

The 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition



34

39 *Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,*

44 *flight to the imagination and life to everything.*

The image shows a piano score with three systems of music. The first system (measures 34-38) features a treble and bass clef with a melodic line in the treble and a supporting bass line. The second system (measures 39-43) includes the lyrics 'Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,' with a treble clef and a bass line featuring a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The third system (measures 44-48) includes the lyrics 'flight to the imagination and life to everything.' with a treble clef and a bass line with a similar accompaniment.

MUSIC

Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

Adult Category

The 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2021

MUSIC

*We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams...*

“Music is the art which is most nigh to tears and memory.” Oscar Wilde on how a song can roll back the years and take you to a forgotten place with friends long gone.

Literature and music have always gone hand in hand. Poets and authors, from Shelley To Shakespeare and Keats to Austen have woven it as themes through their works. 2021 is the 150th Anniversary of the Royal Albert Hall, a venue which has seen every style of music performed beneath its iconic dome. To celebrate this, the 16th Elmbridge Literary Competition was looking for poems and short stories that take music as their inspiration.

Following the success of 2020’s ‘New World’, The Elmbridge Literary Competition was once more open to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, it was open to all ages.

- 2005: Cook Up A Story
- 2006: On My Way
- 2007: A Life In Colour
- 2008: Once Upon A Time
- 2009: A Symphony of Life
- 2010: The Elmbridge 100
- 2011: Breaking The Barrier
- 2012: A Dickens of A Christmas
- 2013: One Act Radio Play
- 2014: Dear Diary
- 2015: Flights of Fantasy
- 2016: Love
- 2017: Luck
- 2018: A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
- 2019/20: New World

Category: Short Stories

Joint 1st Place: Dust – by Lottie Armitage

He lived in silence. That was the way he liked it, and that was the way it was going to stay, for as long as he could keep the sounds out of his house. It was a small house, a little dusty, standing solid in the suburbs with blinds drawn and eyes closed. He was a small man. He'd been tall, once, or so he imagined; now he was – what – seventy-two? Eighty, maybe? It didn't matter.

What did matter was the girl. He hadn't let her into his house. She wasn't *supposed* to be in his house. She didn't *fit*. She was tall and lean and deer-eyed, stepping through his belongings and up his staircase like an animal through long grass, and she was animal to him – not a familiar species; not a creature he trusted. She wanted to fix things. She'd snoop around his kitchen with her thin hands out in front of her, rummaging and rearranging until he caught her and sent her back upstairs. That girl. He couldn't leave her alone for a minute, even. Always stuck in his personal life like a stubborn shard of glass. He wondered who had sent her; who she was spying for.

She'd taken a liking, he mused, to his old turntable, which stood in the living room on a platform of flatpack furniture and cardboard boxes. That thing hadn't worked for years. He kept it around for memory's sake – it had been a birthday gift, or a Christmas gift or something, or perhaps picked up from the charity shop on Sycamore Road, wherever that was – it rang a bell – he shook his head at that expression. It was a stupid expression. No bells were being rung. It was silent, as he liked it, and he wasn't going to let that girl get her bony claws on the turntable.

She was in the living room even as these thoughts crossed his mind. He could hear her rustling around. She turned as he entered the room with that same bland look in her eyes, both hands on the cover of the turntable, caught in the act with the plastic lid raised. He didn't need to say anything. He watched her creep away, foiled again, and slammed the lid back down, turning his head from the thin cloud of dust it coughed up. If he wanted to use it – he thought indignantly, grinding his teeth – then he simply would. He knew how to work it. It was a simple matter of buttons. Five little black buttons and dials scattered across like raisins. One was in charge of the power. It made the plate... spin, he thought. He could definitely remember something spinning. That was why it was called a turntable. It turned. One of the other buttons was in charge of stopping it from turning, and the others... well...

He shook his head. It wasn't important. It was muscle memory. Given the chance to figure it out for himself, he would know which one did which. It was stupid, really, assuming that he didn't. People only ever assumed things. He was lost in thought, now, stepping heavily to the kitchen, brow furrowed and jaw clenching in on itself, the loose skin of his face forming patterns like tree bark. He imagined the dust collecting in the wrinkles. They thought he was stupid. They thought he was *dusty!* Absolutely no respect, he thought, no respect for anyone; no respect for silence. There was no dust in his brain. He didn't *think* there was dust in his brain. It was clear. It was all he knew. Pure clarity. He knew who he was, and where he was, and why he didn't want that girl in his house for another second. He thought he knew... did he know? He looked down at his hands, resting on the kitchen table. He wasn't sure why he was in the kitchen. Slim hands, he thought; pale, fragile hands, with blue veins wrapping around them like scores of musical notes. Little calluses on his fingertips. Yes, from when he'd

played... piano? Guitar? Or he'd built things out of wood, perhaps, or he'd written so quickly and in so much detail that his fingers had bled, or he'd worked outdoors in biting weather. Any number of lives. He might have had them all – yes, that was a nice idea; he'd lived through every single one of them. He sighed, satisfied.

A noise. Oh God, what was she doing this time?

There was crackling coming from the living room, and at first he thought maybe she'd finally turned on him and started a fire, maybe the furniture and the boxes and the blinds were blazing up and he'd die in this house with the strange animal girl, but as he rushed in and his eyes adjusted he saw that she was up to her old tricks. She'd gone straight back to the turntable, and this time he recognised in shock and fury that one of the buttons had been pushed into place. There was a record on the plate, black and bright like a beetle's wing, and that needle was hovering above it like the blade of a guillotine, and as he ran towards the girl and slammed his hands down on the cover and flinched at her bleak black eyes it was too late. The needle dropped.

The first note hurt him on a scale he couldn't comprehend. He felt it rip the silence as if the needle were boring into him, first the outer layer of skin, then deeper into the plush white layers where life was still fresh and new, closer to the pulse, down to the muscle, the bright burning absence of anything but survival, and the tendons, the bone, every single part of his body bending and stretching around the sound. It happened slowly at first – one note; two notes; he was stuck still in that room with the girl unmoving beside him; it was a piano. Liquid melodies dripping down his spine, and it didn't hurt any more. It was like a lightning strike, but where lightning would take a life away this sound was giving one back, and as he stood still and breathed the music it was sending him smells and sights and feelings he had forgotten to feel for years and years, heavy rich emotions that wrapped around him as more and more instruments flooded in, the brown hum of the bass, the light yellow sprinklings of guitar, he knew how to play the guitar, he knew where the calluses on his hands were from, he knew with the rising crescendo what it was like to dance on a cold February night, except he wasn't cold at all, not short at all, not stiff and covered in dust at all, only alive, only young and ridiculous and filled with so much happiness he thought he was going to die.

When he turned his gaze back to the girl, she was crying. He realised that he must be crying too. He hadn't cried for decades.

'Look,' she said, and her voice blended with the music; a clear, silver voice like percussion in the rain.

He saw that she was pointing, and followed the arc of her arm to the window, because she had opened the blinds – of course she had – and he couldn't hate her for it any more because the sun was crisp and welcoming, and the reflection it gave him in the glass panes was something that brought him to tears for a second time.

In her eyes, he saw himself. In the contours of her face, and her soft light hair, and her strong jaw, he saw her mother. In the way that she held herself, he saw the rhythms of the music; the gentle pops and crackles of the needle in the grooves; the way she couldn't quite help herself from swaying and twitching in time to the score, and he saw in his own reflection that he was doing the same. There was no dust any more. Bathed in sound and sunlight, he knew real clarity.

He threw away the silence, took his daughter's hands and danced until nothing was left.

Joint 1st Place: A Song of The Sea – by Joseph McElroy

The flint-grey waves swashed up the beach with the rhythmic certainty of a mason's trowel. Each swell's scrape smoothed the edges of the sand-scattered stones, and sleeked the gnarled, rotting, tree branches that were half-buried in the dunes. This stretch of Suffolk coast had been caressed away over the years, fat slabs of sandstone lured into those memory-less waters: a siren-song that was as inevitable as it was heartbreaking. He knew that a hundred years from now all of this would be a mere charcoal smudge, or worse, a peeling photograph on a public house wall. But at least the waves' song would never change.

Pointing the phonograph towards the sea, he turned the handle vigorously until the stylus had scratched the sound into the record. He had spent the last ten years travelling up and down Suffolk roads, crouched by the hearths of fishermen's cottages, recording the songs of a folk tradition that was rapidly disappearing. He wanted to capture those tunes in the same way that one might pin desiccated butterflies or wildflowers to a cabinet wall: having them was what was important. Once recorded, the songs could never be smashed and churned as had happened to the landscape of his childhood. He would capture them and keep them forever safe, locked away from time.

