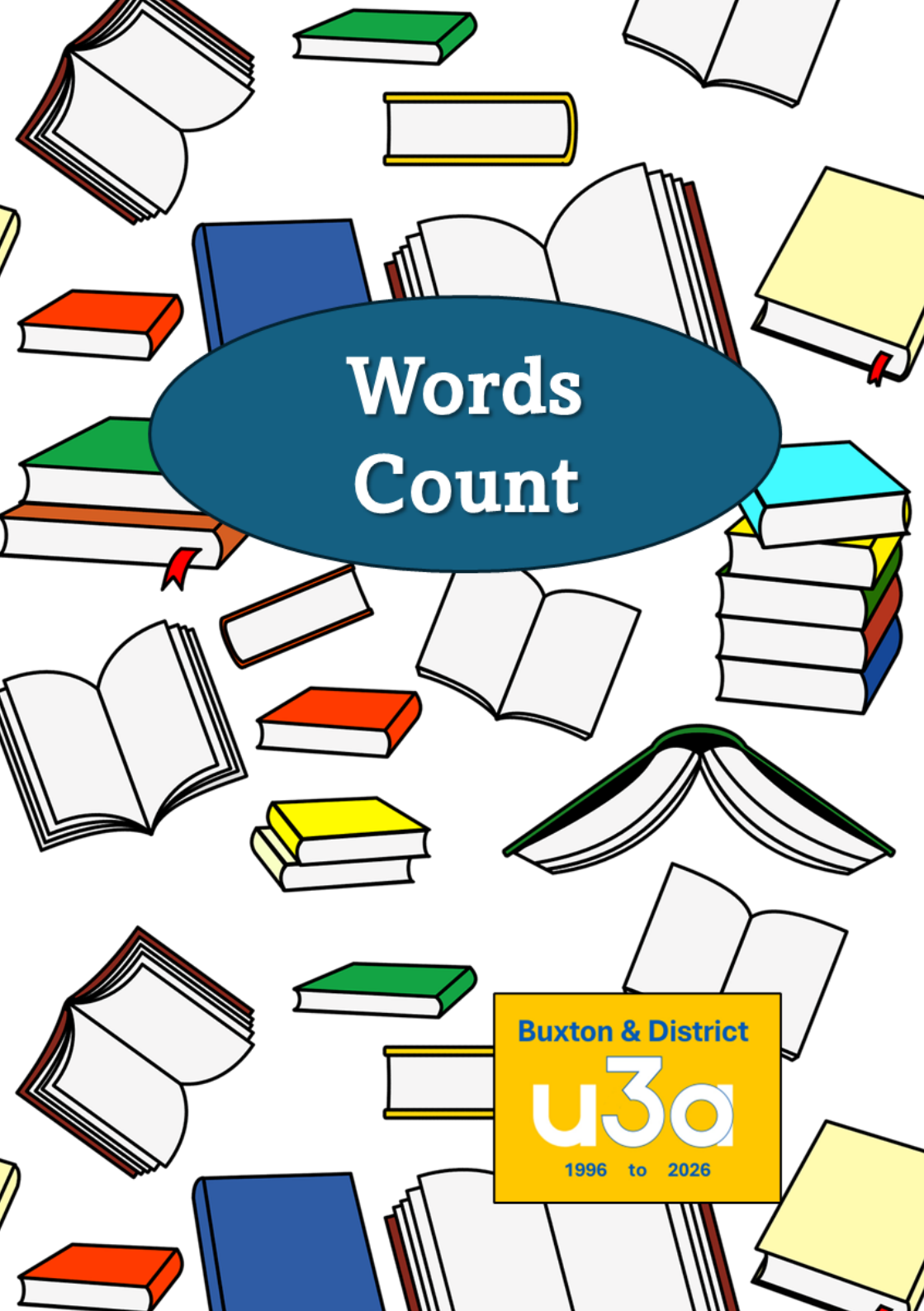

Words
Count
Buxton & District
u3a
1996 to 2026

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Words Count

A collection
of
short stories and poems

by
Members of the Creative Writing Group
Buxton and District u3a

webpage: https://buxton.u3asite.uk/u3a_groups/creative-writing/

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A Better Offer

Angela Leivesley

Tomorrow you're fending for yourself
There's beans and pasta on the shelf
Tea bags in the cupboard to the right
The bins go out on a Thursday night.
You're free to clear off to the pub
(Make sure you give the bath a scrub)
You can finally fulfil your treasured aim
And watch EVERY televised football game.

I'm sick of shopping in the rain
So I'm heading off to sunny Spain
With Bert who sold me the new car
And has promised together we'll go far.
We're off to his villa near the coast
Where he will play the perfect host
We'll spend time basking in the sun
Flamenco dancing and having fun.

Instead of cooking I'll be taken to dine
On tapas, paella and carafes of wine
I'll ditch the wellies and waterproof coat
And Bert will take me out on his boat.
He's promised me cruising on the Med
Then making some waves on his waterbed.

