

# Five at Four

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# Contents

## **Introduction**

### **Sue Lumb**

El Personaje

Trespasses

Warrior

Unfinished

A Minoan Tale

### **Kathryn Jones**

Videogames

Sunset

How Did it Come to This?

‘Messenger’

Oh, To Be

### **Sharif Gemie**

The Other One

The New Monument

At the Platform

Levelling-Up

### **Suzy Hobson**

Bryce Canyon

Death Watch Beetle

Friday Night on the Moon

House Clearance

Salvaged

## **Wayne Putterill**

Lords and Ladies

Halloween 2031

Rain

The Prizewinner

Just Visiting

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## Introduction

Distance, a concept that many became acutely aware of at the beginning of the 2020s: Hands, face, space; two metres and masked; step back, step back. A global pandemic made strangers of us all.

Distance is no stranger to the reader or the writer, we are always removed from our subjects. The author does the best they can with their pen or keyboard and invites the reader to bridge the gap between with imagination. Good writing is a rhythm of supplying and withholding information, teasing out character, setting and conflict in the mind of the reader. It is there the work comes alive.

This group of writers was formed during the pandemic of 2020. We have never sat together in a room, and there are some I've never even met in the flesh. Instead, we've communed in the evenings through our laptops and tablets. The distance bridged by Wi-Fi and cable; webcams and microphones. It is my 11<sup>th</sup> year teaching Creative Writing in the South Wales Valleys and the way people connect always surprises me. Despite this group not being what we would call an "in-person session", they have bonded over their love of literature, and created friendships as well as fiction.

At the time of writing, the group is two years old. What you hold in your literal or figurative hands is potential; a collection where the experienced has met the beginner, and where both have supported each other to create work both fascinating and engaging. Never before have I met a group so receptive to feedback and advice from their peers. Surprisingly little red ink was used in the creation of this book.

Despite the distance, I have been touched by the quality and sensitivity of the writings within this collection and I hope you are too.

Stephen Jenkins

## Sue Lumb

**S**ue has been writing for many years, but only started writing poetry after the death of her husband. She joined this Creative Writing group about eighteen months ago; to her surprise she now focuses more on poetry than prose. Sue is retired from a long career in IT and loves travelling. She has been to all six continents and has especially enjoyed observing wildlife and learning about history and culture. Brought up in Cumbria, Sue has spent most of her adult life in Pontypridd. She has two sons and seven grandchildren. Apart from writing, her hobbies include reading, cinema, art and meeting friends for coffee and meals out. Her writing themes are based on hope, determination and reflection.

## El Personaje

He smells of old tobacco  
sitting outside his home  
in an old chair he's had for ever  
that creaks when he moves.

Smiles and nods to strangers  
greet friends with a cheeky  
wave and com estas?  
Never speaks about his wife  
who lies in the graveyard of  
his local Iglesia never forgotten  
In his mind for all time  
but no longer mourned.

His past secrets will go with  
him to his eternity when he joins  
his wife. They will laugh together  
again in blissful memories  
of when fragile peace broke out  
under a dictator who caused a  
million lives lost, some of whom  
were his comrades in arms.

Loyal to the last of their republic  
welcoming fighters from afar  
seeing death staring them in the face  
killing men who never went home.

Old lives returning to the sea  
mending nets and talking of nothing  
more than chit chat and gossip

day on day until he became too old  
to clamber down the ladders into  
the fishing boats at crack of dawn.

His tall frame broken by age and  
frailty with a granddaughter who  
dutifully washes his smelly clothes and  
cooks his meagre meals while her grandson  
plays cards with him and always loses.  
Nothing wrong with his bright mind.

Chuckling as he ruffles the boy's  
hair and teases him about chasing  
girls with the benefit of experience  
learned long ago in the same village  
with the ancients who are long gone  
but he sees in his mind as he recalls  
laughter and love dodging round the  
streets, his future wife among the chase.

Making mischief and cheeking the  
old men waving their walking sticks  
in protest but remembering their  
own courting antics. Nothing changed.



## Trespases

Hushed. No sound from this gothic masterpiece, the saints staring into the spaces where the dead have lain in stately silence and the living have walked and knelt in pleas for redemption.

Where music soared from the quire, boy sopranos harmonising with tenor and bass in glorious worship of a higher being whose existence they question in the torment of life's complexity.

Ritual of psalms, hymns and sung Eucharist, white robed men with jewelled cloaks and bishop's mitre. The mass over, choirboys giggle and push each other out of the cathedral impatient for cake and squash in the refectory.

Vergers tidy the remains of bread, wine, chalice and plate, priests bow reverently at the high altar, and disappear to disrobe into sweatshirts and trainers, unrecognisable as men of religion.

Quiet contemplation returns, the pipe organ silenced, no voice intoning words of solace absolution from sins and the blessing of God Almighty,

just fading sunlight reflecting on those  
disapproving medieval stone faces whose  
transgressions are long forgiven and forgotten.

Unlike mine.

## Warrior

Marble cold eyes hide your  
emotions, paid to shave your  
head to stare into a camera for  
others to admire the  
clothes you wear, not  
your mind.

Skin hiding scars of  
beatings and bruises, makeup  
applied to highlight  
contours while the mental  
torture you face daily  
is concealed.

Rebellion flows through your  
expression, questions your  
existence in an industry you  
despise, exploitation of your body for  
money and fame, repressed anger  
to fight.

Images of security where you long to  
escape, friends you yearn to make,  
life to be lived free of this slave-like  
circus of starvation diets maintaining  
the look you crave  
to leave behind.