He checked his watch: quarter of nine. A reasonable hour to visit. It began to drizzle as he loped back up the hushed dunes. He hoped that he might have one more song to record, one that would allow him to finally present his work to the Academy next month. This was the last place left to visit. Although, there wasn't much there as the village of Scarshore had been swallowed up by the sea in a storm fifty years before: entire families lost, chapels and hovels vanishing into the murk. Only one house had been left standing.

Surely no one could be still living here? It was a shivering old wreck that teetered on a cliff edge. Its striated clay roof was peppered with abandoned birds' nests; the many black gaps in the walls and eruptions of droppings from peeling window frames made it look scabrous and ill. Trembling at the thought of completing his grand project, he thumped firmly on a moss-bruised door, half-afraid that the whole edifice would collapse.

At first, he could hear nothing but the gargling swash of the North Sea and the drumming of the squall that had started. Then, a scratching. Birds? A shuffling. Rats? And then the groaning croak of rusted hinges, as a pinched white face peered out of the wet gloom. She stared.

"G-good morning, madam. I apologise for disturbing you. I was wondering if you might be able to assist me?"

She continued to stare. Never had he seen someone so perfectly, almost organically, in tune with her surroundings. Her hair was a shock of silver, the colour of the foaming tide; her skin, weathered as an overturned hull, was only missing the barnacles. But it was her eyes that arrested his attention most: behind the film of grey lay two black orbs that glistened darkly. Although she couldn't see, her stare pierced.

"Let me state my business. I work for the Academy and I suppose you could call me a collector of songs-"

"And you come up here to take a song from me, is it?" Her voice crackled like shaken shingle.

"Yes, if that's not too much trouble-"

"You don't want the one song I have, Academy Man." She went to close the door, but his boot barred the way.

"I apologise again, madam, but may I at least come in to shelter from the rain for a moment?" She wavered before shrugging, "Suit yourself. But you'll not feel much difference."

She was right. He felt the cold keenly. As long as the wind coming in through the gaps in the eaves didn't disturb the recording, it would be fine. This shouldn't take long.

"I am so sorry to pester, but it really wouldn't take a moment. Of course, you will be compensated for the singing. Would five shillings suffice?"

He hadn't offered more than a shilling for the other recordings, but he was anxious to wrap this up, so he could finish preparing for the Academy Recital next month. He would begin the arrangements as soon as he returned to London, leaving this desolate place behind for good. She shook her head. "You really don't want it. Dry off and be on your way, once the weather breaks."

Exasperated, he slumped in a chair. "Thank you. That is most disappointing. May I ask why not?"

"You can ask," she chuckled. "Truth is there ain't no forgetting this song. It stays with you. Like the tide, always coming in. Going out. Turning and churning your mind over and over until there ain't much left but the sea itself..."

She trailed off, staring. "I remember once when I were a little girl, back before people like you knocked on doors with your nosy machines and your noisy thoughts. When we just sang to the sea and, if you listened well, the sea would sing you back.

"There were one night, one of them evil nights when the wind'd sweep you up off a cliff and drop you into the everlasting. A young girl came a-knocking, no more than thirteen she were, looking like a drowned rat. She were human like you or I, but her hair were knotted with kelp and her skin were green like the moss on that door. She looked for all as if she'd dragged herself right out of the ocean.

"Mother invited her inside, wrapped her in a blanket, and asked her about her relations. But she didn't speak a word. Just stared into the fire as if she'd never seen one before, and drank cups and cups of tea, before dunking her head in our bucket and glugging water like a sailor would his dram. Her breathing were ragged as if she were fighting for air, but once she'd drunk her fill, she calmed. Mother were scared of her then; she ran out to get help from the neighbours.

"That's when she looked at me, the girl. Stared at me with eyes blacker than ravens, she did. I couldn't look away and I stared back. Then she said, but not aloud, not in words, but in my head, *You're not like the others. You've given me shelter. You've been kind and welcoming. You will hear the sea from Above, not from Below like the others.*

"I couldn't move for sheer terror, when Mother whirled back inside, eyes wide like lamps. She whispered, *I checked on the Deaths first, and then the Kerseys, and all of the houses, even the pub, but they're all...gone. As if they just vanished into thin air.* She then pointed at the girl, *She must know. Where are they?* Screaming now, gibbering, she lunged for the girl, stretching out for the kelp in her hair.

"The girl stared at Mother now and Mother froze. She then opened her mouth, and deep from within her and out, she gushed out the sweetest song you could ever hear."

At this the old woman began to hum. The tune swirled around him, anchoring him to the spot. Sweat beaded his collar.

"The power of the song were incredible. It were so strange but at the same time it felt like it'd been inside me the whole time, like from before I were born. It were like the world opened her lungs and lullabied the universe, spilling all her secrets. At the sound of it, Mother made no noise, turned away and stepped out, lost to the storm."

The old woman's hum changed to words, guttural and flowing, in a voice sweeter than honey and with overlapping harmonies that washed in and out rhythmically like the swash of the sea. Over and over. The notes crashed, the melody swelled: it felt warm, womb-like, safe.

She sang on, but her words now echoed in his head, *You see, Academy Man, this song were her gift to me and my curse. The sea laid claim to them empty houses the same night as the storm but not before she took away those that'd been in them.*

She sang, as he trudged past the moss-beaten door, phonograph tucked under his arm, and out onto the marram grass, no longer feeling their sting or the cold slush of muddy sand. She sang as the icy water lapped at his ankles and caressed his knees. She sang on and on, over and over, embalming him with the swash of the tide; he could hear it in her words, could hear it in the shingle, gurgling and swooshing, before his head finally disappeared under the black water. The song was the sea, and the sea was the song.

And the waves' song never changed.

3rd Place: Soundtracks – by Edward Barnfield

So, it doesn't really hurt. That's what everybody asks. It doesn't hurt, or rather, it hurts, but it's over before the pain registers. There's just the zap of the laser, and they drop the chip in, and everything's subcutaneous before you know it.

It does take time to get used to. You're walking round with a bandage behind your ear and the songs in your head are mostly ones you know already, the ones you hum without thinking, the lyrics you remember. It's distracting at first, and the volume always seems a little off, a little intrusive. Then the algorithm starts to understand you, learns about your preferences. It pulls songs from the cloud to match your mood, tunes you've never heard before.

That's when the magic happens. You're in the shower and there's this great burst of opera from out of nowhere, and you feel like you could conquer the world. My friend Chloe, she thinks everybody's going to get soundtracked eventually. It's the best way to really live in the music, she says, makes streaming as outdated as nose flutes and pipe organs.

After a while, when you get confident, you can switch to roaming. The chip just zooms into other people's soundtracks, gives you a little burst of their world for a few seconds, and then you can stay with their songs or switch back to your own. It's incredible. You go for a jog and it's like everyone is racing to the same beat, or you walk in the park and there are all these symphonies and show tunes exploding all over.

I've had the chip in for six months and the absolute best thing is the subway. You don't need buskers anymore; there's a whole orchestra down there on the rails. I like to start with the chip off. Walk down the carriage, check out the faces. Nobody's staring at their phone; nobody bothers with a screen. They just ride along with their music. Some people have their eyes closed. Some stare out of the window. It's bliss.

Then I slowly turn my track on and start flicking from my tunes to roaming mode, catch a little blip from each passenger. Early evenings can be incredible – you get all these tourists coming in, all these world beats and excitement as they scope out a new city. You get people just out

of work looking for adventure, which means Eurodance or house or eighties funk. Some old dude with his jazz, some kid with K-pop. Everything. Everything's there.

What's that? Oh yes, it absolutely remembers other people's soundtracks. It tracks your physical reactions – elevated heartbeat, endorphin rushes. When the roaming function picks up something you like, it mixes it into your own soundtrack. Keeps your horizons expanding.

That's what music does best, don't you think? Reminds you that other people love just as passionately as you do. Brings back your best moments by association.

Like, I went on a few first dates, and all of them were soundtracked, and it's nice, you know? You don't have to talk, just tune into their frequency. It cuts through all the nonsense, the exaggerations, the conversation. Although, one guy sat down, and before we'd even ordered drinks, the Imperial March from 'Star Wars' blared out. Let me tell you, girl, it saves time. Loop me into an interior soundtrack and I'll tell you if a man is worth a damn.

Even at work, it's made so much difference. You're not supposed to have the chip on during the day, company policy and all, but everybody keeps it running with the volume low. You learn a lot about your workmates from their soundtrack. The guys in sales are always grooving to old-school gangster rap. It's cute to see them in their Brooks Brothers suits and waistcoats and then you synchronise and it's all ghetto up in their temporal lobe. My boss, Mr. Johnson, is one of those crusty, 'call me sir' dudes, but ever since he had the chip put in, I see him in a whole new light. He walks around with 'Adagio for Strings' and Vaughan Williams all day. It's kind of sad and impressive.