On second thoughts, I might not go
Better to stick with the Devil I know
For so long now it's been you and me
And I've already bought sausage for tomorrow's tea.

Lost and Found

Jane Money

The call

Mobile phones are a liability. They mean that even if, for example, you're out on a beautiful walk on a beautiful day and have just reached your favourite picnic spot with its views over the valley, someone, for example your brother, can ring you and say, 'I've just got the results of my DNA test and it seems pretty clear that Grandad wasn't Mum's Dad and therefore not our Grandad. I thought you'd want to know. Anyway, got to go now, we'll talk about it later.'

And what can happen in that moment when you discover that the grandfather you thought was your grandfather isn't in fact your grandfather, is that the enormous and beautiful view doesn't stimulate the usual response about the universe and our place in it - the big 'who are we?' Oh no, now it's personal.

It's 'who am I?'

Firstly you ask yourself, how can the things you thought were a given be thrown up in the air like this? You realise that you're having an existential crisis and are quite unprepared for it. You didn't know that your brother and sister-in-law had embarked on this particular illusion-shattering journey. You didn't realise that on discovering that you did indeed have quite a lot of Celtic heritage, as it turns out – which you said you'd always wanted – that you'd actually wanted it to be in the blood of the people you had assumed were relatives, not some random stranger.

It can then turn out that you're the only one who listened to your grandfather who, it transpires, isn't your grandfather. You're the only one who treasures the stories he told you and can still remember the sparkle in his eye and the chuckle that accompanied the telling of them, and the only one who thinks you've inherited this delight in the collecting and telling of stories. And it can also turn out that your brother has met the news with a level of equanimity that some might even call enthusiasm.

And later you can discover that your cousins, who it turns out have not lost their grandfather, wouldn't have minded that much if they had.

One of them says, 'I wonder if I should get my DNA tested', with a sense of excitement that you really hadn't expected.

The other muses, 'I didn't really know Grandad, but my Mum said Granny was disappointed when she first saw him out of uniform.'

And you can feel your whole sense of who your grandparents were, and the devotion to each other that you thought you'd observed, disintegrating.

And, well, you're perplexed and saddened with this sudden rewriting of history. In fact the increasing fluidity of history in general has become quite concerning (you're thinking of the king in the carpark now and how that story was rewritten) but to get back to your own story, there is now a new character in it with a walk on and probably lie down part, whose stories you don't know but whose DNA you share. Everything is turned on its head, shaken up and rearranged and this time the pieces don't fit together neatly. There's a fragmentation, fault lines where none were before.

Because, you realise, your mum didn't have sisters, she had half-sisters and you remember her saying once, or perhaps more than once, now you think, 'I'm not like the others, I feel sort of different sometimes.' And you also remember, and this is with a terrible sense of guilt, how dismissive you were.

Now it seems it's quite likely that the reason she felt different is because she was.

Memories tumble around in your head. Your lovely grandmother became ill with pneumonia and recovered her health but not her lovely personality and started saying cruel things; you remember your mother being upset because Granny had come into the room carrying three bunches of roses, saying, 'these are for my three lovely girls', before giving a bunch to each of your mother's three sisters.

But not to your mother.

You now think, did a secret, held tight for forty-five years, nearly slip out that night?

And what of your grandmother? What was the nature of this dalliance? Was it love? Was it passion? Was it against her wishes? You want to believe she was complicit but at the same time it means completely

reevaluating the person you thought you knew, the devoted and adoring wife. That look of anger you caught on your grandmother's face when your grandfather mentioned wistfully that his regiment had been posted to the Khyber Pass when he gave up the army to become a father to his eldest daughter and support his wife – what did it really mean? If he'd left it any later to return there would've been no question that my grandfather wasn't my grandfather, that the second daughter wasn't his.

I mean, what about the time you and your brother stood on that hill in Berkshire having identified it as the place where your great-great grandfather had once had a windmill? What about that inexplicable sense of connectedness you both felt gazing across the fields to the church where you surmised he and your great, great grandmother must once have worshipped. Now you realise it was indeed totally inexplicable because you have no connection with that couple. None at all.

And what about the time you and your brother were surprisingly moved by the newspaper article you'd tracked down about your great-grandfather and his brother dying of pneumonia after going out in a blizzard to fetch the doctor for their father in the great winter of 1906? Well, that's not your story after all. That, and many, many others. You can certainly rule out any connection to Thomas á Becket now; not that you were ever convinced about that, but it had been nice to think of one of your ancestors not being an agricultural labourer, even if he was chiefly known for his brutal murder. Also, you can no longer claim that you feel uncomfortable in cathedrals as a result of your connection, all visits having been accompanied in your head by the soundtrack of the screeching violins in the film Psycho.

