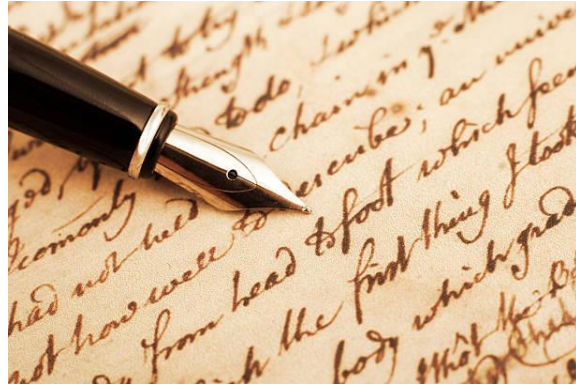


MKHD U3a Creative Writing Group

Some examples of our work



Who would have predicted that the month after we set up MKH's second writing group, lockdown would descend on us all. Fortunately we had had one in-person meeting, so the ice had been broken before we went digital and this enabled us to continue without a break. We have never used Zoom, preferring to circulate our monthly pieces by email and respond (during COVID) by WhatsApp, and now of course in person at our monthly meetings. Originally seven, we have lost one and gained three. As we meet in our homes, this works out well.

We start the meeting with a short warm-up exercise, which some of us like better than others! This is a piece of impromptu writing triggered by whatever our leaders have devised: a tray with random items on it, to choose one; mysterious slips of paper passed round with a key word on; a photograph - and so on. Write for ten minutes then read out your Magnum Opus! This is always good fun, and apparently a good way to 'oil the wheels' of writing creativity.

Each month we choose the subject for our next assignment, making an attempt to vary the task. In our 500-word pieces we have tackled: dialogue, poetry, point-of-view, show-not-tell; sight/sound/smell; the season; using a random word or a whole random sentence from a book as a trigger; a painting; a piece of music; the last line from a novel to be our own last line...quite a variety of prompts! The selection you read here will give examples. We try to keep to 500 words. Our current assignment is in response to what we see as the difficulty of writing about a real event, showing (not telling) the context and key moments in the story while avoiding what writers call an "info-dump". We have chosen the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol to try out a perspective which might be a personal account, rather than an objective news item full of facts and figures.

We hope you enjoy our selection.

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We'll Meet Again Ros Napier

Prompt: *Show not tell.*

Whatever will he think, me in my old mackintosh, my hair frizzy with the rain? I wanted to look nice, but here I am, with my new stockings splashed, and no money for makeup now, even if you could find it.

I've been up since five. I've tried to make the room look nice, polished everything that can be polished, begged some daffs from the downstairs neighbour, made the bed up with clean sheets. I've saved the coupons for weeks: got some sausages and a nice bit of bacon. Even got some butter instead of marge.

I wonder if he will be thin? Margery's son was so thin, he couldn't keep anything down, she had to feed him porridge every two hours. "Get him some stout!" The doctor said, and sure enough, it seemed to do him right.

Although, he's not right, not in the head.

We could take a short cut across the bomb site, but I think we'll stick to the road. Fewer puddles. Pauline begins to grizzle, she doesn't like being in the pram any more, now she's three and can walk everywhere, but it's so wet, and she needs a new coat and a decent pair of shoes. I have a lolly for her, saved from Christmas, so she can have that in a bit. I don't think she really understands what's happening. I wonder if she'll know him? They say they can remember people even from when they're newborn, don't they?

Nearly there, I don't know if it's pushing this pram up the hill, but my heart is racing. Three years. So much time. Did he know what was happening? Did they get any news? I saw the photos in the paper, of the camps. Those poor souls, I hope it wasn't as bad as that for him.

Here we are, and it's so crowded. The air is filthy with the smoke and the steam. Some women are holding up babies to look down the line. Everyone has made an effort, hair in rolls, some have hoarded lipstick on. I wish I did. I don't know what to expect: will he see me straight away? Will I recognise him? Some came back with beards, and taller, not boys any more, you would hardly think they were the same person.

Will it be alright? Can we take up where we left off ?

The sun comes out, and I pick her up, but she squirms and wants to be let down. I give her the lolly to keep her quiet, and hold her hand tightly.

Then, the crowd surges, and with a screaming of brakes, here they are, and he's seen me, and I'm running, and pulling Pauline with her lolly, and *he* can't run, but he's doing the best he can with the crutches, and he flings them away, and I'm in his arms, and we're laughing and sobbing, and kissing, and he's kissing his little girl, and she's smiling, and we're kissing again....

And it's going to be all right.