There was this time, I was feeling low and I wanted to call someone. You were out on assignment, and I wasn't really speaking to Chloe, and... you know. It was one of those evenings when you know before you start that you're destined for disaster. You're going to go out on your own, meet the wrong person, drink too much. Bad decision will lead to worse outcome. And then the soundtrack saved me. It started off with something quiet and blue, and the tempo picked up, and I started bopping along, and then it was all David Bowie and choral rock out of Texas. I was on my own, but the music was with me in the room and I didn't *feel* alone. You understand?

So, one evening, I was riding home and had sort of tuned the soundtracks out. Agnes from accounts had told me that Mr. Johnson's wife had died. She'd been sick for a while, apparently. All those slow tempo sounds in his head suddenly made sense. I was musing about that, wondering if the music was comforting, or whether he was planning ahead for the funeral. I thought about sharing my soundtrack with him, something cheerful, but then he'd have to switch to roaming, and I'd have to admit I had it on at work.

And then, amongst all the music on the train, one really simple melody cut through.

You don't often hear basic music as part of people's soundtracks. Everything's produced and polished. This was a kind of out-of-tune piano, and someone banging on it with one finger, like a kid who is just learning to play, or a drunk who never did. Ding-ding-ding. It just stopped me cold.

I don't know, did I ever tell you that I was taken into care? In the system from eight-years-old. What's the thing they say? 'They suspected the kid was being abused, so they put her in a foster home to be sure.'

Don't look at me like that. I survived.

But something about that sound, that painful hacking at the keyboard brought it all back. Memories of my mum, our apartment. The fish tank that broke, and the crack in the wall. I started crying, right there, on the subway. And I looked around, wanted to find whoever was playing that song over and over. I couldn't, of course. The other soundtracks took over, and then the train stopped, and more people got on. I must have looked like a crazy person.

Went home. Tried to find the name of the track and couldn't. Tried to see if it was mixed into my soundtrack. It wasn't. Felt frantic.

That's why you haven't seen much of me lately. I've been circling round the Central Line, trying to find that tune again. Seven nights a week, riding until the line closed. If you'd asked me why I was doing it, I couldn't tell you. I must have some old ghosts, some memories that the music brought back. I know, crazy, right?

But that's how I found my brother. Turns out he's been in the city for years. Lost. Damaged. No records, no-one trying to reconnect us. He's living in a hostel, and there's a charity that fits them all with chips, says it offers useful therapy for people with long-term mental illness. He's used his for that same tune from our childhood, over and over.

I'm seeing him most days now. We talk a bit, but mostly just harmonise. He remembers the numbers from back then, the stuff mum used to play. 'Heart and Soul' is the song, by the way. By Hoagy Carmichael. Ding-ding-ding. It's part of my soundtrack now. Mine and my brother's.

Anyway. I think you should get the chip. It will change your life.

Highly Commended: Boy Brown's Memory – by Adrienne Howell

Ready. Cornet warmed through. Wait for the down beat. Big breath. Through the belly button as old Sam always said. Now! Let that breath float the notes way above the band accompaniment.

Midnight

Not a sound...

but the sound of Boy Brown's cornet speaking to the audience in Elmsworth Town Hall.

Memory...

'You gotta make that instrument speak,' said Sam, 'and that means tone. Cornet's nothing but a cut off trumpet if you ain't got it. Tone is what counts.'

And for tone, Sam decreed, it was necessary to practise hymns, hymns and more hymns.

'You can forget the show-off stuff, boy, until you've mastered tone. Cornet's brass but that don't mean brassy.'

Hymns. Hundreds in Grandma Brown's Congregational Hymnary: Hope and Joy, Peace and Brotherhood, Faith and Aspiration.

'Legato, boy! Slowly. Slowly. Give that note full value...three and four and...no chopping it short. Wouldn't want you pulling my pint!'

And more hymns. One hundred and twenty arranged for brass band in Wright and Round's famous red book. The tunes in alphabetical order with some named for places he found in his school atlas: Aberystwyth, Moscow, Stuttgart, Wiltshire.

'Phrasing, boy, phrasing! There's folk going to be singing to this and they needs to breathe. Look up the words, there's yer phrasing.'

Boy Brown looked up the words, marked his second cornet band part and longed to play the melody he'd rehearsed with Sam.

'Some way to go yet, boy. Keep working through the Arban. I'll let you know when you're ready for top chair.'

Memory...

When he first sat in with the back row cornets he was perched on a thick cushion to ensure he could see the conductor.

'And so as he can see you, boy,' said Sam, 'no hiding yer light or wrong notes here.' He learnt to count bars rest, watch the baton and wait for the nod that he was ready. His name in concert programmes was given as Leonard Brown but in the Elmsworth band-room he was Boy Brown, old Sam's most outstanding pupil.

'Yer boy's a natural, Mrs. Brown. He'll make principal one day.'

'Our Lenny's music mad,' said his mother. 'The band is all he thinks about, it worries me a bit.'

'At least we've not the worry of paying for lessons,' said Mr. Brown, 'couldn't have managed it.'

'No,' agreed his wife. 'Thank God for the band.'

'Aye, and Thank God we're getting sommit more than hymns now.'

Boy Brown progressed to playing slow melodies – 'Bless This House', 'The Holy City', 'Macushla' – and winning medals at solo contests and festivals with Sam as his accompanist.

'You've more medals than I got for fighting Hitler,' said his dad, 'and about as much use.'

'They show I'm a winner, dad, just like your medals.'

And local winners in any field made the columns of 'The Elmsworth Gazette', his name, age and picture on page two.

Leonard Brown, aged 10, a cornet player in the town band, won the gold medal in the Under 12 brass section of the Three Counties Festival. The adjudicator praised his tone as surprisingly mellow and mature for the age group.

Leonard Brown, aged 11...aged 12... Now he added Air Varie to his repertoire – 'My Old Kentucky Home', 'The Carnival of Venice' – and with equal success.

'You're getting to be a bit of a celebrity, boy,' said Sam. 'Don't let it go to your head. You took that last movement far too fast for comfort.'

Leonard Brown, aged 13...14...15... Promotion to the Repiano stand but old Sam fussing and continually checking on his practice routine.

'He's a worried man, is Sam,' said the flugel horn player, 'look at them wrinkles all a-quiver.'

'Worried?' queried Boy Brown. 'What's he worried about?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'Aye, once lads your age get into horizontal pleasures it ruins the embouchure.'

He laughed and nudged Boy Brown in the ribs, but then added, 'Poor old Sam, he has a bit of a thankless task. I ain't seen one of his pupils stay long enough to make principal. If he don't lose them to love it's life choices takes 'em off – the army, uni, job down south or overseas – any road out of Elmsworth.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Boy Brown.

Leonard Brown, aged 16...17... and on his eighteenth birthday a triple celebration, exam success in Music and Maths, a job at the local bank and the 'he's ready' nod from Sam.

'I've taught you all I know, boy. It's up to you now. Make me proud.'

Boy Brown, principal cornet of Elmsworth Town Band, led it to contest success and a higher national grading. As regional winners of the Third Section, Elmsworth qualified for the National Finals in London. Bands from every region and section played in venues around the hub of the Royal Albert Hall where the likes of Black Dyke, Cory, Grimethorpe, competed to be Champion Band.

A day to remember: the throng of gold-braided uniforms, the mix of accents, the draw, signing on, the adjudicator's whistle, the performance, the relief it had gone well, the busy trade stand where Boy Brown purchased the latest hit number *Memory*, the tense wait for results.

'I reckon we're in the frame.' Old Sam had marked every performance of the test piece. 'Boy's solo could give us the edge.'

The cheers and tears when he was proved right. And on the happy journey home Boy Brown found himself sitting next to the lovely Jess.

'You've put Elmsworth on the map,' said the mayor and posed with the band for the Gazette's photographer.

Boy Brown was a local celebrity. At concerts he loved show-casing new music but his encore was always *Memory*; it became a tradition. Elmsworth audiences never tired of it. Boy Brown put a smile on old Sam's face and his dad pinned on his medals to march behind the band on Remembrance Sunday. Twenty-five years were marked not in seasons, but in contests, concerts, civic events and carolling. And tonight...tonight was his swan-song.

Memory...

They'd asked him to stand down – the new conductor and the band committee all lined up together and not one of them looking him in the eye – they told him his bumper-up, some college trained lad, was ready for his chair. They thanked him profusely but, as the maestro explained, the change was necessary for the band's continued success. Banding was different today, more serious, standards were ever rising and test pieces more demanding. There'd be a tribute concert, of course, and he'd be consulted on the programme. Then, perhaps, he'd like to help out in the back row or teach some juniors?

But it's been my lifeline, thought Boy Brown, what the hell will I do now?

'Don't take it too hard, Lenny,' said the chairman. 'It's for the best. You'll put the band first, I know you will, you always have. You're Elmsworth Town through and through.'