Feelings you long to express when  
you dare not, while you question how  
to be true to yourself when all around

you is false, driven by money and power, the latest look to strive to achieve.

Determination will succeed if you just believe that this life will not be for ever, nor end in tragedy or cancellation but a future where fame means nothing, focus your mind to a world where happiness is everything.

## Unfinished

Hunger claws at her stomach as she  
perches on a disintegrating tower  
above a divided city scape  
bleak on one side and  
shiny on the other.

Is escaping her reality the solution to the austerity  
of a life scarred by brutality and devoid of love  
as she braces herself to jump  
down on the tracks on an  
uncertain journey?

Fending for herself will be no different from before but  
determination to chase opportunities propels her  
towards the sea of headlights instead of  
vanquished hope left dangling in  
the darkness behind her.

Visions of safety in anonymity  
where there is no need to steal to live  
and she can find her inner voice to benefit  
from the craft she learned out of necessity on  
the miserable streets and make her debut on the other side.

## A Minoan Tale

**T**he archaeologists had found fragments of pottery inside an ancient cooking pot during excavations of an underground chamber in the Greek palace, along with some ashes and fragments of clothing which were quite well preserved. It was more evidence of the tragedy that had happened here.

Many centuries earlier, a girl called Lydia had looked down miserably at the shattered remains of the amphora at her feet, the olive oil wasting in a puddle which was now trickling across the floor tiles. Her mistress was furious.

“You must learn to look where you’re going, Lydia,” she scolded. “You will pay for that, no bread or fruit for a week, and you must continue to make up the kitchen fire every morning.”

This was Lydia’s second careless act in the last few days; she had spoiled the cheese she was making by adding too much rennet. Lydia had much to learn. She was treated reasonably well by her mistress, but her entry into slavery had been a violent one.

When she first arrived, she had been jeered at and spat on. She was small for her age, and the other slaves in the kitchen were stronger and understood what was expected of them.

Consequently, they were scathing of her efforts in spite of her attempts to please and she was often jostled as she went about her tasks.

She was lonely and far from her home in Egypt, one of a new batch of slaves transported to Knossos following the earthquakes that had destroyed much of the city along with many of its inhabitants. The palace was still important even though it was now crumbling and isolated, and its royal presence required a network of servants and courtiers.

It was the broken floor tile that had caused Lydia to trip. The amphora had been heavy and awkward and she could not see where she was going.

Once she had mopped up the oil and swept the tiny pieces into an old cooking pot, Lydia took the remains to a storage chamber, then reported back to the kitchen. She was lucky not to have been beaten; she had seen other slaves being whipped, but the kitchen seemed the safest place to avoid that punishment.

She looked past her mistress at the fire she had lit that morning. She realised something wasn't right; she had not laid the firewood properly and some of the embers had spilled out onto the hearth, their sparks cascading onto the tray holding the fat from the pig roasting on a spit above.

Panic rose in Lydia's chest as she saw the flames spreading and catching the clothes drying on the rack next to the fireplace. She must get out before the impending inferno took hold and there would be no escape. She ran into the courtyard and yelled for help.

Slaves and servants were running in all directions trying to extinguish the spreading flames, but it was clear that the palace was doomed. Lydia could barely breathe, but staggered as far away as she could. Her eyes smarted from the smoke and she tumbled into a chamber, catching her dress on a sharp stone as she hit the bottom. Then nothing.

## Kathryn Jones

**K**athryn was born in Aberdare and has lived there throughout her life with the exception of the 5 years that she spent as a student at Bangor University in North Wales. Central to her writings are her Christian faith, mental-health, justice, equality, and fairness. Kathryn has only recently started writing since 2020 and has had some of her poems featured in several local booklets and has read a poem 'What is Love?' on BBC Radio Wales in a 'Arts Show' featured for Valentine's Day. Kathryn loves to have fun and has a wide range of hobbies and interests including Lego, gaming, reading, baking, drumming, and watching the Rugby. She loves learning new things and her most recent interest is reading about artists and poetry and their relationship.



## Videogames

Beep crash

### EXPLODE

Another life

Lost

No second chances

The controller

Moves

Back and forth

Hunting me

Their next victim

Found now

Fight

Body tenses

Legs twitch

Adrenaline

Surges

Tactically

Strategizing

My next move

Activity confined

To my bed

And overactive

Brain

Just one more go

I can do this

Can I?

## Sunset

Darkness slowly descends  
Busyness hushed  
Day transitions into night

Interlude just  
Between  
Sunshades  
A gold disc  
Illuminates the sky

Warm tints  
Bid us rest  
We unwind  
Labour done  
For today at least

The sun sets  
Yet on foreign shores  
A new dawn breaks  
The revolving  
Circle of life continues

## How Did it Come to This?

Technology advances second by second  
limitless discoveries and explorations  
imagination transports us to unchartered territories  
and yet we remain restricted by our primitive instincts

Britain pioneer and premier first world country  
imperial and wealthy influencing the world  
rich and affluent  
God save the King

Impressions are deceitful  
below a greater injustice lies  
rich and poor those who speak incessantly  
and those who speak but their voices are unheard

The marginalised – diseased – homeless  
addicted — veterans even  
these are not odd people but  
odd is our societies blatant disregard of them

Muppets making decisions through rose tinted glasses  
regard and consideration for their own self-interests  
no thought of Gareth stretching his meagre £3  
to meet the family's needs for the remainder of the week

Josephine juggling work – childcare – bills  
school-runs and unrelentless pressures  
minimum wage equals an increase in her essential bills  
meanwhile her disposable income diminishes and disappears

No free meals for the little ones any longer

oh yes policy now changed  
in response only to external pressure and lobbying from those  
among us who use their privileged position for the greater good

Absurd oh yes rule Britannia  
flagship of the world traditions – etiquette – political correctness  
third world poverty amongst our very own  
voices that demand a hearing and action

Twenty-first century we may be  
yet remain Victorian in our connections  
things must change in our society  
wounds need to be addressed and healed  
people valued for who they are  
I utter this challenge to our politicians

remove the hazy lens of indifference  
speak to the least amongst us  
bridge the gap that need not exist between those  
you govern and yourselves

Time to change – surely?

