',
Watching doctors, nurses, ambulances come an' go.
Police, debt men an' window cleaners.
I knows who 'as Aldi or posh shopping.
The Amazon man is very popular,
Especially at number 93

Gazing reminds me
Of the changing weather, school leaving time.
Bus time tables, road sweepers.
To wave at past relationships.
To count the birds and old George.
An' then I wish I hadn't told 'im to bugger off
And slammed the door in 'is face.

Gazing is my phone,
My local news.
Better than television, no doom 'n gloom here.
Just hustle an' bustle an' movement.
Reminds me that the world is still turning.
When you can't take part,
When gazing is all you got left,
Out o' the window

© *Graham Surman*



THE FUTURE

Swollen with new life, Eve stood under the crowded bus shelter. Waiting. All she needed at that point was just enough of the narrow plastic seat on which to squat down. No chance of that though tonight. Even in her pregnancy. Nobody was going to make room for her on this cold November evening, threatening rain. It had been cheaper to take the bus than pay for fuel and parking on this occasion she'd decided earlier.

The city centre was very busy with workers needing public transport home. Tourists also increasing the numbers. Buses were always packed at this time. Standing room only, very often. She reckoned that with luck she'd make it onto the next bus due in seventeen minutes according to the updated information. She didn't relish standing about any longer than necessary.

In her thirty sixth week, she was weary. Thankful to some extent that she was not reaching full term in a blistering heat wave. At least she'd gained an acceptable amount of weight. Certainly not the three stone her aunt had put on in the 70s, or so she said. She'd gone home after an antenatal appointment when the consultant had commented on her weight gain, and proceeded to eat her way

through a large chocolate covered roll. Eve savoured such a slice at that moment.

As she pondered weeks, months and years to come for her and her unborn child, Eve felt weighed down. Worries flooded in. Particularly this evening as she waited, because her emotional state was accentuated amongst the waiting couples and groups.

It had not been easy, the decision to keep the baby. The result of a very short lived affair with her married boss. The cliché of the situation. However, one that still had to be dealt with in reality. She'd be perceived as the stereotypical single parent, but she was determined in her more rational moments to cope more than adequately with her changed circumstances. At twenty one further qualifications and another job could also follow. Better than being sixteen or seventeen.

She'd always liked poetry and as she stood there the words of Sylvia Plath came to mind: *"Love set you going like a fat gold watch"*. In his case lust and availability obviously, she thought. Plath had satirized the immediate connection between mother and baby in her poem. Eve hoped that for her a flood of love and connection would ensue, without the postnatal depression experienced by an old school friend.

Only another two or three minutes to go. She'd overheard a girl in the queue, after checking the bus time table app on her phone, tell her companion that she'd verified the arrival time of the number 13. The one she wanted. Reassurance as the temperature was dropping.

Eventually, their bus rounded the corner at the bottom of the hill. Progress had been slow due to volume of traffic. Relief as it halted by the bus stop was compounded when she climbed aboard. Her mood lifted also when a woman stood up offering Eve a seat for

which she was exceedingly grateful. The solidarity of empathy. As the bus pulled off conveying her to her future, city lights twinkled.

© *Mikki Wilde*

I WONDER IF . . .

I wonder if I might take flight
In Magic Time, when folk like me
Become free.

Tonight my wings will feel a surge, an urge to fly.

I will go to the heron to ask him if, like me,
He can see.
The fish will speak through popping lips
Toads and newts, so seldom seen,
Blinking, hopping.

My friends observe our precious home.
We witness nature come and go.
A bud unfurls, a bursting flower,
The dark of night, a sudden shower.
I know that snow, so soft and deep
Will cover bulbs beneath
And keep them warm,
Till warmth and light bring colour and life.

I watch the seasons, feel heat and cold.
The fever of Spring, the vibrance of Summer.
The smell of Autumn's decay,
The sparkle of a Winter's day.
Dipping branches tap mirrored surface,
Pond-dippers skate, frogs mate,
Shy creatures claim their space.

In the night when humans sleep
Oblivious to our other lives
We taste freedom, see our friends,
Watch for the time when Magic ends.

Perhaps the solid mushroom speaks,
The heron spreads his wings,
The fishing boy rests from his toils,
And now before the Magic spoils,
The fairy finds her place.
Amongst the rustling leaves of shrubs,
In shelter of the lofty trees
I settle down and know that soon
Beneath a bright and shimmering moon
Another Magic Time will come
In this magical, secret, special home.



© Kathleen Dickman

YES OR NO?

Oh my! He's going down on one knee!
Not the most romantic place to do this, out jogging.
What do I say, yes or no?
We have only been together eight months –
Is that long enough to know?
Are we really compatible?
I do love him, but is that enough?
So many uncertainties, but that is life.
I will say yes, but *he* hasn't said anything yet . . .
Perhaps a prompt is in order
"What are you doing down there?"
"Tying your laces, as they have come undone.
Don't want you tripping up, do I?"

© Teresa Morgan

I AM A SPIDER

I can be called Common and House
Not so in my case
For I can fashion exquisite lace.