Boy Brown was bidding farewell to the top chair with his stand-out solo. He knew the melody belonged to Andrew Lloyd Webber and its words to Trevor Nunn, but he felt he owned it too.

He'd studied Grizabella's song from 'Cats', knew the words, the phrasing and every note off by heart. He brought tears to the eyes of those who lived on memories, as he did.

Memory...

He saw again his lovely Jess, all smiles, her eyes bright with love and pride as he played. *The time I knew what happiness was...*

'I love that song,' she said, 'and I love you. Can we have it at our wedding?' He saw Jess in the hospital bed, her brown hair wet with sweat and spread about the pillow, her dark eyes dimmed, her face deathly white, her life slipping away. And their little stillborn son beside her.

'Play *Memory* for me...for us.'

He hadn't got his cornet, not there in the hospital, so he held her hand and sang as she left him.

All alone with my memory...

Boy Brown didn't play at Jess's funeral; he stood with her family as was expected, but he led the band at old Sam's passing. The church, not a spare seat to be had, resounded with music and singing. There was something about the occasion he wanted to remember, a memory that kept slipping out of reach. Tonight, on stage, as his solo soared above the band accompaniment for the final time, it came to him. Old Sam had not had a thankless task, his funeral proved that. The church had been full of people who had travelled miles to pay tribute to him, his teaching and their brass band roots. At the wake strangers spoke of what they owed Sam: careers in military bands, orchestras, dance bands, composing, arranging, conducting, teaching, or years playing in their local band. They spoke of lives filled with music. They remembered the hymns. Now Boy Brown knew what he wanted to do, what Jess and Sam wanted him to do.

Look, a new day has begun.

Highly Commended: Believe – by JJ Hartley

The familiar beat drew me to the dancefloor and I immediately downed the last dregs of vodka and coke from my glass and made my way to the middle of the floor. Dancing like there was nobody else in the room, I began to feel freer than I ever had been in months. I needed this.

My friend Reece had invited me out after months and months of pleading with me. During my 'I can't be bothered' fighting anymore fatigue, I had relented and had said yes. This song took me back in time and I simply had to dance to it.

I met Jake at a Cher concert of all places. I was doing Reece a favour, as he had just been dumped by his boyfriend Derek and needed someone to go with. It was to be her 'Farewell Tour', so I had said yes. I knew a few of her songs and I would probably recognise more once I got there. Reece had also re-enacted her entire 'Do You Believe?' tour DVD in my front room with props and costume changes. He entered wearing this oversized faux fur coat he had found in a charity shop and with his massive sunglasses on, he looked more like a 1970s Elton John than a 1980s Cher. But still I found the whole night amusing and I clapped along, even though it was slightly traumatizing seeing him in a glittery leotard.

Jake was in the row behind us with some friends, one of whom had dressed up as Cher and Reece squealed in response. Jake cracked a smile at this, caught my eye and smiled in my direction, especially when Reece told me I should have worn my fishnets and thong to the concert too. Reece introduced us to the group, and it turns out the one in drag was called Malcolm and he was by day an accountant and by night a drag queen called Felicity Feelmore. It also became clear Reece was not going home without Malcolm's phone number or without Malcolm himself. Within minutes it was like 'Derek, who?'. Malcolm invited us both to go to the local gay bar with them after the concert, to which Reece enthusiastically answered yes for the both of us. I was expecting us to go back to his flat for a night cap and for him to cry over Derek again. How things change when someone goes to a concert wearing a thong, fishnets, heels and very little else.

Jake began apologising for Malcolm being a little bit overbearing, I told him I was used to it and rolled my eyes in Reece's direction and he laughed. I asked the odd but timely question: 'so how long have you liked Cher for then?'.

'She is one of my guilty pleasures, and you?', he replied cheekily with a slight blush.

'I am not a superfan myself, I am here as a favour to Reece. I was supposed to be his replacement boyfriend for the night, but I think Malcolm has somehow fulfilled that role.' Glancing over at Reece putting his feather boa around Malcolm's neck, in other words claiming his prize. 'I do know a few of the songs though and I kind of like the whole dance vibe she has got going on right now, and I mean who couldn't like 'Believe''. Just then the lights went down, I was captivated and when Cher came down from the ceiling in a blonde wig and fur coat with a tiara, the crowd of course erupted.

I don't know how it happened but, in the darkness, Jake ended up somehow next to me, instead of Reece who was now kind of impaling Malcolm with kisses and compliments. We weren't technically sitting down because who sits down at a concert. We clapped together and danced together, and he embraced me when she sang 'After All', and I automatically reciprocated, and we swayed to the along to the song.

When the concert was over, Jake guided me through the crowds, and I am so glad I didn't wear heels because the steps in the arena were very steep. Malcolm on the other hand was struggling, I think it was a mixture of the alcohol he had consumed, as well as the height of his stilettos. Thankfully, he didn't injure himself or anybody else, because if he fell, we would have all gone down.

We reached the safety of the exit, the other three women with Malcolm and Jake left to get an early night and now it was just the four of us, but it really was just me and Jake, as Malcolm and Reece were oblivious to us being there. Jake and I just got on, and it wasn't as if anything were going to happen. We exchanged numbers and he kissed my cheek as we said good night to each other and that was it. Malcolm and Reece on the other hand, well I ended up going back to my flat on my own.

The next day, Jake texted me to ask if I was okay and if I got home safe. He did get me in a taxi the previous night and made sure I was alright going home alone. He just looked after me. We met up later that week and I realised how handsome he was in the daylight. His brown hair was more gingery and his eyes were wide and bright. His lips were plump and soft. I was experiencing feelings I never had before, and it was all a bit unexpected.

Three months passed and we had become inseparable. Something had just clicked between us; the chemistry knew no bounds. The same could not be said for Malcolm and Reece, because after two weeks it was all over. Of course, it was all dramatic with Malcolm crying into Reece's feather boa and Reece strutting his way back to Derek, who had begged him for forgiveness. It was like a bad soap opera.

Jake took me for a picnic and surprised me by producing an acoustic guitar and his hidden talent. He serenaded me with 'Love Can Build a Bridge' which had been covered by Cher, Neneh Cherry, Chrissie Hynde and Eric Clapton for a charity. He then proceeded to tell me he had fallen in love with me. It was just so beautiful, and I told him I felt the same way. We kissed and cuddled, and I can't remember being any happier than I was in that moment. If I could have frozen that moment and held onto it forever, I would have. I work my mind like a DVD player, replaying and pausing that moment, I need that moment to allow me to function. I want to feel happy again. He would often text me Cher lyrics, which would always brighten up my day, till everything became dark and misty.

It was on a Saturday morning, he had left me in bed to get us some coffee and croissants. It was only five minutes away; he was texting me and he didn't see the car speeding around the corner. The message was saved as a draft in his phone: 'I've found someone to take away the heartache...' He had always told me I had helped him heal his broken heart, but sadly no-one however could heal his broken body. I didn't even have the power to do that.

I heard the sirens and immediately thought the worst. I called his phone and when a paramedic answered it was like everything had been plunged into darkness. It was a bit like the roller coaster at Alton Towers where you are dropped vertically into a hole, but then you are propelled up again into the light. I felt like that ride, but in my case, it had broken down and I was now stuck in that hole. All through going to the hospital, talking to the doctors, meeting his parents, the funeral and the months following, I was like a television on standby, the screen black, but there was a small LED red light displayed, just letting you know there was still some life there, waiting for someone to press the right button. Barely surviving, barely eating, barely talking, I was stuck in oblivion.

After months of trying to find my 'on' button, it took a DJ playing a song to do it. Whilst Reece had gone to the bar, I hit the dancefloor. Literally I hit the dancefloor, dancing and dancing and then the tears came, and I collapsed with the dancefloor becoming a pillow for my tears. Cher's 'All or Nothing' playing on and the emotions and I couldn't ignore them any longer. I felt arms someone's around me, it was Reece embracing me and when I looked up, the glittery disco light was shimmering and I knew I had to let him go.

Goodbye Jake, I hope there is life after love.

Highly Commended: Why The Dum Tree No Longer Sings – by Racheal Joseph

The Dum is a small round, red, fruit that looks like a cherry. The Dum tree is tall, though not too tall for children to climb, it has a strong trunk and branches that stretch out in a wide circumference forming a shady umbrella to sit under and enjoy those glorious bright red balls of sweetness.

In centuries past, Dum trees were plentiful, they grew on all the hot dry islands, dotted over, what is now called the Caribbean Sea. The islanders were proud of their trees and nurtured them along with the mango tree, the sugar apple, the soursop, the cashew nut, and the avocado tree. All trees the great tree god Dryad had blessed them with.

The gods sat among the clouds and looked down at the earth and smiled. Dryad was himself pleased and boasted "The human folk love my plants and treat them with great respect. That honours me and I will continue to reward them with a great harvest.