## **'Messenger'**

I survey my surroundings  
and imagine the scene before me  
the chapel full to bursting  
all in their Sunday best – attentive  
hanging onto every word

The call to preach – teach  
and to open the truths of God's Word  
to listening ears continues  
context diverse  
message eternal

No empty seats then  
no other preoccupations on the Lord's Day  
here I stand where giants of the faith  
have ministered and stood before  
I stand in wonder

Spiritual landscape so different  
yet same pulpit where the Word is proclaimed  
speak Lord for your servant is listening  
God communicates  
his message to us his people

Mouthpiece – vessel – servant – proclaimer  
the treasure within finds expression without  
both privilege and burden of proclaiming  
Good News to a generation  
whose needs are no less  
but whose desire it seems so scarce

Hope in a despairing world  
truth amongst fake news and confusion  
weeping may endure for a night  
but Joy comes in the morning

Faith – steadying – centering and comforting  
brings light into the darkness  
an invitation to believe – stand firm and  
even hope in these days

## Oh, To Be

Interview with Hundertwasser House in Austria

**Y**ou think when they put the last final touch on me that would be it, building complete, the ribbon cut and then I am open. Built for purpose and decorated for effect. But that isn't it at all, in fact that is only the next phase completed. To think that all that time ago, I was merely a drawing on a page. Incredible that I made it onto paper as my creator (who I am named after) was mulling my design and style around in their head for years. I thought it was never going to happen. Having been drawn up on paper meant that finally I could take shape. It's quite restrictive being stuck within the confines of a brain and a skull. I have wanted to burst into life for quite some time but well, all I can say is we got there in the end!

As soon as I was on paper that's when all the fun and adventures began, who would they commission to build me and to bring me to life, what about the colours they would use and where would I be placed, who would my neighbours be? So much to think about-all the adventures to look forward to and what about the stories that would be told of the people who use me-I can hardly wait to get going. Excitement doesn't come close to describe how I feel.

There are three major milestones in any building's life, and I am no different. The day our cornerstone is laid, the day that we are named and the day (and this is the one that we all seek after) we are replicated throughout the world and others of all ages build us time after time and display us in their homes. So, my cornerstone sometimes called the foundation stone was laid on 16th August 1983 and I was officially opened on 17th February 1986. The third, well, I am still waiting patiently and can take a



much longer time to be realised, it is the icing on the cake, the Oscar's of the building world. What am I talking about?

I want to become a Lego modular building; I want this more than anything else in the world. At the moment I am stuck in Austria and only a limited number of people will ever get to see my beauty and marvel at me. But, if I was a Lego model, well that's when I become a worldwide superstar. I will be bought because people of all ages will want to build me. Up until this point, I have had a limited number of people involved in my creation but becoming a Lego model is where I go global. I look at the greats of the building world – Taj Mahal, Sydney Opera House, Tower Bridge (to name but a few) and even the Colosseum I heard only the other day has gained this accolade – why can't it be me too? I would even settle for just being a modular building like a fire station or a cinema or a garage: I will take anything.

I have so much to offer. Not only do I have incredible colours that would be so much fun but what about the fact that I have trees interspersed into my design style as well, wow, not many of my fellow buildings can make that boast. There are two ways that I could gain this award-firstly, if a Lego designer happens to visit and gets inspired by my presentation and decides to suggest me as a possible set or if a person who also happens to love Lego decides to build me themselves and present their 'creation' as a Lego Idea. The first is a much quicker way to get to the review board, the second could potentially take two and a half year to even get to the point of being considered and could fail at any point in the process.

Once the idea is put forward, the wider Lego community will have the opportunity to vote as to whether they might like to see this idea being produced into a set. It's a very full-on process. Once a proposal is received, then within 24 months 10,000 supporters are needed to take the idea onto the next level. Wow

– that’s something to celebrate without thinking about anything else.

Only if this happens can the idea then be considered at a review meeting held with all the Lego hierarchy. If at this meeting there is a positive decision taken to make the design into a set, you can expect to see the model on the shelves for sale about 6 months after that. I feel exhausted just thinking about the whole thing.

So, you can see why this is just so important. As a building, life gets a little bit boring after we have been built – everything just becomes mundane with only maintenance to look forward to.

But the thought of having thousands of people building ‘Mini Me’s’ all over the world-well, who wouldn’t want that and what other stories can be built around mine. I am waiting patiently. I have everything crossed. Keep looking at the Lego Ideas website and hopefully one day you will see me there. One day!!! I live in hope and patient expectation.

## Sharif Gemie

**S**harif is a happily retired ex-lecturer. He used to teach history, and took up Creative Writing after retiring. His first novel, *The Displaced*, is about a British couple who volunteer to work with refugees in Germany at the end of the Second World War. If he's lucky, it will be published in April 2023.