The Evening Pilgrimage Ray Tier

Prompt: *The senses.*

The waves were lashing the shore as if to castigate him for his protracted absence. The sharp scent of the surf mingling with the rotting odour of seaweed assailed his senses, dragged him from the somnolent complacency of that warm stuffy bar and forced him to confront the harsh reality of the natural world. Harsh it may be but it was genuine and primeval, enduring for past ages and destined to continue so for millennia to come. The wind rifled through his hair, invigorating yet consoling, as a mother simultaneously comforts and fortifies her child by stroking their head. He could hear distant sounds of people's chatter and a jumbled cacophony of music but these were no match for the overwhelming clamour of the sea thundering against the beach, vanquishing all feeble human intrusions. As he strode purposefully forward on his mission, the lights of the pub receded and dimmed, to be replaced by a stunning blackness, relieved only by the occasional glint of moonlight on the advancing rollers. How he had missed all this during his weeks of obligatory absence! He watched a boat out at sea waging war against the breakers until ultimately gaining supremacy as it continued remorselessly towards its destination. He contrasted that with his own battle in life, striving to obtain qualifications and ultimately succeeding but, unlike the boat, with no chosen destination, no ultimate all-consuming objective to inspire and drive him forward. Surrounded by the elements, which to him embodied truth, honesty and the very essence of life, his own life seemed to lack any foundation. Maybe that could change this evening.

Advancing rapidly, he saw new lights ahead, swelling in their intensity as he drew closer. The tang of the salt on his lips had already eradicated any residual trace of beer but now he craved a different taste, one that was warm, comforting and satisfying, the regular culmination of an evening out. In truth however, the purpose of this evening march was not merely sobriety and sustenance but something more compelling and alluring, something which had become an obsession to him during those long lonely nights away – the memory of a warm smile, laughing eyes, a cascade of auburn hair, friendly banter and welcoming arms, which he fantasised could burgeon into a more fulfilling relationship. An observer might scoff that theirs was an ill-fitting match but he knew she was only working there to help finance herself through university. Would his feelings be reciprocated, he agonised? There was only one way to find out.

As he drew near, he detected a small throng of people gathered around the pier approach and hung back waiting for them to disperse to allow himself undivided attention. To his relief she was there.

“Hello again, Dave! Back from uni at last? I've missed you! Sobered up now, I hope. The usual large cod and chips and mushy peas with salt and vinegar, is it?”

“And a can of Irn Bru, please,” he stuttered nervously.

Prompt: *A character piece using a place for the character's name.*

"Hello Frank".

Chappell recognised the cheery well-spoken voice instantly; Preston *Brockhurst*. Brock, to his friends, was wearing his customary three piece suit complete with a carnation for his button hole.

"What brings you here?" Chappell asked, eyeing Brockhurst's leather briefcase with suspicion.

"As ever Frank, business".

"Take a seat Brock, what have I done this time?". Chappell's enquiry raising a smile.

"So far nothing of concern to HMG" replied Brockhurst, easing himself into a chair "I note you continue the policy of having chairs that are just that little too soft to escape quickly".

Chappell chose to ignore the diversion, asking "Does the Chief Constable know you are here?". Brockhurst persisted with a better aimed deflection, "That coffee and doughnut look rather good". Chappell's instant "bugger off!" drew a chuckle.

"Get to the point of your little visit" insisted Chappell. He knew this game. They had first encountered each other years before when Brockhurst appeared to work in Special Branch. It was always 'appeared', no one ever seemed to know who Brockhurst worked for.

"Yes, Dennis is aware that I am here, I spoke with the Chief Constable before breakfast".

Chappell noted the name dropping and that the jungle drums must have been working overtime to inspire Brock to action so early in the morning.

Brockhurst continued "I am aware that the Colonel's reappearance means ..."

"Who?" blurted Chappell, kicking himself for letting the surprise show.

"Your Mr Darwin, more correctly Lieutenant Colonel Lionel Darwin, New South Wales Light Infantry, retired. You can have my copy of the unofficial biography" offered Brockhurst reaching into his case "read it at your leisure, it's a cracking yarn".

"DS Spencer" shouted Chappell.

"By the way, the official version is classified and no you can't have one" Brockhurst concluded.

"Tea Mr Brockhurst?" asked Spencer from the doorway.

"Argh, DS Spencer, how nice to see you again. Yes please. Darjeeling perhaps?".

"More like brown and tepid but I'll ask the machine nicely" replied Spencer turning to withdraw.

"Spence, take this with you" directed Chappell, pushing the biography across his desk "and verify every word, dot and comma in it. The author is entirely unreliable."

"I'm hurt Frank" feigned Brockhurst.

"Please tell me your dirty little mitts have been nowhere near this case" said Chappell, almost pleading.

"I am a mere civil servant. Really, the very suggestion that I should get my hands dirty" came the less than reassuring reply. "You put out the usual enquiries, re persons of interest, and when Uncle Sam concluded his call to the Foreign Secretary I was directed to act as .. liaison ... interpreter?".