For centuries, the islanders treasured their trees. Each year after the rainy season, having quenched its thirst, the Dum tree would burst with tiny green buds. Over time as the land dried and the sun became stronger the green buds would slowly turn orange and then to red. When the berries were at their richest brightest red the leaves on the tree would quiver and shake. everyone believed the trees were singing and dancing, because the leaves rustled gently, even though there was no breeze. The music of the leaves calling softly for the children to come enjoy the harvest. Children responded eagerly climbing the trees, bouncing on the branches knocking the fruit to the ground, a shower of bright red gems. Laughing and dancing the children gorged on the honey sweet fruit until they could eat no more. They would sit full bellied in the shade and doze, their lips, and fingers red with the juice of the fruit.

One day strangers came from a land a long way off across the seas. They came in large boats that sailed on the seas with the help of strong stiff fabric that caught in the wind. The islanders had only ever seen small fishing boats, which were manoeuvred across the water with the aid of oars and paddles.

The islanders welcomed the strangers and invited them to feast on the islands produce. The newcomers were fed roasted breadfruit and boiled yam with fish and the delicious black pineapples were marinated in golden rum.

When the strangers heard the Dum, tree sing and saw the leaves dance and the fruit fall, they were so impressed they wanted them. At first, they took the seeds of the fruit and tried to grow trees in their homeland. They were not successful. Then they tried taking the harvested fruit, but the journey across the seas was too long and the fruit perished. Eventually the strangers were so keen to have the singing trees they came in large numbers and physically dug up the saplings, wrapping the root-ball in damp hessian sacks. The strangers took so many there were almost none left to start a new crop in years that followed.

Locals were appalled at the destruction of their beautiful Dum trees. They fought with the strangers, but they were unable to compete with the fire balls that flew from the big ships, destroying acres and acres of land. The damage to the homes and fields was too great. The islanders watched with tears in their eyes and pain in their heart as the big ships raised their sails and disappeared into the distance.

The great god Dryad also wept as he watched the islanders try to repair the damage and to reseed their land. Although Dryad was a god his power to interfere with human behaviour was limited. It was written in the clouds that no god should personally intervene in mankind's behaviour. They were only to have power over the weather the crops and the harvest and even those powers were limited by the terrain and make-up of the different parts of the world.

Unfortunately, the strangers from the far-off land returned time and time again destroying various crops as they tried to establish trees in their distant homeland. Eventually the Dum trees diminished. The children stopped listening for the music of the tree and no longer ran to feast when the tree called to them.

Dryad was heart-broken the Dum tree had become less important, less part of the yearly joy for the children. The fruit still grew and went from green to orange and then red. The Dum fruit had been replaced, in the desires of the children, by manufactured sweets from foreign lands. Boiled and coloured sugar wrapped in wax paper had rather quickly replaced the joy of the ripe red fruit.

There were so few Dum trees left the islanders decided to grow sugar cane instead. It was more profitable. The cane was harvested and sent with the strangers to be processed into sugar, to make the sweets that had replaced the Dum.

Dryad cried as he declared the Dum tree would remain silent until the day when the islanders remembered the joy the tree gave them and would nurture it once more. So sadly, the few Dum trees that were left stopped singing and the leaves stopped dancing.

The great tree god tried occasionally to invite the children back, but the lure of sugar-based candy was too strong, and the ruby red fruit fell in a shower of red tears from the trees and was swept up and fed to pigs or rotted where it landed.

The great god Dryad sat, sadly, in the clouds and watched the children scramble for bon bons, candies, sweeties but not Dums.

That is why the gods mourn and the Dum tree no longer sings.

Commended: Dance Partners – by Georgia Cook

The house is dark. The night is silent and still. There is a heaviness in the air-- the first lingering suggestions of summer. She shuffles across the bedroom floor, fumbling in the gloom; bumps her hip on a sideboard, catches her elbow against the wardrobe. It would be easier in the light, she knows, but they prefer the dark, and a silvery half-moon provides just enough light to distinguish furniture silhouette from shadow.

She finds the dressing table, stares at her reflection in the high oval mirror, notes-- with a twinge--that the shadows have deepened the wrinkles, darkened the lines around her eyes. But her hair; her hair in the moonlight shines translucent, like spun silver.

She finds her dressing gown on the back of the door, slips into it with difficulty, and shuffles out into the hall.

The music has already started.

Her children think she's mad; living all alone in this big old house. How will she possibly manage? How will she possibly *cope*?

She isn't alone, she argues; she has the maid, and the woman from the council who visits once a week; eyes to make sure she takes her medication and remembers to eat. Eyes to watch and pry and roll disapprovingly as she eases herself painfully out of bed.

That's not what we mean, say her children. And she knows. She knows.

That's not what she means, either.

She follows the music. It winds down the corridor towards the living room-- the one she never uses, the one she locks tight during the day. Violins, this time, sharp and sweet and muffled around the edges. Last night it was flutes, and before that trumpets; Once, a harp, melodious in the darkness. They choose by committee; whatever it is they loved in life. And she lets them pick, because they have such a wonderful taste in music.

The door is unlocked. She enters the living room, and the music enfolds her like a warm embrace. It is empty, at first, here among the dust and old knickknacks, but she can already see shapes-- flitting between the pools of moonlight. Twirling, swirling, lighter than feathers. She feels the touch of invisible hands-- so soft, so gentle, so welcoming-- pulling her into the dance.

She doesn't mind living in a haunted house. She doesn't think anyone would mind, really, if they understood.

Ghosts, she has learned, are just people. People rendered invisible and incapable by time and circumstance, lingering on the whisper-thin edges of things. They're kinder company; they don't care about age or wrinkles. She is, among them, the youngest in the room, and they handle her so carefully.

She catches a hand in the darkness, feels the tug on her waist, a soft tap on her shoulder. She follows the music into the middle of the room, and there among the ghosts and the dark and the shadows of understanding, she dances.

Commended: Hats Off To Larry – by Bud Craig

1. 1960

I rubbed the steam off the bathroom mirror, comb at the ready, thinking about my life. I had already achieved my two major ambitions: to get rid of my pimples and create the perfect quiff. Tonight at Turners Dancing Academy I would unveil my new blue shirt with the tab collar. From the transistor balanced precariously on the cistern, the Everly Brothers sang *Cathy's Clown*, courtesy of Radio Luxembourg. Best record ever made, bar none. They brought the house down when they sang it at the FreeTrade Hall in Manchester a couple of months ago.

As usual Cathy Flynn was on my mind. I'd been mooning over her long enough, it was time to do something about it. She'd hardly turn me into Cathy's Clown and humiliate me, would she? She might even like me. Maybe the tab collar would do the trick. Right, Jack Ainsworth, I said to my reflection, tonight you're gonna ask her to dance. I smiled, practising for later, trying to be a bit nonchalant.

"Do you, er, fancy a dance, Cathy?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

They usually played a couple of fast ones first, so I'd have to jive like I'd never jived before, chatting wittily, waiting for a slow song. Then I'd move in real close. The thought of holding her in my arms, the first kiss and later, when I walked her home...Oh, no, another impure thought. And I only went to confession this morning. If God didn't want us to think about that sort of thing, why did he invent randiness?

These profound questions were left unanswered as a sound behind me diverted my attention. I turned just in time to see the radio doing a nosedive into the toilet bowl with a loud splash.

2. 1961

"Oh, I like this one," said Cathy as *Hats Off To Larry* came on.

We were jiving at Turners again. She looked lovely in a tight, green frock, really got me going. I had just got a new suit with narrow lapels in charcoal grey check. Dead smart I looked.

"Yeah, it's good."

We discussed Del Shannon's second record for a bit.

"Not as good as *Runaway*, though. Best record ever made, *Runaway*," I said, bringing the discussion to a close.

"Did I tell you Angela's got engaged?" said Cathy, moving on to her favourite subject.

"Oh, yeah? That's nice."

I said no more.

"It's our anniversary next week, Jack."

"Yeah, I know."

I stopped myself from saying 'what anniversary' in the nick of time.

"I can hardly believe we've been together a whole year. It's been the best twelve months of my life."

"Oh, me too, Cathy," I said, right on cue, "me too."

At the end of the evening, I walked her home and she held my hand.

"Are you still keen on going to university, Jack?"

"Yeah, next year, after my A levels. I'd need to get good results."

"You will. But if you go to university you won't have any money, will you?"

"I'll get a grant and I can work in the holidays..."

"I know but you won't have a proper job for three years."

Four years, more like. I fancied spending a year in France.

"So what?"

"So what? How can you say that?"

"I just open my mouth and words come out."

She let go of my hand.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jack Ainsworth, take me seriously. All I mean is three years is a long time to wait before you can settle down."

She knew how much getting to university meant to me. Nobody in my family had ever managed it. Why couldn't she encourage me a bit?