I live in cracks of a timber frame
In an overgrown garden
Around me . . . rose . . . grows.

It is now October, nearly dawn
I have worked my patterns, strong yet delicate and stop to rest.
No teacher . . . instinct.

The sun breaks through the mist
A thousand diamonds light up my web, like a royal crown
Glistening and cold.
All that glisters . . .

I wait for warmth to lure my prey
My work well done, a meal away
I am drowsy in the rays.

I must not sleep, a vigil I must keep,
Then pounce . . . and feast.
My ambush spoils to reap.

So, no, not Common or House
A master of deceit and craft
This web of steel-like strength.
My home, my sustenance, my creation.



© Kathleen Dickman

TREASURE

I have been here for three hundred years or more, ever since the day Captain Jack got me to carry his treasure chest to the centre of the island. He carefully took markers and counted his steps, writing them all down on a piece of parchment with a map of the island drawn on it. Jack had visited the island before, and had finally decided that it was the safest spot to bury his treasure.

He had me digging a very deep hole before depositing the chest in it and then just as I finished filling it up again, I turned towards Jack to find him pointing his pistol at me . . .

“No, Jack! No!” I pleaded.

“Sorry, Mate” answered Captain Jack. “Can’t have you about, knowin’ where my treasure is hid. You will be my final marker for when I come back.”

He left me there on top of the buried treasure, covering me in soil and foliage. My spirit did not leave me, so I assumed (ass that I am), that I was doomed to stay with the treasure until it was found.

The years have not been kind to the island. The shoreline eroded and I am now nearer to the beach than I ever was. Of course, my body has totally decomposed, my dust, bones and clothing gone with the wind, at least all that was left after the wild life had had their fill.

Although the shoreline was eroding, it did not stop a hotel being built. I welcomed it, thinking that they would dig up the treasure and set me free, but no - they missed me. So now I have to hope that some kids, digging sand-castles, might find it. At least, I now have some entertainment listening to the visitors on the beach.

“Oh, wait. I think I have visitors!”

“Billy, what are you going to do today?” Asked a male voice.

A young boy dressed as a pirate answers, “I’m going to dig for treasure”, as he heads in my direction.

Could this be it at last? I shout out, even though I know he can't hear me. "This way, my lad. This way!"

The boy pauses and looks around him - can he hear me?

"Over here, my lad", I shout again, and the boy follows my voice.

When he reaches the spot, I shout "Dig here, my lad. Dig here!" and he starts to dig.

"Billy, come and have a drink and put some sun screen on."

"Keep on digging, lad. You're nearly there!" I shout.



"In a minute, Mum. I'm nearly there."

At that moment there is a clunk and the lad scrapes away the dirt from the top of the trunk.

"Dad, Dad" he yells. "Come and see what I've found!"

"Thank you, my lad, for setting me free!" said I, as I floated away.

"NO, THANK YOU, SIR!" I heard Billy shout back.

© *Teresa Morgan*



Until regrowth stirs.
Stump shoots forth from coppiced state.
Then worshipped anew.

© *Mikki Wilde*

OUT OF THE BLUE

Out of the blue the flood waters came,
A natural disaster; no one to blame,
Destroying roads, fields and crops,
Houses, businesses, pubs and shops,
Creating havoc, leaving much to reclaim

Out of the blue the tsunami came
A natural disaster; no one to blame
Threatening turmoil, destruction and death
Before the people could stop to draw breath
Confusion rising like a fiery flame

Out of the blue the earthquake came
A natural disaster; no one to blame
A thundering, deafening, random menace
Revealing a huge and frightening abyss
Too fraught with danger to attempt to tame

Out of the blue the helping hands came
To give help and assistance was their aim.
Friends, neighbours strangers
Not heeding the dangers
Bringing support

© Shirley Wilding



Crunchy shuffle. Boots
Displace shed yellow, orange,
Red. Soul enhancing.

© Mikki Wilde

ANTHEA

Anthea Mulgrew was a large presence. A huge bear of a woman with bear-sized hands. She stood at six foot three in stockinged feet and weighted twenty-two stone without clothes. This was just right as she was an all-in wrestler. Her ring name was “Right Big Mamma” which betrayed her northern roots.

She always thought that she must be adopted as her mother was only five foot one and a cleaner, and her father five foot seven and a traffic warden. And, as everyone knew, she became a wrestler by accident. One night she was watching one of her favourites “Giant Haybarn”. During round three of the bout he ran at his opponent, missed completely and hurtled over the top rope of the ring, landing at Anthea’s feet on his back. She’ll never know why she did it, but she dropped to her knees and kissed him on the lips. He just smiled and got back into the ring.

During the next contest a steward passed her a message. It invited her back to “Giant Haybarn’s” dressing room at the end of the evening. It was then that he suggested that she might try making a living on the wrestling circuit. He suggested that he become her trainer and she agreed. Three months later she defeated “Maggie the Terminator” in her first contest. She was an instant hit and soon became the darling of the WWF circuit. She soon gave up her job delivering coal.