Sharif's had fourteen short stories published, including: 'Leonardo and the Mad Girl', *Magazine of History and Fiction* 1:4 (Winter 2019)

<https://magazineoftheoldwest.neocities.org/leonardomadgirl.html>; 'A Problem with Sex', *Storgy* (Sep 2021),

<https://storgy.com/2021/09/27/a-problem-with-sex-by-sharif-gemie/>;

'The Old Man and the World', *Abergavenny Small Press Literary Journal* 3 <https://www.asppublishing.co.uk/sharif-gemie>.

Thanks to 5 at 4, Sharif has even started writing poetry.

## The Other One

Steph found Em in the café where they met every Tuesday and Thursday evening. As usual, Em complained. 'Do we have to come here? Starbucks is just round the corner and it's cheaper.'

'This is the last independent coffee house in town. And it's quieter than Starbucks.'

'But—'

'Look, Em, I've decided something.' The gravity in Steph's tone silenced Em. 'You remember my last argument with my mum?' Em nodded.

'I think it's time to make the final break.'

Em frowned. 'You already live away from home and you support yourself. You only see your mum once or twice a year. Could you be more distant?'

Steph's eyes gleamed. 'I can change my name.'

'Your name? What's wrong with Stephanie?'

'Not my first name, silly, my surname.'

'Your surname?'

'Montgomery was my stepdad's name, remember? I'm going to take my biological father's name.'

Em looked amazed. 'Your real father? The one who died?'

Steph nodded.

'What was his name?'

'Service,' said Steph proudly.

'Service? Stephanie Service?' Em laughed. 'Sounds like a pornstar's name!'

'I thought you'd be pleased for me!' cried Steph. How could Em react like this?

Em stifled her giggles, then sipped her coffee. 'If it's what you want...'

Normally Steph and Em chatted for an hour, in between Steph's shift at the garden centre and her evening classes. It was a chance for Steph to unwind and to fill up with enough carbohydrates to keep her going through two hours of MA Geology. This evening—she cut it short, told Em that she had to check something in the library.

On Wednesday evening, Steph was meant to be researching Red Sandstone in Wales, but her thoughts kept coming back to her name. Em had been so rude! Steph had always hated the name Montgomery. It made her sound like a general's daughter or a minor Scottish aristocrat. Service sounded—more modern, more focused. Slicker. Smarter. She'd prove Em wrong. Turning away from her PDF, she googled 'Stephanie Service'.

There! A Scottish rower, third in the women's team. A fat, blonde American, who worked in a health spa. An employee of a London undertakers, trying hard to look dignified. And—oh fuck. At the bottom of the page. Female flesh, blatantly displayed. The head cropped away. Despite herself, Steph clicked on the image and got the shock of her life. The hair was wonderful: glossy, curly, long, nothing like Steph's straggly bob. Something had happened to the eyebrows—they were clear and sharp. But the grey-green eyes were familiar. Stephanie clicked and clicked. There were at least thirty pictures, some more explicit than others. The glossy hair and sleek make-up shifted the contours of the face, but didn't change the essentials. She knew that face, she saw it every morning in the mirror, it was her. Cringing, she worked her way through the photos. It was her body. On the fifth photo—there, below her left breast. The triangular, wine-coloured birthmark. It was her.

On Thursday evening, Em was astonished when Steph told her what she'd found.

'What do you mean? Pictures? You panicked, it's not possible.'  
'For a moment, I thought you must've rigged it,' said Steph. 'But you didn't know my father's surname, did you?'

'Steph!'

'They can't be deep-fakes. That wouldn't explain the birthmark.'

'Old boyfriend? Did you ever let one—'

'No! I've always stopped them taking nude photos, you never know what might happen.' Steph sighed. 'Have you got your tablet?'

Em glanced round, glad for once that she'd met Steph in this near-empty café. In less than a minute, she found the pictures.

'Oh. My. God. Well—she does look like you.'

'Em, she is me.'

'I know—this is what they call a twin stranger. It's an internet thing, it's what happens when you feed a photo of yourself into google and it gets matched with another person, a double.'

Steph shook her head. 'Em, this isn't someone who looks like me. It is me. My eyes, my smile, my way of standing.'

Em opened more pictures.

'Nice arse.' She whistled appreciatively.

'Em! It's not funny. Anyone can see these photos. What if I go for an interview? The first thing they do is google your name.'

Steph showed Em the photo with the birthmark. Em nodded, staring at the image for so long that Steph insisted Em close her tablet.

Em turned to face Steph. 'There's only one thing you can do.'

'Yes?'

'Keep your name. Make sure you're Stephanie Montgomery and no one will be the wiser. But how—'

Steph wasn't listening. Em was right, it all came down to the name.

‘Service,’ she said slowly.

‘Who was he? Something bad happened, didn’t it?’

Steph nodded sadly.

Steph’s mum and her real dad—it had been off/on. Arguments all the time. Constant threats to leave. She’d only been a child, but it had affected her. She’d liked her father. Steph remembered him smiling and laughing, not sad, bitter and bad-tempered, like her mother. She’d run to him when he came home, then ignore her mother for the rest of the evening. When the arguments got bad, he’d leave for a few days. Steph could remember the last argument: two adults screaming at each other, no longer caring whether their six-year-old daughter heard. Her father had walked out, but came back an hour later, in a different mood. He spoke quietly, even tenderly to her mother, who refused to respond.