When I got home, I tried to analyse what we'd talked about. Those questions she asked about my plans for the future, I didn't know how to answer them. 'I haven't got a plan,' I wanted to tell her. I fancied university; a year in France sounded like it could be fun.

Cathy was getting a bit serious. I wasn't half glad she was my girlfriend, all the other lads were dead jealous. When you meet a nice girl, who you get on with and who you're attracted to, it should be enjoyable, shouldn't it? When she dropped hints about getting engaged, well, I mean, engaged? I'm only seventeen.

3. 1962

We were smooching to Sam Cooke. Another Saturday night at Turners Dancing Academy was almost over. I sang along to *Bring it on Home to Me*. Best record ever made without a shadow of a doubt. Cathy kissed me, clinging to me.

We walked home, dragging an awkward silence along with us. Just before we turned into her street, Cathy spoke.

"You can still change your mind, you know, Jack."

Not that again.

"It's too late, I've made all the arrangements now. I'm booked on the ferry in three days' time. Anyway, I've made arrangements with Toby. I can't let him down."

That should have put an end to it. No such luck.

"And I don't matter, I suppose."

"Course you matter."

"Huh. Your posh pal from Windsor's more important by the sound of it."

Toby was a bit posh but so what? We'd started out as pen pals a few years ago through a cricket magazine. We had met last year and it was like we'd known one another all our lives.

"Toby's family have an apartment in Douarnenez and he'll be spending a year there same as me," I explained for what felt like the hundredth time. "It made sense for us to share the flat."

"You're gonna be away for a whole year."

I sighed with frustration.

"I'm going to Brittany to teach English so I'll be home for the holidays. I've already told you that, Cathy."

This was greeted by a disgruntled snort.

"Big deal. I'll tell you one thing, Jack Ainsworth, I'm not prepared to postpone my life until you get these silly ideas out of your system. There's plenty of other boys after me. There's a lad from work who's very interested. What do you think of that?"

Try as I might, I couldn't think of an answer

"Dunno really."

"It'll be 'out of sight, out of mind' as soon as you get on that boat."

"Cathy,..."

"You'll have plenty of girls to choose from once you get over there, you and Toby. Them French lasses are no better than they ought to be, are they?"

"Cathy, you're talking daft."

She breathed in as if preparing herself for a supreme effort.

"Let me spell it out for you. If you go to France on Tuesday, I've finished with you."

She stormed off. I hardly slept that night. France represented a new world of opportunity; Cathy symbolised security and familiarity. I didn't want to lose her, but she'd never compromise. With Cathy, it was all or nothing. What was I gonna do now?

4. 1963

We parked outside St Joseph's church, singing along to *She Loves You* - best record ever made, no danger. I smoothed down my Beatles jacket and ruffled my hair a bit so it didn't look too neat and tidy.

"Your new hairstyle makes you look so sexy," said Francoise, "like George Harrison."

She turned to me from the driver's seat. A girl who called me sexy in a French accent, I said to myself, can't be bad. A few days ago we'd walked hand in hand along the beach in the bay of Douarnenez. Soon we'd be back there.

"This girl, Cathy, she is pretty?" she asked.

"Yeah. Nearly as pretty as you."

Good that, quick, without thinking. Francoise was two years older than me. She had a groovy, little Citroën with a wireless. She was no better than she ought to be, but nobody was perfect.

"Do you know the man she's marrying?"

I shook my head.

"When I read his name on the invitation, it meant nothing to me. It's a lad she works with apparently."

After the ceremony we went to the Lancastrian for the reception. In the function room upstairs, while standing in the queue for drinks, I heard a familiar voice behind me. I turned to see the groom getting stuck into a pint of Boddington's mild. His bride was making clear her expectations.

"Let's get one thing straight, Larry Prince," said Cathy, "you're not getting drunk tonight. I'm not having my wedding day ruined by you showing me up."

Later there was dancing to *The Royals*, a local group, who belted out a few current hits.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said the lead singer at the end of their third song, "any requests?"

I looked at Francoise, then at the stage and shouted out the title of a number that summed up how I was feeling.

"*Hats Off To Larry.*"

Commended: Resolution – by Katherine Fisher

The imposing dome rose into view, shrugging its giant shoulders above the roof tops, as Caroline approached from the underground. A middle-aged woman, faded and anonymous, she nevertheless felt a significant sense of pride and awe at the powerful statement of such a building in her city. A Victorian gesture of grandeur, achievement; its empire long gone, together with its immovable sense of self-belief and secure place in the world. Groups of people surged past her - couples, families, a few children, couples both old and young - and the occasional lone man or woman. All of them seemingly quite sure of who they were, and the rightness of their destination. A multitude of languages swirling around her; now a new world, people differently confident and they, in a typical London way, not sparing her a glance.

These concert goers – all had discussed the programme, had booked their tickets, planned their journey, probably weeks or even months ago. She wondered where they lived, where

they bought their clothes - had they had to save carefully for this special occasion, or were concerts regularly attended and taken for granted? Caroline guessed that the better dressed of the crowds had bought block tickets for the season and that it was a casual part of their lives, along with their Ocado orders and the planning of their annual holidays.

It seemed unlikely that many of these people clipping purposefully towards the concert hall were there for the same purpose as she was. Or least part of her purpose. Caroline loved music; it was her companion and her solace. She was on this summer evening, determinedly pursuing a different kind of companionship. This was her mission, despite anxiety and a frequently overwhelming sense of self-doubt. She sometimes felt an inability to connect effortlessly with others; to be like these people around her – smartly dressed, confident, surging relentlessly forward, their position in society assured, their connections intact.

A few pigeons settled momentarily on the pavement nearby, pecking fruitlessly amongst the moving feet, then suddenly taking flight, momentarily stirring the air, resettling again nearby. They too, were oblivious, not only of her, but of the grandeur of the building and the crowds. Plain and homely birds, unadorned, ignoring the surge of humanity, concentrating only on the search for crumbs and their survival. Caroline felt a sense of empathy with these timeless creatures; their plump grey bodies and pink feet - many of them with deformed claws. These birds in the 21st century, the result of generations and generations of nest building and egg hatching stretching back to the days when Victorian workmen sweated to construct the Albert Hall - and for hundreds of years before when there were fields and sheep within a few miles. Caroline, too, in her own way was trying to survive.

She was there - amongst the people and the birds – both to hear a Beethoven piano concerto (number two) and to meet, for the first time, somebody she had corresponded with on the internet for the past few weeks. Friends had urged her to try to pick up the pieces of her life after her divorce two years ago. Now retired, she was considering how the empty years ahead could be filled, her sons gone abroad to work. Quiet had begun to press on her ears, suffocate her as she moved through the rooms, she immediately wanted it punctured; silence oppressed her. Wearing carefully chosen clothes; a simple grey sweater and pink trousers (her travel card safely zipped inside her small black handbag) she thought how easy it would be to be absorbed into complete obscurity among the flocks of pigeons. Half-wishing to turn round and flee back to the safety of her south London flat, Caroline willed herself to put her shoulders back and her chest forward in the hope that her more confident body posture would send the right messages to her mind – and the man she was about to meet.

Feeling her ribcage begin to compress with the pressure of nerves, she forced herself to relax and curb her mounting trepidation. She tried to retrieve from memory the opening movement of the concerto she was about to hear; the triumphant orchestral opening. How positive it was, how uplifting, how it took her forward – the sudden burst of rippling piano notes breaking across the strings; a wave on the beach, lifting her heart and speeding the blood through her veins. The back-and-forth conversation with the piano and other instruments, call and response, the question and answer; it was a mystery how such an invisible force could both mirror and elicit feelings that she barely knew she had. She had never learnt an instrument herself and it had always been almost incomprehensible to her that black marks on two sets of five horizontal lines could so successfully manipulate the fizzing chemistry of the human brain.

Remembering that the first movement of the concerto was *allegro con brio*, this provided her, she mused, with a pointer to how she should try to emulate that impression on her date. After all, they wouldn't have long to talk before taking their seats; there was safety in brevity, perhaps. But she was dimly aware of having read somewhere that a first judgement on meeting another human being took place within the first ten seconds, although friends had urged her to 'just be herself', whatever that meant. Crossing the road to the Albert Memorial where she was to meet this man called, perhaps appropriately, Ludo, she waited for the lights to change, taking the time to compose herself. This encounter, she thought, could be the overture to the possible next movement of her life. The man might, of course, turn out to be completely unappealing. But she had liked his writing and hoped that these symbols on the computer screen, too, would miraculously manifest themselves into somebody she actually liked.