Another day and the phone rings again. And then it turns out that the other side of this equation, which at first is unknown, is discovered. The new grandfather is found; although already dead, his DNA lives on and there are a myriad of new, if distant, relations relentlessly identified by the project that is Ancestry.

Someone says to you, presumably trying to be helpful, 'Look at it this way, you've lost one grandfather but found another', as if you've achieved some sort of equilibrium.

But you know that the equation isn't that simple, it's infinitely complicated, and equilibrium is definitely not the word you would choose to describe this feeling of dislocation. The grandfather you didn't know who didn't tell you stories was a jockey, a champion jockey. You think about that time on holiday on the farm when you first rode a horse, you're desperately searching for a connection, but what happens is that instead that memory too now seems distorted or tainted in some indefinable way.

And then you remember that story about your mother, a small child and gravely ill with pneumonia being wrapped in a horse poultice. The story always told by your grandparents with a sort of wonder as they both clearly remembered that terrible time and your mother's seemingly miraculous recovery.

But now the scene plays out differently.

Who applied the poultice?

Was it your grandfather who now wasn't your grandfather, as you'd always thought? He'd been in a cavalry regiment and presumably knew his way around a horse.

Or was there a helpful neighbour there that night, someone who'd been brought over from Ireland to look after the racehorses at the big house, who was in fact the child's real father?

And if he was there did he know that it was his daughter's life he was saving?

That was the immediate aftermath. Now it's old news. In the intervening year you've continued to take your mobile phone on your favourite walks, in spite of the jeopardy, because you've learned that the treasured memories you have of the grandfather who wasn't your grandfather have, if anything, become more vivid, they've been taken out, honed and polished and now glow reassuringly, particularly the image you have of him saying 'our Winnie Lou' – his pet name for your mother – with such love and tenderness.

As for DNA grandad, the cocky jockey as you've taken to referring to him in your head, he's no more yours than a character in a book.

But you do find yourself thinking about taking riding lessons, and there is a print of a Stubbs painting now hanging on your wall...

Pillars of Life

Simon Rogerson

Four thoughtful lines from Rudyard's pen
Are still so fresh and new
I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are what and why and when
And how and where and who

What lies in wait as lives unfold
One simply cannot tell
Why worry what the futures hold
It's not a magic spell
When to push forward and be bold
Or just ponder and dwell
How to learn from lessons of old
But myths one must dispel
Where to find those moments of gold
Avoiding living hell
Who to rely on manyfold
Not those of just a shell

Addressing these pillars of life
Is a hard thing to do
It helps tackle troubles and strife
So positives ensue

The Great Fire

Maggie Hale

The long hot summer of 1666 was coming to an end and we were all looking forward to the cool, damp days of autumn. We who had survived the previous year's plague hoped that a spell of frost might kill the last vestiges of the disease. Everyone was hoping for a new beginning but the one we got was not the one we wanted.

We had gone to bed as usual on the first Saturday in September, the little ones tucked up securely, my wife Lizzie and me listening to the freshening easterly wind which might finally bring some relief from the late summer heat. Some time after midnight I arose to attend to a banging shutter. As I looked out I became aware of a strange glow in the sky, a little way to the west. It looked almost like a sunset but I knew it could be no such thing, in the middle of the night. I called to Lizzie, to join me at the window and to help me make sense of what I was seeing.

"There's a kind of flickering," she said, and then "Do you see flames?"

Even as we watched, a spurt of flame flew upwards and we could see sparks flying, landing on rooftops and starting other fires, closer to our own home.

"Quick, we must go," I urged Lizzie and we pulled on some clothes, roused the children and lifted them from their bed. Everything else we left behind. As we stepped outside the door, the very air seemed to be alight and we all began to cough. I ran back inside, snatched up some rags and dipped them in a bowl of water which was sitting at the hearth. These I wrapped round all our faces and we breathed more easily.

The streets were already crowded with people, pushing their way towards the river. I was afraid that little Mary would be torn from my grasp so I ripped a strip from the cloth around my face and tied her skinny little wrist to mine. Her eyes were huge and frightened as she struggled to maintain her footing amongst the stampeding mob.

At last we reached the river, where the lightermen were filling their boats with anyone who had the money to pay. I found one who had places to spare, handed him a generous sum of money and helped Lizzie and the children aboard, to go we knew not where. I felt it my duty to return to the burning streets and do what I could to save the city. I

watched them go with a heavy heart, not knowing if we would ever see each other again.

I turned my back to the river but it was hard to make progress. People seemed to have taken leave of their senses – handcarts piled high with possessions blocked every street and alleyway and as the new day progressed, and people realised the danger they were in, the streets became more and more impassable. I tried to help several fire engines get close to some of the burning buildings but even when there was sufficient manpower to push them along the narrow and crowded streets they were sorely hindered by those who seemed to think their household goods were more important than the burning buildings.