The Polar Station Ruth Sharp

Prompt: *Orchestral music by Anna Porvaldsdóttir 'Metacosmos'*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITG4BVM8Pps>

Brown, corrugated, a roof breaks the skyline
Sitting atop crumbling brick walls
Old, rotten, perished

Walls cracked, shield the inside from relentless icy winds
A building long ago left neglected, deserted
Old, forlorn, derelict

Ajar, a door off its hinges preserved, but broken,
Snow encroaching beyond its frame into darkness
Old, crooked, gaping

Icy winds moan swirling through an aged staircase
Groaning metal creaks, twisting, fighting against wind
Old, mangled, rusty

Peeling paint, broken window panes
Glinting in the sun catching its weak beams
Old, cracked, dirty

Metal once bright, a blue truck stands proud
Windows iced up with years of weathering
Old, abandoned, forlorn

Caterpillar tracks no longer needed, rigid
Ceased up, almost buried beneath snow
Old, useless, forgotten

A coffee mug, half concealed lies forlornly on the snow
Those who drank from it all those years ago
Old, dead, a memory

A Parka coat stiff with ice hangs by the door
Faded and weather worn its colour unknown
Old, redundant, discarded

A glove, fingers firmed by ice not flesh
Frozen to the ground, furry cuff like spikes
Old, rejected, cast-off

Cold, bleak and icy, abandoned an ice station waits in eerie silence
Waiting
Waiting

The Frozen Lake Russell Cousins

Prompt: *The line 'Between woods and the frozen lake' from "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost*

In the warmth of spring the frozen lake would begin to yield up its fearful secrets. The frost-withered vegetation along its snow-covered shores would resume its suspended life and hibernating animals, reinvigorated by the new-born sun, would emerge from the shielding undergrowth of the dormant woods. Green shoots would replace the solitary, crumpled leaves still resolutely clinging to the lifeless trees and birds would soon begin their search for new homes and new partners. Life's untamed cycle would turn again to bring back long summer days, days of laughter and happiness to that silent, desolate beach between the woods and the frozen lake. But not for Steve and Julia.

So many memories. Such happy memories. So much remembered joy and seemingly endless pleasure, but across the still frozen lake the dark shadows of sadness lengthened in the setting winter sun. It had been on this beach that Steve had first met Julia, confident and vivacious, freshly graduated from Princeton and eager to explore, to experiment, to enjoy! It was in the pine-scented woods that they had first made love and held each other quite still, listening to their friends laughing and singing at the beach barbeque. It was from the jetty where he now stood that they had swum out along the lake to the sheltered cove which they came to see as their own private place. The cove where they had shared their dreams, talked of glittering futures as successful writers, made love. And made love. So long ago.

Their charismatic friend Jack would have been thirty-four this coming spring. It had been he who had brought about their meeting that glorious summer, and they readily decided to name their son after him. In their friendship group Jack was adored by all the children as lakeside picnics, filled with squeals and giggling, supplanted the heady, wine-heavy barbeques of earlier years. It was he who had led the riotous, stumbling chases into the warm waters, encouraged the tumbling and splashing. The children's shrieks of fun-filled delight had never left Steve, and now in the jetty's fading winter light they were even more strongly, poignantly, present, almost unbearably so.

It was at the annual winter solstice barbeque on the beach that Jack had presented the friends with an inflatable dinghy as a Yuletide gift. With characteristic theatricality and mock ceremonial seriousness, much to the excited squeals of joy and expectation from all the enraptured children he had, with glass in hand, launched the craft so perfectly equipped with a skull and cross bones: "I name this magnificent pirate ship the Magic Voyager, and may the bountiful gods of Yuletide protect all those who sail in her. Now, my hearties, the wind's set fair, so let's all clamber aboard, hoist the main sail, and be on our way to adventures new on Treasure Island, yonder, across the waters blue."

No-one could have anticipated the sudden, angry squall.

In the warmth of spring the frozen lake would begin to yield up its fearful secrets.

Prompt: *the random word “nomadic” from a random book*

In them days we was called ‘stuffers’. Me brother and me, we were the stuffers for the big house for – well, maybe going on thirty years. Took over from those ‘nomadic’ stuffers who touted round the county aristocracy, but with no skills at all. So me brother and me we was definitely top notch, though I say it meself.

All those dead animals: not to everyone’s taste. The first few would turn your stomach, but you got used to it and in the end we got known as the best stuffers in Derbyshire.

It all started with one of the Baronets – John was it? or George? Anyway, the one who was a so-called nature lover like a lot of them country squires under Victoria. To do with Darwin they said – scientists and the like. Wanted to look at ‘wild life’ more closely, so shooting it dead was their answer. Funny that. Anyway, like I said, me brother and me got good at it: little birds and mice and rabbits and fish to start with, then small deer and birds of prey and larger deer, antlers and all, and gradually the glass boxes in the big house got bigger and fuller and there were more and more of them. My favourite was the barn owls – so pretty. We managed to get eighteen of them in one case for the front drawing room. And I remember our first swan – that was a two-man job, one holding the neck, the other, well, stuffing.