How could she present herself convincingly as an attractive proposition, Caroline had wondered in the preceding days. It simply wasn't possible to be known in those first crucial minutes as she wanted to be known. The shorthand of 'middle-aged divorced woman who lives alone' was a phrase that carried its own weight in unappealing presumption. The first meeting would, necessarily, be simply an introduction - indeed an overture— she would try to think of it like that, and hoped that Ludo would too. After the lightness of the first exchanges – a relationship *could* move into the exposition phase – a melody that might become increasingly – richly- embroidered with the exploration of every aspect of their lives – the question and answer, the call and response, until the final movement.

After the concert, she and Ludo left their seats and made their way around the plush red corridor that encircled the departing humanity, all now flushed with the beauty of what they had heard. Excusing herself and joining the queue for the ladies, Caroline felt a warm sense of achievement as if she herself had performed without fault. She had sat next to Ludo, conscious of his jacketed arm just slightly closer to hers than if he had been a stranger. The *adagio* swept through the space, relaxing her – it was impossible to let her mind escape to wander along its usual uncomfortable corridors. She gave herself up to the music.

It had not, after all, been difficult. Meeting, shaking hands, she had realised immediately that Ludo was as unsure as she was. Chatting easily, they moved together towards the main entrance which was swallowing the crowds into its central sweeping staircase. As they walked, seemed as if they were each striking notes that the other could recognise and to which they could respond – the to and fro of what, remarkably, appeared to be a natural connection. Taking their seats, glancing at each other, both relieved to have each achieved the correct tone – spoken in the right key. The lights dimmed, the conductor appeared, striding across the lights to prolonged applause, turning to, and humbly acknowledging the audience and then, to the soloist sitting at the piano. They, too, shook hands and the baton lifted gently upwards, ready to draw out the notations from the page and into the air...

Returning to join Ludo, Caroline had a dawning realisation that this afternoon could, would be the start of a new phase; whether or not they would decide to meet again. The final rondo had lifted her up beyond the banality of her usual concerns and the shrinking smallness of her solitary existence. The concerto, with its changes of key, its contrast with light and dark, the interplay between the instruments was, after all, life with all its points and counterpoints. A work in three movements – her youth, her life with marriage and children, now grown, she was

entering the finale, everything from the past and the present would be gathered together – and finally understood.

Commended: The Concert of The Pumpkin and the Goat by Linda Shanson

There was once a beautiful stringed instrument called Sitar. Sitar was elegant and refined with a long wooden neck and round base made out of a pumpkin which was dried and highly polished and decorated with delicately carved leaves and inlaid birds and flowers. She had been built in an instrument workshop in a city in India. Sitar performed together with a pair of drums. The fat one with a deep masculine voice was called Bayar and the thin one with the high feminine voice was called Dayar. Together the drums were called Tablas and they had been made from goat skin in some simple huts on the edge of a large town in India. They were excellent drums and they travelled all over the world to play in fine concert halls.

Sitar was a celebrity with her picture on TV, newspapers, glossy posters and social media. Tablas were jealous “Why is her picture everywhere and not ours?” they moaned. It also made them cross when they all travelled together on long journeys and sitar had a comfortable seat. “Why are we shoved out of the way while she has the best place?” they said “GeGe” said the Bayar, “Na Na” answered the Dayar in her treble tone, “*tirikita dha, tirikita dha, tirikita dha*” they said together.

But Tablas knew that Sitar could not give a concert without them. They knew that Sitar really loved to play with them, even though her manner was more aloof. She would speak to them in her own language “*da dire dire da ra*” Sometimes on the stage she would ask them questions and they would answer so cleverly that the audience would break into applause. There were even times when Sitar would let Tablas play solo and she would play a guiding tune again and again so that they would not lose their way as they were being slapped and tickled by the tabla player who would make them break into elaborate patterns of rhythm. It was then that Tablas spoke their best poems about the beating of wings and the splashing of raindrops and the clattering of hoofs in the most complicated mathematics of sound.

One day posters of Sitar in bright colours were pasted up all over town and in the Underground and on the side of buses. “Typical” commented Tablas “No picture of us then.”

In the evening of the concert the instruments were taken in a limousine from the hotel where they were staying to the concert hall. In the green room Tablas came out of their bag and Sitar came out of her velvet lined box. “I need tuning” she sighed. “I have so many strings and frets that must be perfectly in place for the concert”.

“Oh she’s fretting again” chuckled Tablas, while Sitar’s pegs were carefully turned and her frets tied and retied. Then Sitar was more finely tuned by moving the beads and carved swans under her bridge so that when she was strummed she resonated.

Sitar glowed as though she had long hair which had been lovingly combed and pinned into place. “Our turn at last” grumbled Tablas. “She takes hours and hours to get ready”. “Ouch” exclaimed Dayar as her pegs were hit with the metal tuning hammer. “Gently please, ow, you’re pulling my skin!” exclaimed Bayar who was then tapped with a hammer around the edge and slapped a few times. Then they were all taken into the concert hall and placed on the stage. Bayar and Dayar each sat on a comfortable satin ring, and with Sitar they were put on a Persian silk carpet of the highest quality.

They waited silently as the audience streamed into the auditorium and sat down. The house lights were dimmed and an expectant hush fell upon the crowd.

With her first notes Sitar cast an immediate spell upon the audience as a veil of sound floated gently down on them. It was as if they were no longer in that concert hall in the big city. The music seemed to transport them to a faraway place. Here they could feel a deep stillness and peace. Sitar conjured up a picture in the imaginations of the audience of a lush green garden with vibrant flowers pouring out their fragrance. Bright orange pumpkin flowers were opening their petals among the fleshy leaves and stems trailing along the ground.

"This is where I came from" sang Sitar, "here in this fertile earth of India I spent many hours feeling the warmth of the sun and then the coolness of dew upon my skin. I swelled with the sweet rain water into a plump pumpkin and ripened in the heat of the summer. I listened to the breeze rustling through the leaves and the chattering of birds. How beautiful and generous is nature for all the gifts she has given us."

The audience sighed as each one relived special moments from their own childhood. Even Tablas were affected by this mood. "I remember when we were baby goats eating juicy tufts of grass between the stones of the mountain side. I listened to the tapping of my hoofs against the rocks" thought Bayar. "Ah I remember burping and farting in the monsoon. I loved the sound of my skin rubbing against the trees and the drumming of raindrops on my hairy hide" thought Dayar. Sitar continued her enchanting tune. "Isn't she ready for us yet?" moaned Bayar impatiently. "She always does this" said Dayar "she gets carried away in a world of her own". "Oh there is our signal" said Bayar as Sitar played a rainbow of notes from her tarab strings. "Ready?" she asked. "Listen to this" sang Dayar and Bayar as rhythm lifted the music and carried it into the minds of the audience.

"Come with us" they called to the spirit of the people, "travel with us to the heart of the melody. Leave behind your care; be free, be boundless; fly like a bird; fall like rain; dance like a flame" Then Sitar and Tablas and all the people listening became one with the music in their own way.

"OK Tablas" whispered Sitar "It's all yours" Sitar politely played softly so that Tablas could have their loud solo and show off all the clever sounds and patterns that they could make and cause so much excitement that the audience broke into thunderous applause, and some people shouted encouraging words in Hindi such as "Vah Vah" meaning "Wow Wow". Sitar played a game with Tablas inventing complicated patterns for them to imitate " *Dar dire dire dha re da re da* " she called.

"*Dha tirikitaka dha te dha te dha* " they answered. No matter how much Sitar tried to surprise Tablas they could always match her.

Now the music of Sitar seemed light as a feather twirling and spiralling in the wind; then swift as an arrow with Tablas chasing alongside her like galloping horses; pelting drops of sound like monsoon rain; like the rapid beating of a heart. Faster and faster Sitar played till Tablas felt they would burst with happiness

"We are dancing with the waves crashing and foaming, we are dancing with the stars and the planets in the heavens, we are dancing the dance of all the particles that make up everything and everyone, we are dancing with the universe, we are dancing with time itself" Sitar was leading and guiding at the centre of all the excitement wisely steering the music to its highest peak and then gently, like a bird returning to its nest after flying through a storm, she stopped playing and settled again into silence.

"More More" shouted the audience who were standing up and clapping so loudly.

"Well done" said Sitar to Tablas. "You were magnificent" said Tablas to Sitar. "Please play some more or shall we go back to our bags and our box?"

“If you really want me to” she said. “That is the reason why we have been created after all - isn’t it?”

Commended: Folktale by Peter Shaw

*The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In a cold box she was lain.*

Mags was alone on stage, illuminated by a single blood-red light. As she packed away the last of her gear, Mags heard the breath of someone else in the darkness of the village hall.

“Hello?” she called out.

“Don’t mind me,” said the figure. “You pack up your stuff.”

“Sorry, are you...?”

“I’m your lift. David.”

Mags let out a sigh. “I won’t be long. Serves me right for bringing so many bloody instruments. I didn’t even touch the concertina.”

She didn’t expect to be still packing and lugging her equipment aged 30, ten years into her career.

“You don’t remember me?” said David.