It seemed to me that Hell had descended upon London. In places it was impossible to breathe – all the air had been sucked out of the street and it felt like one's very lungs were burning but I still felt reluctant to abandon my beloved city to its fate. Fires were now starting up everywhere, and rumours were spreading that the whole thing had been started deliberately. I was shocked that amongst all this terrible devastation, foreigners were being attacked in the streets, merely for being foreign.

All through Monday the fire raged and on Tuesday the seemingly impossible happened as the fire crossed the river and reached Cheapside.

But the worst was still to come. I watched in mounting horror as the flames reached St Paul's Cathedral. I myself had helped to move goods from nearby shops into the crypt as we all thought the stone-built cathedral would not burn. But by sheer misfortune it was in the middle of restoration and covered in scaffolding. Once that caught fire, there was little hope. I watched as the lead melted and ran down the building in great black tears, leapt back as the stones flew hither and yon, saw the street turn to liquid fire, wept as the cathedral burned to the ground.

But nothing lasts for ever and on Wednesday the firebreaks, which had been created by blowing up a great number of houses, began to work and the advance of the fire was finally halted. The streets were full of refugees and there were great encampments of wretched people who had lost everything they possessed. Rumours still abounded as to how the fire had begun and it was a bad time to be a foreigner in London. We

finally learned that it had been an accidental fire at a bakery, but by then a Frenchman had been hanged.

Lizzie and I did find each other again. We started anew, as many others did, outside the ruin that was London and made a good life for our children in the countryside. While a fine city was eventually built, with wide streets and grand buildings, we never had any wish to return. Our love for London had, like our home, turned to ash.

The Ghost Of Honister Pass

Brenda Artingstall

High above the Honister Pass
on awesome cliffs with ancient tracks
Joseph Clarke labours on
dragging slate from dusk till dawn.
Through tunnels lit by flickering flames
his massive strength of purpose remains
a triumph, over conditions poor,
wages frugal and no rights in law.
His many workmates trapped and dead
gave him impetus to survive instead.
Joseph Clarke, Quarry Hero the last
worker still, above Honister Pass.

Penny The Penguin Goes South

a children's rhyming story

Alison Wheeler

Penny was a penguin, she lived in a zoo.
She didn't like it there, there wasn't much to do.
She had a little pool where she swam round and round.
She had some little rocks and a little bit of ground.
The pool, and rocks and ground were behind a see through wall,
So penguins in a zoo have no privacy at all.

Everything that happened in that penguin pen was planned
So penguins always know exactly where they stand.
But who knows if a penguin likes each day to be the same?
No one every asked them which is really quite a shame.

Penny did her best to smile and be happy with her lot.
In a cage that felt too small, and was always far too hot.
Till she met a wise old penguin who became her special friend,
Who told her of a place where penguins live at the world's end.
Where blizzards blow and snow and ice are cold as cold can be
Where penguins live like penguins, contented, cold but free!

And as the days went by, Penny knew she'd have to go
To this penguin world she'd heard of, this world of ice and snow.
Penny longed to hunt for herring in a dark and icy sea,
Not dead fish in a bucket at exactly half past three!

So Penny hatched a plan, and when the man came with the fish
She climbed inside his bucket, it was really quite a squish.
When he set off with the bucket to the sea lion cage next door
The bucket seemed quite heavy, so he put it on the floor.
Ten minutes till the sea lions ate, he'd have a little rest.

What was happening at his feet he never would have guessed!
Because this was Penny's moment, she slithered to the ground,
Said goodbye to London and headed off south-bound!

Penny reached the river Thames as the day was slowly dimming.
"Just the job," she thought, "I'll be quicker once I'm swimming."
But Penny couldn't swim to the world of ice and snow,
(called Antarctica), it was far too far to go.

But she got lots of help from the crews of south-bound boats
Who welcomed her aboard in their fancy hats and coats.
They shared their fish with Penny, then they sent her on her way,
Telling everyone they knew, "we picked a penguin up today!"

With the help of these new friends, it really wasn't all that far
Until the days were getting colder and she saw the Southern Star.
The sailors on the boat were wearing scarves and hats and gloves
But proper winter weather is what a penguin loves!
Penny sat out on the deck with nothing on at all,
Till one snowy, icy morning, she heard the captain call:

"Penguins ahoy, down on the ice. We'll drop you off nearby.
He quickly wiped away a tear, and said a sad goodbye.

But Penny wasn't sad because as far as she could see
Was ice and snow and penguins, "And each one looks like me!"
Now Penny lives the life that she had dreamed of at the zoo.
She even has a boyfriend, a penguin known as Hugh.

Could life be even better? Could life be more complete?
Oh yes!.....With the arrival of baby penguin Pete!