She and “Giant Haybarn” aka Bert Perkiss, spent many hours together and their love grew until they were inseparable. They married in the spring, ordered a super king-sized bed and bought a huge house. Maybe not a conventional life, but for her, progress!

© *Chad Barnsley*

THE BAG

I looked around the lounge. Tidy. Well sort of. Structured clutter I call it. Until I come to Mike's "stuff". Now my books are in one neat pile. He maintains his are in neat piles too. I hardly call a scattering of individual books "neat piles". "Nothing against having neat piles of one" he says. I beg to differ. "'Pile' and 'one' are totally incompatible words when used together" I tell him crossly.

Then there are his magazines and catalogues. I can accept he still has to read some copies of 'The Engineer' but what about the ones he's read? Why are they still here? And I'm sure that he can get the information from the Ikea, Screwfix, Argos and all those car catalogues on line. It's different with my travel brochures, after all, I am trying to choose and book a holiday that doesn't clash with all our other family commitments, appointments and social outings. And . . . they're in one neat pile. And my paintings are in a neat stack in the dining room, as are the paints, the watercolour papers, the portfolios, the collage materials . . . actually there is rather a lot, but I will be using it. Soon. Well sort of.

At least the kitchen's clear. "But why" I ask my beloved "do you have three pairs of gardening gloves, three pairs of gardening shoes AND one pair of wellies clogging up the utility room?" "I guess the other two pairs of wellies are in a neat pile in the garage" was his sarcastic reply.

Then there's the hall. Cans of paint, rollers, trays, brushes, Polyfilla, sandpaper and an assortment of tools here, there, and up the stairs. "It's like an assault course negotiating this lot", I complained. His eyes lit up, "Now that's a great idea, the grandkids will love it!" They probably would, but I trust he's joking. They are all due here for lunch tomorrow. Ten people and one dog are rather a tight squeeze in our semi, so all the aforesaid articles throughout the house will have to disappear. Now there's a thought, instead of making endless journeys traipsing up and down the stairs to the spare bedroom with what feels like all our worldly goods, I wish I could just

make them disappear! Not for ever of course. What I need is a 'Bag of Holding'. You know, like the one in the Dungeons and Dragons game. Well sort of.

In case you don't know, a Bag of Holding is only about two feet in diameter at the mouth and four feet deep, but opens into a non-dimensional space, making the space larger inside than it is outside, and can hold up to five hundred pounds, not exceeding a volume of sixty-four cubic feet, but it always weighs only fifteen pounds, regardless of what is put into it. This could become a permanent solution, but, I reckon, as the icing on the cake, that when you think of the item you want to retrieve, it just pops to the top of the bag!

I wish! Yes, I wish I really could, wish that is.

Mike passes me a pile of his catalogues. Do you know just how heavy they are? And he hasn't cleared the stairs yet. Accident (likely mine) waiting to happen. I'd probably put him in the bag first!

© *Patricia Brown*



APOLOGIES

"Looking back at what has just happened over the last five hours, and now that I have had a chance to calm down a bit, I feel in some really strange way that I kind of owe you an apology. Considering every aspect of what has just gone on between us, I can see that in virtually every way you were better on the day, even though I came out on top in the end.

It sort of takes the shine off things a tiny little bit. You won 14 more points than I did, just not the most important ones in this crazy sport of ours. All the stats point to you as having been better throughout, yet I am the one who gets the plaudits, raises the trophy, chalks up another major victory, gets my picture all over the newspapers and the internet in the morning.



Yet, am I really sorry? Of course not! In the grand scheme of things, I am chasing you down as hard as I can. I will catch you one of these days, mark my words!

The only thing I can't seem to do is win the hearts and love of the fans. That belongs to you, all over the world. I wish *I* was loved as *you* are loved. I am respected, but not loved. You are both respected *and* loved. I apologise if wanting to be loved irritates people – but I can't deny that it's how I feel. Perhaps, when you're off the scene, my turn will come."

(Private thoughts from Novak, 14 July 2019)

"So sorry, everybody! I tried everything, gave my all, had one hand on the trophy and then blew it. Two championship points, then I dropped my serve. So, on we went, for the longest singles final in Wimbledon history. I seem to make history every time I walk on a tennis court, but this is one bit of history I could do without. I feel I've let you all down – my team, my family, and my fans. It was a fantastic experience in many ways, and I feel proud of how I played. Even so, my best efforts came on the not-so-vital points, which I did not win. Ironic that I even won more points than he did, but that's our sport – that's our life. It will be better in the morning, I know. Sorry, Mirka. I probably won't be very good company this evening once I've done all my media duties. Let's just settle the boys into bed, and spend a little time with the girls before their bedtime."

(Private thoughts from Roger, 14 July 2019)

(NOTE: Wimbledon Gentlemen's Singles Final Day, 14 July 2019)

© June Norris

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perhaps you might like to join us?

We meet on the
third Monday of each month
2.00 pm – 4.00 pm
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