‘Get out and don’t come back!’ was all she said.

When he left, her mother had looked at her.

‘Do you think I should give him another chance?’ she’d asked.

Steph had nodded, too caught up in the emotions of the moment to trust her voice.

Her mum knew where her father would stay. She’d phoned and phoned throughout the evening: he was never there. Next day, a friend phoned: her father had died, hit by a truck.

Steph looked at Em. ‘It was touch-and-go, you see. He could’ve come back, he almost came back. But—I don’t think I ever forgave my mum, I blamed her.’

‘Did he work?’

Steph frowned. ‘Not really. He had some connection—some connection with films.’

Em looked up. ‘Porn films?’

Steph shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’

She checked the time—she needed to run to her geology class.

The next Tuesday, Steph arrived in the café before Em.

‘The pictures—they’ve gone,’ she told Em.

‘Gone? But—how? There were dozens of them, from different web-sites. You can’t have got them all taken down.’

‘Have a look for yourself.’

Em got out her tablet, searched for Stephanie Service. There was the Scottish rower, so proud of being third. The fat blonde American beamed outside the health spa. The London undertakers still employed Stephanie Service. Em clicked on for a couple of pages, tried a different search engine. No naked, pouting Stephanie, not anywhere.

‘What happened?’ Em asked.

‘I spent the weekend thinking about my dad, my real dad.’

Steph’s memories of him were all positive: the smiling, laughing man who played with her before bed. The one who’d sing her Beatles songs and take her to funfairs.

‘But he had it easy, didn’t he? It was my mum who cooked, cleaned and worked. Most of the day my mum or a neighbour took care of me: my dad just supplied one hour of fun. And, as I remember it, he hardly ever worked. Most of the time, he lived off her as well.’

‘So?’ Em didn’t follow.

‘It was grim, living with my mum. And when she re-married! Take it from me—Peter Montgomery was the most miserable man alive.’

‘He died too, didn’t he?’

‘Liver cancer, poor bugger. My mum was more gloomy than ever after that. But, Em, here’s the thing. It was because of my mum that I did so well in my first degree, part-time Geology, cleaning offices in the evening and attending classes in the day for five years. And I got a first!’

‘While—Service—’



‘Donald Service. Yes, the life and soul of the party. But no backbone. He wouldn’t have supported me through that degree, he wouldn’t have given me a penny and he’d have told me to give up when it got difficult. If I’d followed him, maybe I would’ve drifted into films, and we know what happens to penniless young girls in the film industry, don’t we?’

Em grinned. ‘Well, it sounds a lot more exciting than a geology degree!’

‘Does it? Does it really? Do you think you could ever enjoy sex again after a few hours of that work?’

‘Porn-star Steph looked like she was having fun.’

‘Exactly. She looked like she was having fun. She was paid to look like that. That was her job. It’s nothing to do with real pleasure.’

Em shook her head. ‘But what are you saying? Where did the other one—porn-star Steph—come from?’

‘Don’t you see? I was going to change my name, I was going to deny what my mum had given me. I was becoming the other Steph.’

‘So—what? The internet responded?’

Steph looked up, calm and intensely serious. ‘Yes.’

‘But, Steph, the internet doesn’t work like that. It’s scientific, it’s about currents and connections and—and electrons...’ Em had clearly reached the limits of her knowledge about how the internet worked. ‘It’s practical, it’s not created from dreams and wishes.’

‘No? Isn’t it?’

The two friends stared at each other. The only other customer in the café—an old man with a ponytail—picked up his tray and took it to the counter, called out goodnight.

Steph checked the time—her course began in ten minutes.

‘I’m going to see my mum this weekend.’

‘But you hate her!’

'She's a miserable cow, there's no doubt about it. But she's my miserable cow. She's getting older now. She needs a bit of help.'

## The New Monument

**F**at Sue yelled at me as she walked by:

‘Oi! Word-boy! Big Daryl needs you in the Park.’

Obviously, I don’t like being spoken to in this tone. In my opinion, poets play an important community role, and it’s about time that my community recognised this. But I heard the urgency in her voice and, well, you don’t ignore Big Daryl.

So I wended my way up to the Park. Lots of people were going there: Know-It-All Mike, Fat Sue, Steve-the-Whiskers, Mad Jane, Molly’s mum, One-Eye Greg...

I hadn’t visited the Park for a while. Boy, had it changed! Right in the middle, there was this enormous—this enormous—this enormous thing. Huge, white, circular thing. Big Daryl shouted orders:

‘Grab on one of the ropes and pull. You too, Word-Boy.’

I got the idea: we had to raise a gleaming white column. Bloody heavy. A devil of a job.

Daryl shouted, ‘Put your backs into it. One, two, three, pull.’

We got a sort of rhythm going and up went the column, teetering and tottering, slipping on the ground.

‘Careful!’ yelled Daryl.

I could see what was meant to happen: the column was to slide into a groove next to another column. But it wasn’t working.

There was a horrible crunch as it banged into the other column and then, despite our best efforts, it fell down with an almighty thump.

‘Blatant disregard for the most basic Health and Safety reg’s,’ said Know-It-All Mike, staring at Big Daryl. ‘That could have hurt someone! What we should do is pack this hole with rubbish, raise the column up a bit.’

Big Daryl gave him a look.

‘The problem ain’t the hole,’ he said. ‘The problem’s the column. Those bloody Welsh cowboy builders! They haven’t followed the specifications.’

I could see that this might turn nasty, so I tried to calm matters. ‘What is this thing anyway?’