So we was fine, me brother and me – nice secure job, tied cottage, friendly chambermaids and such like. Nice group of staff – dozens of them, it was such a massive house – well, Hall really. The only drawback was the master’s kiddies: well, one in particular – young Horace. Little bugger he was. Always getting in the way, asking questions, telling us we’d missed a bit, with his nasty yappy little dog trying to sniff at what we was stuffing, not beyond cocking his leg. Then one day as we was trying to concentrate on a particularly tricky stag, the dog (his name was Jupiter) just came over and sank his teeth in me leg – unprovoked, no reason. Agony! Me brother swore at him and went to give young Horace a clip over the ear, but the horrible kid just laughed and ran off with the dog – no apology, nothing.

We couldn’t complain to the Baronet of course: the likes of us don’t get to make complaints. But a few weeks later the butler fellow said had anyone seen Jupiter, because young Horace was hysterical at not being able to find him. They’d even sent out search parties across the parkland, but no sign.

Well, me brother and me could’ve told them. Just look in the third glass cabinet from the right in that dark corner of the back drawing room. Jupiter won’t be taking chunks off the staff round here any time soon.

Prompt: *Travelogue.*

In the year of Our Lord 1542, I, Diogo de Boytac, Master Architect and Controller of the building of the Mosteiro dos Jeronimos, the Torre de Belem and the Capele de Sao Jeronimo in Lisbon, Portugal. In recognition of my advancing years and the years of my life that I have given to these monuments, I write to you, Joas de Castillio, as my pupil and the one who will complete these masterpieces. So you may understand the honour and high ideals that have driven me and, through me, the skilled workforce in the design and execution of the parts and whole of this life's work. This is the first of a series of instructive and clarifying documents I shall write to leave to you. In this case to set the scene and background.

These buildings were commissioned by the illustrious Dom Manual 1, in the year of Our Lord 1502, to house the Church and Cloisters of the Hieronymite religious order, in thanks for the divine favour bestowed on my Lord through the Discoveries and, to commemorate our lands maritime prowess. The Torre de Belem was also to mark and to guard the harbour entrance. Built with the great bounty from our lands in the Indias and the South Americas, and with the design influences from the east now called the Manueline style. I have worked on these monuments for 36 years and I was not a young man at the start.

This was no virgin site, but previously housed the chapel dedicated in the 1400's, over fifty years ago, to Prince Henry the Navigator, master of the Order of Christ and successor of the Knights Templar, and in an area much used by the usual traders, money changers and booksellers that crowd the banks of the Rua Novella. At this time Lisbon, a city of 40,000 citizens, was the richest in the world rivalled only by the Spanish, with the return of Vasco de Gama with the spices of India and the east. The opulence and depravity of this area cannot be overestimated, rife with crime and the stench of the slave pits, but building continued nevertheless through the massacre of 1506 and the plague year of 1527. The security of the multiple sites will continue to be of great importance for you to oversee, as the pressures on these areas have continued and will continue throughout the building work and beyond.

The expelling of the Jews and Moors in 1496 and the subsequent massacre of 1506 had substantially reduced the numbers of skilled workers we could find, and this was a practical and serious issue. We have needed the finest of skilled tradesmen to build the south lateral entrance with its sculptural relief, and the hierarchical saints to the crescendo of the statue of St Mary of Bethlehem, amongst many other marvels. The quality of the work continuing is an imperative particularly to maintain the exquisite light in the Nave and the symmetry and detail of the carving in the cloisters, the aim that it should show heaven in stone. The master masons need to be watched constantly to maintain the quality of their work.

Future documents that I will leave for you will include further details of the initial designs, inventories of the work completed and the work yet to be completed. The costs spent or allocated and that still to be allocated and spent. I remain, Joas, your friend as well as your master and teacher, and I am proud to name you as my successor in continuing to deliver these magnificent monuments to the power and

influence of My Lord and to our skills and endeavours, may they stand for a thousand years.

Christmas Fun Neville Cooper

Prompt: *A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens*

'Twas Christmas day in the mortuary
and all was sad and glum,
when up sat one of the corpses
and said, "Let's have some fun."

The rallying cry was answered
by several eerie groans,
the shifting of old bodies
and the creaking of old bones.

"Let's all sing a carol,"
quoth one unearthly voice,
"It's Christmas after all,
it seems the obvious choice."

The stiffs all then agreed,
within their ghostly throng,
that nothing could be better
than a Christmas sing-along.

And so, in whispery tones
the voices of those there
rose up in spectral beauty
into the mortuary air.

Never in the history
Of those who've passed away
Had there been a carol service
As took place on that day.

Prompt: *A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens*

Melting snow dripped from roofs and droplets landed with a 'Plink!' in gutter puddles, rainbows swirled as carriage oils were disturbed. The old man glided on past the chestnut burners and the young urchins running amok in the market. No doubt 'obtaining' their evening sustenance. His brow was wrinkled as if trying to work something out, but whatever it was, he couldn't quite recall it from his memory. And his memory was long.