Meteorological Meanderings

Simon Rogerson

Winter is cold, damp and dark
Every flower dies
All the trees are bare
Then spring sunshine warms the earth
Hot summer days make plants grow
End arrives as autumn storm clouds gather
Return of cold, damp, dark days

Morning arrives
Invisible droplets pervade
Screen hills and valleys
Transforms and blurs the scenery

Finding the way so hard
Opaque landscape
Gets denser and denser

Westerly and easterly
In every direction
Northerly and southerly
Degrees go up and down

Replenishing dry earth
A light shower
Incessant downpour
Now watered plants revived

Soft flakes begin
New falls every day
Overnight freeze
White wintery scenes preserved

Shadow generator
Ultraviolet danger
Near-perfect ball feeds life

Cumulonimbus extends throughout
Lost sunshine the outcome
Overcast skies form
Upcoming storm announced
Droplets of water amass

Stillness sends silent warning
Then something stirs
Overture of wind builds
Rain crescendo follows
Mayhem ensues

Five Stones

Lois McGill

"It's not enough" said Ug.

"It'll have to do" replied Dug.

"We can't only have 5 – what will the others think – some have as many as 50 even those cretins on Stanton Moor have 9 well 10 if you count the fiddler and the Denovians have loads and on top of each other."

“Well they are just showing off – it’s a tourist attraction” said Dug, “and its working everyone is going down this solstice for a party.”

“I’ve heard that over in Hibernia they have lots of 5 stone circles.”

“Well they’re a lazy lot aren’t they” came Ug’s reply.

“But you can say they’re pointing in certain directions – that’s what they do but everything points in one direction or another you just leave it up to the learned ones to come up with some theory. We could point to the rising sun and the setting sun with 2 in the other directions and a slab in the middle for the party food – or we could say it was for sacrificing things on – that always draws a crowd.”

“OK then let’s start with 5 and see how we go on.”

A Fateful Encounter

John Evans

During the week I have lunch at a little café, just across the road from the office. From my table in the bay window I watch the parade of humanity along the High Street. On Monday their shoulders are hunched as they brace themselves for the week ahead. But today is Friday, so there's a spring in their steps and a smile on their faces as they plan for the weekend. I enjoy studying people and trying to guess what's going on in their heads. And it helps in my job as a claims assessor for an insurance company to be able to spot the signs when someone has a guilty conscience.

Cyril is walking past when he sees me and comes in to join me for a coffee. I've known him since schooldays and, as usual, he's full of enthusiasm for the latest gadget. Today he's got hold of the last word in smartphones and insists on telling me all about it, though it means very little to me.

As I listen to him extolling its virtues my eyes stray to a 'vision' picking her way delicately down the High Street. She wears half-boots with high heels, figured tights, a short skirt and a caftan completing the outfit. Her hair is piled high and tinted a salmon pink, and her lipstick is a bright scarlet.

As the vision comes level with the café she spots Cyril and taps on the window. He looks up and beams, beckoning her to come in. I heard that he got married a few months ago and he's obviously still in the star-struck phase. The vision smiles, backs up a few yards, and comes into the café, pausing momentarily to gaze longingly at the cake stand. As she stands I see her face in profile and recognise her. She was also at school with us, but in a younger age group. I remember standing behind her and watching her shoulders brace as her name came up in the roll call. Playground chatter said that she hated her names, both first and last.

Well, she'd solved that problem. Marriage to Cyril had changed her surname and, according to town gossip, she'd picked a new first name and persuaded people to use it by simply ignoring those who didn't. Overnight Jane Heginbotham had become Chelsea Smythe. She comes up to our table and kisses his forehead. They beam at each other. I think how well the expression 'all loved up' fits the pair of them. Cyril breaks the trance and gestures to me, “Do you remember Alan?”

Chelsea looks a little doubtful, but she holds out a hand and summons up a smile, “Hi Alan.”

I stand, take her hand and smile back, “Hi Chelsea. It looks as though marriage agrees with you!” Her smile becomes genuine now that I've passed the Jane-to-Chelsea test. We chat for a couple of minutes then she turns back to Cyril, “Darling, I've just seen the most beautiful hat at Millington's. The very thing for your sister's wedding next month. Do come and see it!” He springs up, says goodbye to me and goes off with her.

I'm about to go myself when I notice that the specimen at the next table – a guy with metal rings in the rims of both ears, and another through his lip – is staring fixedly at the table where Cyril has been sitting. He's left his smartphone. I pick it up and show it to the woman at the counter, “If my friend comes back looking for his phone would you tell him that Alan

has it and will drop it off at his house this evening. Thanks." I slip it into my pocket and head back to the office.

The atmosphere has changed since this morning. There is none of the usual banter. Everyone is busy, or looks busy, and the phone is answered with a crisp efficiency. As I sit down George mutters to me, "Human Resources are here." That explains it! Since the downturn several branches have had their staff cut back, and more computers installed. Apparently this makes the remaining staff more efficient, though I've yet to see any sign of it. Later comes another whisper, "They're looking through the staff records."