Nobody seemed to know. Daryl said it was a contribution to astronomical research. Molly’s mum thought it was an ecumenical centre. Know-It-All Mike said a bull-ring, while Mad Jane was sure it would attract UFOs.

‘All this work and you don’t even know what it is!’ I berated them.

‘It’ll put the place on the map,’ said Big Daryl, defensively.

‘Has it even got a name?’

‘Yeah—Stonehenge.’

## At the Platform

Cynthia frowned as she got off the train. Just think: people had to travel like that every day! Crowded, noisy, shaking like a hippo running a marathon. Cynthia didn't take trains often, she didn't like them. Or railways. Or platforms. Still, the Firm had to do some commissions for the general public, and this station was one of them. That sign—Newport Central—that wasn't what they'd ordered. She'd specified Times New Roman and she was sure that was Cambria. No wonder everyone around looked unhappy. Her boyfriend, Graham wasn't at the platform, of course. Was he ever on time? She looked at the stairs leading down the walkway and sighed. Wrong again. The Firm had specified a mezzanine break every ten steps. Instead: look at it! Fifteen steps and then a single mezzanine. Disastrous. The whole station was an assault on the basic rules of aesthetics. Where was Graham? It began to rain. It always rained in Newport. Which is why the Firm had specified that the shelter should be built in smoke grey, not tundra grey. Cynthia sighed.

There was Graham, at last, bumbling his way down the under-mezzanined stairs. Those trousers! She'd told him never to wear them with his brogues.

She glared at him, waiting for his excuse. 'Well?'

'I'm sorry, Cyn, but this just isn't working for me. I can't—I can't face seeing you again, I can't do it. It's over.'

Cynthia was overwhelmed by a wave of black rage.

'How many times have I told you never to call me Cyn?'

## Levelling-Up

A: I mean, when he said all that stuff about levelling up—

B: -yeah, like, no one believed him.

A: But then—

B: Wow! In came the lorries.

A: Do you remember? They closed the covered market for months.

B: There was that crane in John Frost Square.

A: And we laughed, said it would never happen.

B: No way!

A: Something happening in Newport, the city of closed shops and empty streets.

B: Life by the Brown River. Who'd have thought it?

A: And there it is. Gleaming in the sunset. Wales's first teleportation station.

B: Wales's? Britain's!

A: You step inside and in, like, three seconds you're in Australia—

B: Chicago!

A: Mongolia!

B: (American accent) Beam me up, Scotty.

(They laugh.)

A: Would you go in it?

B: No way, sounds dead dodgy to me.

A: I mean, if we were meant to zap round the universe in three seconds—

B: -then our atoms would have numbers.

A: Flying in the face of nature, that's what it is.

## Suzy Hobson

**A**t her most content walking the shoreline with her dogs, Suzy feels fortunate to have lived most of her life near a beach. She grew up in Aberystwyth on the West Coast of Wales, swapping sunsets over the sea to sunrises, when she moved to Scarborough on Yorkshire's East Coast. Suzy has always enjoyed disappearing into the world of words. As a child she would entertain a captive audience of family, dolls and cats, with the productions she wrote for her puppet theatre. There's usually a hint of menace in her short stories, a sense of the fragility of life in her poems and her song lyrics are poignant. Her favourite genre is sci-fi – where endless possibilities are on offer.

## Bryce Canyon

**L**ike a weary glow worm, the Greyhound bus crawls out of the darkness and stops at a diner in the middle of nowhere.

“Pit-stop,” says the driver. “You’ve got half an hour here – back on the bus at 3am people.”

Looking like a player from a Hopper painting, she sits at a window table, enclosed and safe in her cube of light and hot coffee. Outside, the driving rain rattles the signs and washes the gas pumps.

Her mind travels a 100 dangerous miles back down the freeway, to a house where a sleeping monster is slumped in a chair by a stove. The pills she crushed into his hot chilli and the usual night of heavy drinking, should keep him contained for a few more hours.

She’s keen to get back on the bus – to put more distance between them. When he realises she’s gone his rage will be all consuming, his tracking relentless.

She only has the vague shell of a plan. Her priority was to escape, to get out of his clutches. Weeks had passed since the last beating and she knew the signs. Another brutal storm was brewing.

Having no cash of her own – he made sure of that – she had managed to squirrel away small amounts from the meagre and intermittent housekeeping money he gave her. Lately, her growing apprehension had dared her to swell her secret pot by taking a few dollars from his pocket, when he was out cold.

All she needed was enough for an open season Greyhound bus ticket, plus a bit more to see her through until she got a job.

The bus continued through the night. In a few hours she would be at the Reno, Nevada intersection where she would disembark.



Two months on, Reno, with its transient population had fulfilled the possibilities she sought. People were surface friendly but no one asked too many questions. Changing her name to Daisy Garcia, she secured a job as a waitress at one of the smaller casinos – bed and board provided.

There were numerous offers from men, but she kept herself to herself and when she wasn't at work she spent her time in her room, watching tv or reading.

The night of her escape, she had travelled light. She had little of monetary value but looking through her possessions she had come across a long forgotten jigsaw of Bryce Canyon that she had never had the occasion to complete. The view of that canyon at sunset had always fascinated her and she had promised herself she would visit one day.

Though the box was quite bulky she had decided to take the jigsaw with her. Somehow it represented the new free life she strived for.

One day when she was at a loose end she remembered about the jigsaw. She retrieved it from the top of the wardrobe and worked on it in between shifts. When she had finished it, she found to her dismay, that there was one piece missing. It didn't take long to search the small room with its plain carpet. It wasn't there.