Along the street, shop windows were aglow with lamp light and displays of festive goods. The counting house not so; inside, a fire burned reluctantly in the grate. A few more logs and coals would have made a cheery improvement, but Scrooge was never one to indulge in cheeriness. Besides, the darkness was gaining intensity and soon it would be time to shut up the counting-house and away home to bed. Having dismissed the clerk with a warning to come extra early the day after tomorrow (he had the cheek to request the whole day off on the morrow, so what if it was but once a year), he retrieved his hat from the stand and snuffed out the solitary candle. The chill crept through his bones as he stepped out, locked the door and strode across the street to his house.

Scrooge sniffed. He had a cold and that made him all the more miserable. Scrooge was a miserable man. Of course I am not referring to the general miserable state when suffering a cold, but of the miserable state of a person who was miserable by nature, and a cold would give further opportunity to moan and complain. He lit a candle and decided to take some porridge with a glass of port. A few minutes later, he was in his bed chamber kneeling before the grate coaxing a small fire to life to warm his frozen toes.

The old man's face lit up. He had recalled his thought and began a low chuckle which no one seemed to hear. Nor did anyone pay attention to him as he glided further up the street. He had remembered both his name and mission and continued on towards the abode of Mr Scrooge. He halted at the door as if torn between which direction to take. Decision made, the old man effortlessly took the steps and disappeared through the door. This was a neat trick given that the door had been locked and bolted against the cold night not just a quarter hour before.

Bells suddenly started to ring throughout the house. Every servant bell seemed to want to be the loudest; it was as if there was a need to prove their very existence after so long being silent. The old man made a theatrical entrance via cellar, staircase and finally bedroom door. The belt around his middle was long and made of various items including keys, padlocks, and heavy purses fashioned in iron. It clanked as he walked and was so long it scraped the floor. "I'm going to enjoy this" thought the old man with a smile.

Prompt: *'For Alina' music by Arvo Pärt*

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Alina+by+Aarvo+Paart#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:3caf437d,vid:TzIZPZN5K60,st:0>

Laurence woke at five, the street light seeping round the edges of the thin curtains. He sat up and reached for his cigarettes. Another cold day. Another dark day to get through, with no relief from the pressing dread, the listless longing. He finished his cigarette and stubbed out the end in an overflowing saucer.

The bare floor was cold on his feet. He opened the door a crack and listened: no sounds yet from the other sleepers in the house. He pulled a threadbare sweater over his pyjamas and trod carefully down to the bathroom.

In the dim light from the naked bulb he examined his face. His skin looked grey, the mouth downturned, the eyes red and circled by dark patches that looked like bruises. "I am getting old."

He thought. "I am getting old, and the world is getting older." The water from the heater spat and spluttered. He washed sparingly, shaved quickly, and crept back to his room.

Then it seemed there was nothing to do but get back into bed. It would be two hours before Stefan contacted him. He switched on the tiny transistor radio, muffling it under his pillow. The BBC world service was reporting more strife, more standoffs. The bullish rhetoric of either side did not convince anyone. There was no peace, as they had promised. No end to hostility: it seemed to him his friends had died in vain. He smoked another cigarette, remembering Felix with the others in the mess, his curly hair, his infectious laugh. Gone, all gone to dust, and no relief. He thrust a coin into the meter and switched on one bar of his electric fire. He dressed quickly.

Outside it was beginning to snow, and the pavements were icy. Bare branches held glistening drops of ice, and the sulphurous sky felt low enough to smother him. The tram was crowded and damp. He got off one stop early and walked carefully through the slush and ice to the usual cafe.

He sat in the designated booth with coffee and the newspaper. He couldn't eat. He smoked another cigarette. At eight precisely Stefan appeared. The conversation was short, explicit. He memorised the details. As Stefan left he noticed another man rise and follow him. The watchers watched, he thought grimly.

At mid-day the weather was worse: huge flakes whirled in an icy wind, and the streetlights were still lit. He saw Alina before she saw him. She was standing looking in a jeweller's window, pensive, with that little half-smile on her lips. His heart lurched, and he had to stop and catch his breath. It was all he could do to stop himself from crying out and warning her. She put up her hand to straighten her hat, turned, and saw him, her eyes widening, her mouth breaking into a smile. He forced himself to smile back. "Let's go" he murmured into her hair.

His room felt colder than the street. She had brought proper coffee from the black market, and some hoarded sugar, and busied herself at the popping gas ring. He felt for her pistol in her discarded coat pocket. He took her in his arms, and turned her face to his. She nestled into his chest. "Do you want coffee before or after?" she

whispered. He turned away. He couldn't bear to see her smile, and though he wanted her with every fibre of his body, he couldn't sully her like that.

"Let her remain pure, just for this day," he prayed. Her smile faded as she watched his face darken, the tears near the surface. Then, with something almost like relief, she smiled, and nodded. "Ah," she sighed, and, in her own language, "It has come to this at last." She closed her eyes as he circled her neck with his hands. He supported her frail body as she slipped, lifeless onto the bed.