The office is unnaturally quiet all afternoon as we wait for the axe to fall. Just before finishing time Fred's phone rings, and he blanches, rises, and leaves without a word. There's a collective sigh of relief, and we all relax. Fred was the last person to join the firm and is not much liked. I understand the tactics. By the time Fred's 'interview' is over all the staff will have left for the weekend and he won't be able to spread disaffection in the ranks. Then my phone rings and I'm also summoned. There is a hush and my colleagues avoid meeting my eyes as I make my way between the desks.

On one side of the long table in the meeting room sits the hatchet man from HR. He's wearing a lapel badge that says Richard, so it appears we are still carrying on the charade of chumminess that's the prevailing management fashion. On the other side of the table sits Fred. Next to Fred a second chair is pulled out. I sit, before Richard can ask me to. If I have to go, I'm not going without a fight.

Richard clears his throat and says, "As you know there has been a general downturn in business since 2008. The company has to make some reduction in staff costs to remain profitable. This is a small office, so the cut back here will only involve one person."

Fred's eyes meet mine. So, it's to be a choice between the two of us.

Richard is oblivious to the glances, and continues, almost as an aside, "Although it seems to me that the office will still be overstaffed for the needs of a small town."

I lean forward to interrupt, "Do you know why we seem overstaffed?" He's taken aback. Evidently the rabbit is not supposed to bite the fox.

“We service a large area surrounding the town, an area with narrow country lanes. Much of our time is taken up in travel. Staffing levels should really reflect the type of terrain to be covered.” Careful, don't patronise him! I sit back, having made my point. Fred is making small, nervous gestures and fidgeting in his chair.

Richard pauses, clearly taken by the logic of this, then shrugs. Obviously the number of redundancies has already been decided, higher up. He only has the power to select the victim. He ploughs on, “You two were selected because you have fewest open cases at the moment, so a redundancy will have least impact on the business.” I could point out that fewest open cases are an indication of efficiency, but there's little chance he would listen. Fred is getting more agitated. Richard looks down at the paper before him, then up at me, “Alan, you have an excellent record for detecting fraud, but your settlements are perhaps a little on the generous side.” He turns to Fred, “Fred, –“

Fred interrupts, “If you're going to say 'last in, first out' forget it! If there's any of that nonsense I'll sue!” Richard seems a little taken aback by this. Fred follows up his outburst by pointing at me, “If someone has to go it should be him. He's a dinosaur – everything done with paper and pencil. He'd be happier with an abacus than a computer terminal!” He sits back and glares at me, defiantly. I'm surprised by so much malice. Richard, apparently, is not, he just looks contemptuous. Without conscious thought my fingers feel for the smartphone and bring it out. I hold it so that its polished screen catches the sunlight and reflects it to flash on the ceiling. Fred's eyes bulge and something kindles behind Richard's impersonal front. I recognise the signs of another Cyril. “Is that ...?”

“A Galaxy S7?” I say, casually, “Yes, it is. I think it's important to keep up with the latest technology. The 4G network provides faster downloads and better coverage, particularly out here in country districts.” I hope I've repeated Cyril's words accurately, I've no idea what they mean.

Richard brings himself back to the business in hand, “Right. Thank you Alan. You can leave. Have a good weekend.” I pause outside. I'm not proud of what I did in there – pure survival instinct, I suppose. Fred had doomed himself anyway. The management's current gods are Team Spirit and Computerisation. By attacking me he'd shown spite rather

than team spirit, and then appeared to be lying about my lack of interest in technology. I can't afford to be caught out now. I'll have to become a computer worshipper like the rest of them. I'll get a smartphone over the weekend and learn how to use it.

I produce Cyril's phone from my pocket and study it. It's heavy, smooth and shiny ... and completely inert. I wonder how you turn it on?

Colours

a bedtime conversation between a mother and child

Alison Wheeler

"Where do the colours go when I'm fast asleep in bed?"

"They go to the other side of the world, where the sun still shines," Mum said.

"But why can't I see the sun if it's shining brightly there?"

"Even the sun's not big enough to shine brightly everywhere."

"But why don't the colours stay? Why do they go with the sun?"

"Well perhaps they do stay here, but hide in the dark," said Mum.

"I miss the colours at night, but sometimes behind my eyes

I think I can see the light of a golden-red sunrise,

And when I wake up in the morning, there are colours under each eyelid,

So when my eyes were tight shut, I think that's where the colours all hid."

Mum tucked in the sheets with a tear in her eye and kissed a warm sleepy head.

"Sleep tight with your colours my darling, you were right all along," Mum said.

The Weaving Shed

Brenda Artingstall

Rattling and clattering
levers lift looms.
Banging and clanging
weary weavers work.
Nattering and chattering
mouthing silent sounds.
BANGING AND CLANGING
RATTLING AND CLATTERING
NATTERING AND CHATTERING
Noise swirls and swells
rhythmically repetitive.

Threading community
tight as warp and weft

Advice on Ageing

Angela Leivesley

People tell you, when you're old
Not to go out in the cold,
If it's icy you may slip
And end up with a broken hip.