A couple of days later, when she was watching morning tv, there was an unexpected knock on the door. Looking through the spyhole she saw a girl in a bright pink uniform carrying a large bunch of flowers.

She opened the door.

"A delivery for Daisy Garcia, Room 22," smiled the girl.

She took the flowers from her and closed the door.

They were white lilies in full bloom.

Funeral flowers.

A small envelope had been stapled to the cellophane wrapper.

She opened it.

Inside she found the missing piece for her jigsaw.

## Death Watch Beetle

time frays the edges of the room

deathbed vigil  
s u s p e n d e d in soft amber  
too late to hope  
too soon to grieve

whispered sounds  
lungs grasping, candles licking  
competing for air

outside  
sailing somewhere  
galleon clouds, luminous  
backlit by moon  
inside  
marooned, castaways  
going nowhere  
dark shadows

then they hear it

INTRUSION

tick tock tick tock

pulsing through the walls  
brown husked  
metronomic portent  
of fading life

but let's look back now  
down history's telescope  
and expose you  
*Xestobium rufovillosum*  
debunk this myth

tap tapping your head  
on decaying hardwood  
your mating call  
a cheap little sideshow  
death is furthest from your mind

you don't fool us  
an ineffectual omen  
more pendulum than clock

tick tick tick tick

## Friday Night on the Moon

someone says  
let's try Armstrong's  
new place on the shore  
of Maré Nectaris  
Manhattan skyline, yellow cab tables  
cocktail waiters, filmstars on ice  
usual meet up  
Keplers at eight  
then hop on the shuttle  
champagne and starlight  
whizzing through black

iconic Marilyn  
hi I'm your hostess  
dazzles a welcome  
red lips and white pleats  
swish us to a table  
James Dean the waiter  
I shake 'em and make 'em  
served with a smile  
working our way down  
the cocktail menu  
a wink at our Jamie  
brings a few extras  
not on display

someone says  
let's go lightweighting  
hire some spacesuits  
join the leapdancers

booted and suited  
floating and flying  
high jumping and jiving  
Cafe del Maré  
out on the crust

dancing til earthrise  
here comes Mother  
she's such a beauty  
tears of yearning  
drip in my visor  
one day I'll go

one hell of a night

## House Clearance

the room is losing its identity  
piece by piece  
new boundaries appear in the dust  
marking voids where furniture once stood  
two matching frames linger on the wall  
our younger selves look down  
from that proud gallery  
mam's display  
for the unavailability of visitors  
you smiling in your football kit  
the day you played for Wales  
me graduation happy in my cap and gown

soon they too will be gone  
replaced  
bright squares  
with faded outlines

your wheelchair dominates emphasising  
a uselessness newly attained  
flicking through albums with your good arm  
we smile at mam's photos with their missing heads  
long shadows of herself

I sort disassembling their lives  
our history into black bags  
charity - keeping - tip  
the doorbell rings again  
a couple young and vigorous  
just starting out  
we've come for the settee

a play with angles to get it through the door  
some folded notes  
will you take fifty? we agreed on sixty  
funeral weary no energy to argue

another space invades



## Salvaged

he left the bar, that stranger  
broke you open, beyond repair  
no china bowl gold paint  
could make you whole

and there are no words  
but I'm looking anyway  
and KINTSUGI isn't one  
they found your donor card  
a good cause  
and there are no words  
but I'm looking anyway  
for what you have become  
and I found one: RECYCLED  
a depository of spare parts

new photos on my wall  
a girl, all Barbie pink  
rides a scooter  
a man, dog companioned  
descends a mountain path  
a woman, arms triumphant,  
crosses a finishing line  
all survivors now, smiling  
at life down a long view  
because of you

and there are no words  
but I'm looking anyway  
for what you have become  
and I found one: COLLAGE

this symmetry of gold frames  
and I'm looking for a word  
for what I have become  
I used to be a mother  
so bound up with her son  
and I found one: CURATOR  
of this bitter sweet gallery

that's the closest to it

## Wayne Putterill

**W**ayne was born in Llantwit Fardre when it was just a small mining village, he still lives in the area with a black cat called Betty and a teenage son who is occasionally seen at meal times.

Selling Lotus and Mercedes, writing horoscopes for a magazine, being an IT consultant, and many more - Wayne has had a varied and occasionally successful career, although ill health in the past few years has slowed him down a bit.

Common themes in Wayne's writing are Science Fiction, people he's known and events from his own life.

## Lords and Ladies

I met a supermodel once  
She entered the room  
And silence rippled out  
From those close until  
We all stood alert  
Mute before her  
Captured by her quiet  
Certainty we would be

She smiled and  
Beguiled so did we  
She greeted us and  
Led us through rooms  
Where kings and queens  
Had gambled and  
Gambolled through  
Private histories

Her husband the Lord  
Showed us his cars  
Blood red Ferraris  
And rare Maseratis  
The finest collection in  
The world we were told  
By the aristocrat in  
His Armani black tie

The next time I saw him  
Was on tv in a jungle  
Of celebrities cameras  
Tasks and microphones

Chasing a payday  
After five years for fraud  
Betrayed by an addict  
Ex-wife's revenge

## Halloween 2031

**E**lsie finished tidying her shelves and looked around her room with satisfaction. She hated cleaning but had to admit to herself that she did like the room when it was like this. She sat at her desk and looked out of the window, it had rained earlier and the sky was still grey over the street with its rows of boxy houses.