For ever after the smell of coffee reminded him of this moment. The rest was administrative: the discreet and efficient disposal of the body, the paperwork, the carefully worded commendation, the coded phone call from a street box, the meeting with Stefan in the park. More orders. More deaths.

In his room later there was still a faint echo of her perfume. He sat on his bed in his heavy overcoat. He lit another cigarette. "Please God," he prayed, "Let it be worth it, let it be worth it."

The Refugees Carol Gatehouse

Prompt: *A random line from page 61 of Anne Tyler's 'Saint Maybe'.*

The machine he had in mind was a blue hulk with a cord so thick that the only outlet they could plug it into was the one behind the refrigerator. It was therefore not an option they wanted to pursue unless there was no other. Was that the place they had finally reached mused Sergeant Morris, after all the fridge held all their current rations and the few bottles of beer they had requisitioned from the other houses.

They needed the machine to pump water from the well they had found, which had the potential to provide the only source of even vaguely drinkable water, since the taps had dried up. The timing was crucial as they didn't know how long the electric supply would continue.

Sergeant Morris surveyed the motley crew of soldiers he had to work with, and the refugees who they had seemed to have become responsible for. A group of older women and some children, all filthy and wrapped up in a series of shawls and blankets, the men had long since left to take up fighting somewhere else. They looked cold and tired and defeated.

It was then the woman spoke to them; her English accent was quite poor but understandable;

"You need to pump the water, we need it for the children, I know how, let me show you".

Fearing a trap Sergeant Morris was wary but she moved with confidence and showed him where to plug in the machine without moving the refrigerator, it took all the men to move the machine but they managed it. Then another of the women showed him the storeroom, it had some very limited provisions and, amazingly some medical supplies; they would be able to help some of the wounded. Sergeant Morris thanked the women, and got his men into action setting up the pump, the women

rallied around with containers. The men were cagey with them, but they could see they seemed to know what they were doing, this wasn't what the soldiers had expected to find in this area, where the surface buildings had been practically razed to the ground after weeks of bombardment.

After a bit the woman who had spoken English came back asked if any of the soldiers were in need of medical assistance, and Trooper Peters, who had a nasty festering shrapnel wound, stepped forward. The woman gestured to the other and they started to examine the wound and to clean it with alcoholic wipes. Suddenly Sergeant Morris realised what they had found;

"Doctor?" he said. The woman grinned and gesturing to the other woman said "and nurse".

What a piece of luck, who would have believed it, now he could see them for what they were, survivors, he grinned and pointing at his chest "Morris" he said "Good to meet you".

Enforced Leave Mark Sharp

Prompt: Holiday.

Robert, seeking relief from the heat, leaned against a cool marble pillar. Watching the dancers he noticed a rather elegant Asian girl seated at a nearby table. Between dances several European young ladies would join her and engage with her in animated conversation. As the music began her companions would be duly escorted to the dance floor but each time she remained, patiently, alone. Robert approached and mustering his finest pigeon French enquired if she would care to dance. Startled she jumped then, giggling, apologised in French. Robert pressed on, this time in Hindi, and she burst into laughter. Seeing his chastened expression she explained, in English, that she was waiting for her friends.

"Thank goodness" he said.

She looked at him offended.

"Oh no, I mean, thank goodness your English is so good. I'm afraid my Hindi is, at best, broken".

"A rather generous assessment" she said smiling.

"It would help, of course, if someone .." he looked about expectantly, before meeting her gaze ".. were to tutor me". He quickly continued "Allow me to introduce myself; Lieutenant Robert Stevens".

"What a relief" she said, looking at his uniform, "I feared it was fancy dress and no one had told me or, perhaps, another example of your singular dress sense".

"Ah. You were there? Breakfast yesterday.." he cringed "swimming trunks were perhaps a little too casual but I can explain".

"Really?!" she said raising her eyebrows.

"Unfortunately my luggage is aboard ship and I am not; although my luggage is rumoured to be enjoying its cruise to India. What I stand in; plus the couple of decent shirts, change of underwear and pair of swimming trunks I acquired, are all I possess until my bank completes a wire transfer".

After a moments pause she asked "Why not wear your uniform to breakfast?".

“It embarrassed itself brushing against a wall .. although my French vocabulary now includes peinture fraîche”.

She laughed then smiling said “Jyothi. My friends call me Jay”.

He considered her admiringly before replying with a smile “I definitely prefer Sunlight, it suites you much better”.

“So! Your Hindi isn't nearly as shabby as you pretend” she said, offering her hand.

“Delighted to meet you ..” he said, “I think I should ask; are you particularly fond of your feet?”.

“What?” she asked bemused.

“My dancing is only marginally better than my French”.

Rising Jyothi said “Dancing? With an Indian girl! What will people say?”.

“They'll just be jealous; whereas I would be mortified if you danced with anyone else”.

“You're sure they won't think it inappropriate?”.

“I don't know” said Robert. Then whispered “are your intentions entirely honourable?”.

Smiling, Jyothi replied “I haven't decided”.

“Oh good” he said.