Never climb upon a chair,
Don't weave beads into your hair,
Keep skirt lengths below the knee,
It's far too late to learn to ski.

You must ditch the pipe and fags,
Don't carry heavy shopping bags.
Early to bed and early to rise,
Steer clear of pizza and pork pies.

Never ride on a motorbike
Or attempt a transpennine hike.
Don't you think you're too old to drive?
Cut out cream cakes to stay alive!

Pensioners don't kiss with tongues,
Older ladies shouldn't wear thongs.
Don't attempt to walk in high heels,
Take a nap after meals.

Don't embark on a foreign journey,
Put in place a Power of Attorney.
I'm sure it's sensible advice
But before you conform, just think twice.

Who wants to live to one hundred and one
If there's no opportunity for adventure or fun?
The surest way to feel you're old
Is to do exactly as you're told!

Paper Raffia

Lois McGill

If I have to make another bloody paper raffia basket I'll go bananas. That's what my great grand-daughter Lucy says about being made to do anything. It's supposed to be therapeutic, the basket making not the swearing though it's a polite swearing and that is supposed to make you feel better. Oh here comes the do-gooder from the craft group – Peter says CRAFT should stand for can't remember a fucking thing. I pretended to be shocked but it is funny. If she would only talk in a normal voice instead of that ' aren't we going to have fun voice'. No it's not fun, we don't talk, no one has anything to say except Edith who will never shut up about her wonderful grandchildren. I once made up a Nobel prize winner in the family just to see her reaction – I may as well have been talking to myself. There seems to be only Fred and me in here with our marbles still intact. He likes to think his libido is still intact as well so I don't encourage him. Flashed himself once to us when he thought Madam over there wasn't looking and I've seen the blanket on his knees making funny movements and it's not by magic.

The telly's on. It's on all the time – gives the impression of something happening. Complete silence would be un-nerving to the staff. But it's impossible to get involved in anything – always someone walking through with cups of tea, tablets, visitors and cleaners. Music would be much better perhaps they think a bit of Bach would be too highbrow.

I got a new visitor today. He's on an Adopt a Granny scheme. He has to come regularly he tells me for a month - no doubt he'll get a certificate for sitting here hardly speaking a word. It probably does me good though as I have to continually think up things to ask him although I don't care what football team he supports, or what computer games he's into. I know a little about them as Freddie tells me all about one called Minecraft – he can go on and on and on about zombies, and skeletons

and stuff I think is a bit unsuitable for him but I don't say so – it wouldn't do any good and he might not talk at all then.

It's Daniels last visit today. I'll miss him – he's got a bit chattier lately and they always bring out a better class of biscuits when they come. I get the feeling he's not a happy lad. Probably bullied – he's a bit fat and spotty and likes chess. He bought a chess set with him from school, his dad told him it was poncy to play chess so he hasn't got one of his own. We had quite a good game and I don't let him win every time just now and then to improve his self-esteem. He needs to – I've given him my travel chess set as a farewell present – then he can hide it in his school bag.

Wow – its raffia flowers today – what a change – they are going to decorate the garden for carnival week – what fun.

A Soft Touch

Andy Limb

"Come down from that wardrobe and wait until I get my flippers on," ordered Denise. Geoffrey duly obliged. After all, Tuesday was one of the nights earmarked for his submissive role. He gently lowered himself down, carefully avoiding the rusty nail protruding half an inch from the door. His tutu was only borrowed and his sewing skills were less than elementary.

"Right", growled Denise, "Are you ready?" His mouth twisted in agreement at the same time as his back bent forward. Turning round Geoffrey caught a glimpse of the black rubber plimsoll soft focused by the standard lamp in the corner of the bedroom. Denise stood proudly above him and counted down. "3-2-1". An explosion of pain bruised his nether regions. She had perfected her swing at the local golf club. It was going to be a long night.

"Mr. Kershaw, there's a Miss Denton to see you. Should I send her up?"

The voice of his secretary spared Geoffrey from a more detailed post-mortem of Tuesday's activities.

"No Carol, I'll see her in the lobby".

He placed the phone down, flattened his hands on the desk and eased himself out of his chair. It would be a relief to allow some distance between his buttocks and Swedish furniture. Such ergonomic innovations may improve posture and managerial expertise but the designer had not been wood-glued to a relationship with a woman like Denise for ten years. He was sure she was becoming more heavy handed and even dangerous. If only they hadn't been to see the sex counsellor a few months ago. The memory lodged like a boiled sweet in a child's throat.

"Express yourselves, you're only young once," she had sung enthusiastically, crossing her varnished legs and depressing her ballpoint pen with irritating frequency.