Humming to herself she put on her smart glasses and as the interface floated in front of her she selected the list her weekly chores were on, swiping her finger flamboyantly in mid-air she cleared the last item and smiled. Hopefully her mother would see the notification soon and send her allowance to her account. The street looked very different through her glasses with the augmented reality filter turned on. Bland boxes were replaced with an assortment of haunted houses, crypts, graveyards, and her favourite, a ruined castle with tall towers jutting up from crumbling battlements with cackling witches flying and swooping down on anyone passing. That skin must have cost a fortune, she thought, feeling a little ashamed of the basic haunted house skin they'd got years ago on sale. It didn't help that two other houses had the same one but at least they were round the corner.

She heard a sudden shriek of laughter as the witches dive bombed a glamorous vampire floating down the street on a purple cloud, her long black hair flowing and waving for several meters behind. She clutched the arm of an upright scarab beetle made of diamond, even in this dull weather he shone and rainbows reflected and scattered all around them. Hugging and giggling the beautiful couple hurried past and stopped for a moment to appreciate the fabulous house skin.

She lifted her glasses for a moment to see who they were, a couple about her age she hadn't seen before wearing the usual

drab clothing and no makeup of the rich kids. That had been the fashion for a few years now, if you saw someone looking deliberately lousy in the real world you knew they had something spectacular going on in the virtual one.

She sighed and dropped the glasses back down onto her nose, a new notification blinked, mum had sent the money through. Her budget updated and she saw she had enough spare to buy a couple of Loot Boxes. She tried not to get too many of them as they usually only contained random common skins, it was easy to spend a lot and end up with nothing but junk. One in a thousand did have a rare skin though, a boy in the class above had one last year and he'd been quite the celeb for a while. She watched the vampire and beetle carry on down the street feeling more than a little jealous. Oh what the hell she thought adding the Boxes to her cart, maybe tonight it'll be my turn to be lucky, maybe tomorrow I can be the one wearing grey.

## Rain

Two parts hydrogen from the beginning of time  
One part oxygen from algae ocean and trees  
Mix and circulate through air river and stream  
Freeze it in glaciers till it reaches the sea  
Then let it melt and reach for the sky  
Until the clouds fill to bursting and it falls  
Needling on to my bedroom window  
Running down the pane forming wet bars  
Imprisoning me when my legs itch to walk



## The Prizewinner

“Do you have payment?” The old man tapped the faded Formica in front of him, Anatoly took the bag of groceries from his rucksack and put it on the table. “May I sit?” he asked, his legs still burning from the walk up the hill and the endless flights of stairs.

“Of course,” Nikolai said, taking a litre bottle of vodka from the bag and pouring two large glasses, he drained his with satisfaction and poured another.

Anatoly sat at the table and watched a humming Nikolai shuffle round the kitchen putting the groceries away, occasionally making small exclamations of delight.

“Coffee!”

“Good potatoes, no rot.”

Anatoly couldn’t help noticing that the cupboards were almost empty and was glad he’d got some extra stuff over what he’d been asked for.

He looked around the room, there wasn’t enough in it for it to be messy but it certainly wasn’t tidy. Long cracks spidered up the plaster walls and across the ceiling, a bed was against one wall with a missing leg replaced by a pile of thick leather books, and the window had been replaced at some point with one that didn’t quite fit with a thick plank filling in a gap at the top.

Nikolai sat down opposite him, and raised his glass, “To health,” he toasted and they both took a gulp. “Now what has caused you to seek out an old man like me, eh?”

Anatoly cleared his throat, vodka had never really agreed with him and he was glad he’d got the good stuff rather than the locally distilled gut rot. “I’m a Physics student and I heard in town that a winner of a USSR State prize for science lived in these apartments, I didn’t believe it at first but then I was introduced to your sister who arranged this meeting for me.”

Nikolai took another gulp of vodka and then took a battered red leather case from his pocket and put it on the table, he opened it to reveal a gold medal adorned with the hammer and sickle. "Is this what you wanted to see?"

"It was you I came to talk to, but may I look at it please?" He picked it up from its case, slightly shocked at its weight. He was surprised that it hadn't been sold as he obviously could do with the money, but then he saw the look in the old man's eyes as he watched the medal in Anatoly's hands and realised just how important it was to him.

"I expect you're wondering how a winner of the highest civilian honour our country can give comes to be living in a shit hole like this." He took another gulp of vodka. "Well let me give you one piece of advice, if you're going to fool around with someone's wife make sure they aren't a member of the Politburo first!" He laughed, slapped the table and drained his glass, but Anatoly noticed his eyes never smiled.

## Just Visiting

We were always there  
The isolated and alone  
The destitute and fallen  
The sick and the sick of life  
Some trapped in their homes  
Some swept from the streets  
And now you join us

It was fun for a while on those sunny spring days  
Joe Wicks kept you fit and you baked for the praise  
But as nights grew darker so did your mood  
You've binged all of Netflix so you turn to the food  
Day follows night follows night follows day  
The coffers are empty, universal credit your pay  
And people are dying, some that you knew  
And you've had quite enough of those claiming its flu  
And your soul is so weary and sick of the fight  
But you still battle on trying to do what is right

One day the world will throw its doors open again  
And you'll joyously greet all your family and friends  
But as you tap glasses and toast round the table  
Will you spare a thought for those who aren't able  
Those whose life didn't follow the trend - tell me  
Will you think of those whose alone didn't end?



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