As they danced, at arm's length, Jyothi instructed “Stop fooling about and hold me closer; you're not as inept as you pretend”.

He sighed “Pris sur le fait”.

Cavil and Dolittle Russell Cousins

Prompt: *The following photograph*



Cavil and Dolittle Estate Agents
Property Sales

Autumn Newsletter

A rare opportunity has arisen to acquire a remarkable Grade 11 listed building for sale by auction on 7th November 2023. The *Shepherds Retreat*, also known as the *Tree House*, was built as a folly for the late Sir Bartlett Pears as a birthday gift for his notoriously wayward wife, Aurora. Designed by the celebrated French landscape

gardener Lancelot Bergere the stone construction is one of only four remaining follies Bergere built in Northumbria and is testimony to the distinctive craftsmanship of itinerant masons fleeing Italy following the construction of a tower in Pisa. Among notable architectural features is the granite fireplace installed by Alfred Collier, known locally as Alfred the Grate.

Standing in unblemished countryside the building is very much part of the woodlands as indeed the woodlands are intrinsically part of the building. Comprising a single, compact living area with unchallenged views of trees and skies, the folly is unusual in its forest setting. For those seeking a place to meditate, to observe the heavens, or simply to get away from pressured urban living, the location cannot be rivalled, and lovers of fresh air will find this in abundance.

For buyers contemplating prolonged winter occupation some renovation work may seem desirable and to this end grants for loft insulation and double-glazing are available. Sanitary facilities have remained unchanged since the innovative pit and straw eco- system introduced by U.P. Freely partners at the turn of the century. Forget utility bills and parking permits as they will be of no consequence here: none of the services has been connected and access to this charming property is only by a narrow path which should not be attempted after dark.

The *Shepherds Retreat* boasts a rich socio-cultural history. It was here that Sheila Blige wrote *Tales from the Hay Loft* – the first volume in her much-loved trilogy about married life and infidelities in a Victorian country parish. Fans of television costume dramas will recognise in the *Retreat's* romantic location, the idyllic hideaway for several besotted Jane Austen characters exploring the niceties of courtship. Through Aurora Pears, D.H. Lawrence also had a presence, for it was in the *Retreat* she found so much inspiration from her illustrated versions of his novels.

In the thirties, archaeologists discovered remains of early Palaeolithic settlers together with evidence of more recent pagan practices now banned in Europe since Foot and Mouth disease became prevalent. In 1940 a Force 8 gale removed much of the original roofing while a thunderbolt caused such a conflagration that flames could be seen in the village a mile away. Locals have long believed that nature's intervention was retribution for Aurora's use of the *Retreat* for her scandalous sequential relationships with each of Sir Bartlett's grooms. It was in the folly that she died on mid-summer's night after the Lower Wick point-to-point from apparent exhaustion and hyperthermia.

To register an interest in the purchase of this unique property please contact staff at our Auction Rooms. Full terms and conditions are to be found on our website: Omes4U.com. Buy-to-let mortgages are negotiable through our partners Cheetham and Scarper.

Prompt: *Transition*

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year*
For a second lockdown,
And such a long lockdown.

The rain was unforgiving;
In sheets it came, on and on;
The garden was a quagmire:
No joy there.
Darkness came early, and the nights were long.

The roads (so quiet last Spring)
Were hogged by racers (mostly men):
“We speed; therefore we are!”
(Police were elsewhere, dispersing parties).

Children were home-schooled by parents
Juggling roles, exhausted,
Puzzling over new maths, new methods,
Trying to help while Zooming colleagues.

The elders, jabbed and less afraid this time
Were missing family, dreadfully;
Now bored with online food deliveries,
Hoping to choose their own broccoli soon,
Fed up with tramping the same streets
For exercise, lacking country air.

And the long hair grew longer and longer.

Some had less money even than before
(but some had more).
Some wanted to kill each other
(living too close for too long);
And some succeeded.

There was talk of ‘variants’ and ‘data’
And ‘following the science’.
There were graphs and Venn diagrams,
From earnest, trusty men with shiny heads.
But Number 10 argued with SAGE;
Then argued with Europe:
(“Those vaccines are ours!” everyone claimed).
“But what about Africa!” we cried;
“What about ‘the other’?”

Why can't we share?"

Dear god, we've had enough.

*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley...
Smelling of vegetation, with a running stream.*
And the first shoots of crocuses showed themselves,
Then the daffodils laughed their way into the sunshine,
And the robins sang unselfconsciously near our spade,
Snatching worms as we tilled the earth;
And the bluetits declared our nesting box
Was to their satisfaction, and moved in.
And the children joined their friends at school
And parents smiled again, feeling younger.

And the graphs slid downhill,
And the 'R' number dipped below One,
And the hospitals heaved a sigh,
And we dared to hope.

And, like children on a journey, we asked,
Plaintively,

"Are we nearly there yet?"