And they had expressed themselves; in showers, in saunas, in Sainsbury's. Dressing up, dressing down, with salad dressing. Stockings and suspenders quickly became old hat. Even old hats became old hat. Geoffrey couldn't complain that their sex life had entered a new dimension. It was the twilight zone of suburban sadism he'd been pushed into which encouraged rivulets of anxiety to dampen his forehead.

He wiped his face with his handkerchief and looked into the mirror. It could have been worse. There were wrinkles but all forty five year olds had wrinkles. It was a face neither too red nor too sallow. Hair ingeniously combed to make him look younger. A face lived in, not squatted in. Geoffery allowed himself a light smile of satisfaction and took the lift to meet his visitor.

Miss Denton sat upright, hands on the black leather briefcase in her lap. She rose in her dark blue business suit to shake Geoffrey's outstretched hand.

"I believe I'm a few minutes early Mr. Kershaw. Thank you for taking the trouble to see me."

"No trouble at all."

Geoffrey beamed a smile which stretched the length of the building. He stood transfixed as a rainbow of words danced out of Miss Denton's mouth and caressed him. She was describing a two-day course on Maximising Staff Potential. He was slow motion running through golden corn as this beautiful woman waved her welcome. He brushed away a strand of hair which had rested on her cheek. Their eyes met, their lips touched, their bodies merged...

"....and you will therefore ensure a dedicated, highly skilled personnel."

"Brilliant!" Geoffrey ejaculated his satisfaction and then began to wonder what the hell she had been talking about. Not that it mattered. Only words of wisdom could cascade from Miss Denton's soft mouth. Her mind would have no room for the perverse, the tacky, the cheap. Please let me in he pleaded silently, let me take a shower in your innocence and dry myself on your unblemished skin.

He continued, "How about discussing this over lunch?"

The words skittered out like a mouse running along a skirting board. He was excited by his informality for trapped under this prosaic proposal were a multitude of desires. He was not just captured by Miss Denton's beauty, he was cocooned in it.

"That would be jolly nice. Thank you."

Jolly nice? It would be like walking naked together in warm rain thought Geoffrey. He opened the door for Miss Denton with practised ease and was amazed. How could a woman with such radiance leave the building and not set off the alarms.

"Maxwell's does a nice soup," he prompted inanely as they studied the hieroglyphics of the menu. They sat facing each other as couples should at a small table, knees not quite touching. If Geoffrey moved the thin vase holding the pink rose three inches to the left he could nonchalantly reach out for Miss Denton's hand and stroke her elegant fingers, one of which was now exploring the hollow of a soup spoon, softly, thoughtfully.

If Denise had been his lunch partner the cutlery would have achieved some bizarre sexual significance and he would have been more than apprehensive at the thought of the fish knife in her creative hands when they returned home.

Miss Denton, now Eleanor, enveloped Geoffrey in her smile.

"I'll bow to your excellent advice and have a cheese baguette as well."

A painful memory intruded and formed a shadow in Geoffrey's brain. A packed lunch, a wet night in Skegness and an embarrassing visit to Casualty nearly succeeded in blotting out this precious moment.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes thank you." Geoffrey shuffled nervously, "I was miles away."

"I'm sorry if I'm boring you."

"No-one with your beauty could bore anyone."

Where had this come from? Had the blood from some moustachioed screen lover seeped into his veins? But he had said it. He had to carry on.

"You are an enchanting, beautiful woman. I..I..."

"...would like to go to bed with me?"

A slight question mark floated over this half sentence and perfumed the air.

Geoffrey tried to regain his composure, although his desire had stampeded out of the restaurant and was now halfway down the high street. He reined it back in and smiled.

"How did you guess?"

"Intuition."

Slowly Miss Denton stood up from the table and had a final sip of her mineral water.

"Follow me," she purred.

Full of feline reciprocity he pawed behind.

It had been as in his dream. Unselfconscious love-making, soft and not too adventurous, urgent but not overpowering- a seductive combination of fond love and first experience. Now they lay naked, side by side, his hand holding hers, his eyes staring at the ceiling, her eyes closed. Geoffrey willed himself not to utter a post-coital cliché, so it was Eleanor who spoke first.

"Sweetheart, you wouldn't mind popping into the kitchen and fetching me an orange juice would you?"

She turned and kissed him gently on his lips.

“Your word is my command,” he whispered and slid off the bed as she nuzzled in the softness of the duvet.

The dusk had begun to anaesthetise the day but Geoffrey could easily make out the fridge in the kitchen. He bent down and opened the fridge door to illuminate the gloom but it was not the carton of orange juice he saw first. Piled neatly in threes on each shelf were rows of rectangular yellow containers. Geoffrey picked one from the top and looked at the lid. Surely a single woman couldn’t consume so much butter. Before this thought had time to manoeuvre itself into the pit of his stomach his attention was caught by a slight movement from behind. Eleanor stood, leather clad and masked, framed in the doorway. Geoffrey’s eyes moved up her body to the wooden spatula in her hand.

“Shall you spread or shall I?” she gleamed.