The Rhinoceros and the Umbrella **Neville Cooper**

Prompt: Umbrella and the work of Eugene Ionesco

There was no doubting it: a large rhinoceros was striding menacingly down the high street knocking pedestrians hither and thither. Alarming as it was, there had been other sightings in recent days. It was all very unsettling.

From the relative safety of the Café Humane, Bernard awaited Berenger, his long-time friend. His tardiness was legendary. Although engrossed in a book, Bernard's attention was drawn to a commotion in the street and, through the partly obscured window, he thought he could make out a rampaging Rhinoceros. Common as such sightings were becoming, a shudder passed through him. This was the third such creature he had seen in the town this week.

Suddenly, a shabbily dressed man burst in through the café entrance and stood quivering as if having escaped from a fearful mauling. The man, erratically, made for Bernard's table uncertain of his footing and destination.

"Drunk again at lunchtime, Berenger," his friend Bernard crowed.

There was no reply as Berenger collapsed into the seat opposite Bernard. After regaining his composure, the visitor spoke: "You'd need a drink if you had seen what I've just seen. I swear I saw one of our fellow men change into a rhinoceros."

"That's incredible," Berenger exclaimed. "You definitely need a stiff one."

A silence hung in the air between them as if the rhinoceroses' sightings and transformations had robbed them of the power of speech.

It was Bernard who spoke next: "Have you noticed that these rhinoceros' sightings coincide with yet another disappearance of a prominent political figure?"

"I'd say that's a blessing in the case of people like Bill Vowells and his obnoxious views." Berenger replied. "But these disappearances seem to be affecting our supporters".

Bernard ordered two more drinks and the pair sat in gloom as they considered this extraordinary situation. After another soothing injection of strong brandy, it was Berenger who spoke next:

"Do you think you might be the next one to turn into a rhinoceros?" He said tentatively.

"Well, it would be a novel experience" Bernard replied.

This very night, Bernard and Berenger had organised a meeting of friends and fellow sympathisers to draw up guidelines for a new political party: The Red Fist. Their meeting this afternoon was to draft the agenda.

Both men, whilst not politicians, shared a common view on freedoms and equality. They had been known to thrill the patrons of the Café Humane with passionate diatribes against those in power. Only the previous evening, the place had hosted a rousing debate on freedom of speech.

It was only a short while later as Bernard was pinning up posters for the event, that a rhinoceros charged through the café door and came to a stop. The creature's flanks heaved and the stench of sweating, primaevial animal pervaded the air. Staring helplessly at the creature, Bernard, defenceless, reached for the only thing available to him for protection: his umbrella. It unfurled and he waved it menacingly.

Prompt: *Umbrella.*

The rain was beginning to soak through his coat as Derek hauled his suitcase to the *Jolly Boatman*. He had arrived at the station that Sunday evening to be confronted by torrential rain and the sudden realisation that he had lost his umbrella. He could only have left it at the pub during Friday evening drinks with colleagues before departing for the train to York and his weekend course on Health & Safety. The earlier downpour which cleared up as soon as they arrived was to blame for his temporary amnesia. He had lost count of the times he had misplaced this essential item of commuters' equipment over the years and the lost property desks he had frequented, to the point of being on first name terms with the attendants. If only umbrellas could talk, they would have a tale to tell, he mused. On that evening his colleagues had gathered for their customary Friday drinks to celebrate the end of another tedious week's work. They carried an assortment of brollies which seemed to reflect their personalities – convivial Tim with his capacious multi-coloured golfing umbrella, smooth Giles with his immaculately furled bamboo handled article adorned with a silver band bearing his initials GS-M, efficient Jane with her elegant example in vibrant shades of blue with matching transparent handle, scatterbrain Wayne with his bedraggled specimen always with a few spokes loose and finally himself with his own nondescript functional broolly endowed with a sensible plastic handle. Pondering on the impression this created, he had sometimes wondered whether he should exchange it for a more flamboyant alternative but couldn't bring himself to do so.

As always, he had much enjoyed his Health and Safety course, impressed and intrigued by the ever-increasing list of unexpected hazards and risks that can befall the unwary. Based on past experience, the barman of the *Jolly Boatman* had anticipated his arrival and had his broolly ready to hand. Gratefully accepting it he set off for home. He was greeted with the sort of cold welcome he had grown to expect, his wife complaining that she hadn't seen a soul all weekend and had spent the entire time spring cleaning. He could never understand how she could devote so much of her life to domestic chores to so little effect but agreed to help finish the process by tidying up. After replacing books on shelves, magazines on the newspaper rack and clothing in drawers, he set about relocating the outdoor coats from the banisters to the understairs cloakroom cupboard. It was there that he encountered an unexpected event that his course had not prepared him for. It was a shock certainly but perhaps in reality more a confirmation of his own private suspicions which he refused to acknowledge. Nestling surreptitiously in the corner of the cupboard was an umbrella with bamboo handle and silver band proclaiming the initials GS-M. Gloomily he recalled his previous musings. He was wrong: umbrellas don't need to talk to have a tale to tell.