“Sorry?”

“You stayed with me last time. You and Emma.” David walked forward and Mags could make out more of his shape. He was a large middle-aged man, drably dressed. Yes, it was him.

“We did a lot of gigs. But I do remember you. David.” Mags zipped up her mandolin cover.

“You’re welcome to stay this time. There’s always a bed for you.”

“Thanks for the offer. If you can just drop me off at the station. I’m staying with a friend. She lives in Leicester. Got a gig at the White Hart in Whitby. I want to make it as far north tonight as possible.”

“OK.” David moved closer and into the light. “Can I help you with any of this?”

Mags didn’t want him near. “I have my own... system.”

“I’ll help you carry when you’re done.” David watched Mags finish her packing. “Sorry it wasn’t a bigger crowd tonight. Was rammed last time with the two of you.”

“It’s hard going solo. Like starting again. Even though I put ‘The Scarlet Sisters’ on the poster, people don’t always make the connection.”

“Cold and rainy night tonight. Always a smaller crowd. Don’t know why you singers still come here. We’re not exactly The O2.”

“It’s the room, the history.”

“Sandy Denny sang *Who Knows Where The Time Goes?* on the spot where you’re standing. First-ever performance,” David laughed. “At least that’s what old Bob keeps saying.”

“Tragic what happened to Sandy. Gone far too soon.”

David wandered over behind her to turn the house lights on. Mags was momentarily startled. Then she felt a hand grab the guitar case she was holding.

“Let me help you with that.” David smiled.

“Thank you.” Mags eased her grip. Best to let him take it.

David surveyed the mass of gear and spotted a large, musty trunk. “I can carry that old box.”

“No. Thanks. It’s... fragile. You have to carry it in a certain way or it might get damaged.”

“Whatever you say, girl,” David winked at Mags, happy to see her in the light. “No objection to me handling anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

For what seemed like an age, Mags and David made the tedious journey back and forth to his rusty Volvo estate. A trail of muddy footsteps marked their path across the village hall to the stage and back.

“Don’t worry about that, Mags,” said David. “I’m good at mopping up after. It’ll be like you were never here.”

Mags offered him a nervous smile and went to grab the last remaining item. As she lifted the old trunk, a faint rattle could be heard from inside.

“I’m gonna watch you doing it. I’ll pick up the knack and can carry it for you next time.”

David gazed as Mags struggled with the trunk. It wasn’t particularly heavy, just awkward and delicate. Then he turned out the lights, locked the hall and they wandered together through the rain to the car park.

“What happened to Emma?” David finally chose his moment to ask. “She was a dazzling fiddle player. Together, you were dynamite. I followed her on Twitter and she just went silent. Then I saw your email looking for a solo gig.”

“Sorry, David. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fair doos. Musical differences. That’s what they say, isn’t it? But you seemed very close. Hope you haven’t had a bust-up.”

They reached the car and David opened the rear passenger door, much to Mags’ relief.

“You can put your precious trunk in there and sit upfront with me.” Assuming she had no choice, Mags obliged. The car set off. This was going to be a long journey.

“Must be weird for you folk travelling up and down the country singing all those creepy songs. Sea shanties and murder ballads. Roses growing out of people’s heads. Dead soldiers coming home from war. Children slaughtered in their beds by vengeful nurses...” David laughed uproariously. “Give us a smile, I’m just spooking you out.”

Mags kept her gaze out of the car window into the dying night sky. “Sorry. Tired. It’s quite draining playing and performing.”

“That’s not what happened last time, when you stayed with me. You and Emma were quite the party animals. You drank me out of red wine and Campari before you went up to your bed. I went to old Bob’s office the next day and bought a new stock. ‘The Scarlet Sisters drank me dry,’ I told him.”

“I don’t remember all of it.”

“Well, you sneaked up first. Emma stayed down with me for a while. She’s quite feisty, that girl. Talented, but what a temper. Hell of a fiddle player. But tell you the truth, I’m not really into all this riddle-ree folk music.”

Mags didn’t trust the country lane they were taking, so she turned on her iPhone and set the sat nav for the train station. “Then why do you do all this?”

“It’s the access to the performers you get. That’s what I enjoy. I like Jennifer Lopez and Janet Jackson. Beyonce. You know, proper music that you hear on the radio. But I’m never going to give J. Lo a lift to the station. Or have Little Mix staying in me spare bed.”

Mags kept her phone on silent. The sat nav kept insisting they do a u-turn to get to the station. But that’s going to be tricky on such a small country lane, thought Mags.

“Is this the best route?” Mags asked cautiously.

“I’ll get you there.”

“It’s just that my phone says...”

David slammed the breaks on. The car came to an abrupt stop. The box on the back seat flew forward, bashing against the front seats causing the buckles to spring open.

“This is the way to the station, girl. No matter what your telephone thinks. Steve Jobs doesn’t live round here.”

David turned to Mags and their eyes met. “I’d still prefer you to go the way the sat nav is saying.”

David shook his head. “Go on, then. What does it say I should do?”

“Take a u-turn.”

“Here? Look out the window, girl, there’s less than a foot either side. You’d barely get the doors open.” David shrugged at Mags then put on the handbrake.

“I’d like to get out and walk, please.”

“What, with all your gear?”

Mags started pulling at the handle to get out. Although she frantically tried and tried, the door wouldn't shift.

"Stop that, it's busted. Stop it. You'll break the bleeding handle, girl."

Mags sat back, frozen in her seat. David leant over and put his hand on her thigh. She remembered what happened that night in his flat.

"Stop panicking, girl. All right. I just thought you'd want to finish off what we started last time. And now Emma's not here to stop us..."

"Emma's dead."

David sat quietly for a moment. "Was she your...?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I see. You must be lonely."

Mags made a break for the back seat, scrambling over the trunk, in the hope that the rear doors would open. But the child lock was on.

David released his seat belt and clambered clumsily over the gear stick to get to Mags. He slipped, and his large frame landed awkwardly on the trunk, which burst open. Mags had wound down the window and was scrambling out. David seized her leg.

But then he felt boney fingers grasp him, and glimpsed the other skeletal hand clasping a violin bow. They had emerged from the depths of the battered trunk. The car's electrics failed, the interior light faded and the vehicle was plunged into darkness, except for a red security light.

Mags felt the grip on her leg loosen. She squeezed out of the window, and onto the muddy verge. As Mags stumbled down the lane, after the cries subsided, she could hear the faint sound of *The Unquiet Grave*, an old fiddle tune. It was Emma's favourite.

*"T is I, my love, sits on your grave,
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
And that is all I seek."*

Category: Poems

1st Place: Lung Resin – by Eve Naden

There's a note for every day you've been beside us
A sometimes sharp, discordant sound,
For all those times you disappeared in town, stumbling
But refusing help each time we asked.
Sometimes, a symphony of the softest flutes ripple through my lungs
When the day winds down and you're sat with us, the TV Remote
Your crown as we pretend not to notice you want us
To head off to bed so you can watch documentaries
Where young men die in an orchestra of bullets, for lyrics
Which are lies. But when you left, the melody
Flickered, embers stoked by silence and I ask the stringless violins why you're not here.

Like Amphitryon built a palace of music in Hell,
I carve a staircase out of sharps and flats, *mezzo fortes*
And *mezzo pianos*, crawling up each step until my legs burn.

That night when you passed away, trickling through the cracks like a melting harp,
I couldn't be there. Just like I couldn't play a single chord at your funeral,
Because a disease which has travelled the world rubbed bow resin into my lungs
And choked the music from my veins. But I find myself muting the radio
In our empty kitchen and picking up my current dancing partner –
A mop with hair as scraggly as yours once was. But it drops from my hand, falling away,
Like I did at our wedding when you invited me to dance the Charleston to the band my Father
hired. But then I think of you, of our first home, where melodies
Jumped through the plaster and when the lights went out during
That storm, you took my hand, and we sang a tune off-kilter.
I pick up the mop. Begin the waltz – hesitant at first, but then my steps

Gather and become a thundering tide
Because even the silence carries its own tune.

2nd Place: Requiem in Absentia – by Helen Whitten

There was no music at her funeral
but we could sense her there
as we had last seen her,
an 105 year-old figure,
stooped over her piano,
skinny neck sunk into her chest,
crooked fingers gnarled over the keys.

There was no music at her funeral
but for us she'd played Haydn,
her hands dancing in perfect form
"the songs of my childhood" she'd said,
then sang calypsos from Trinidad,
lullabies she'd hummed to the Kinder children
she'd transported from Germany.

There was no music at her funeral,
just awkward quiet in the Quaker hall,
a shuffling of shoes on bare boards,
the odd cough, a fidget,
eyes that glanced up for a moment
then back to the floor.
And silence.

There was no music at her funeral.
An omission of sound.
Her life had been teaching young hands to play.
A choir should have sung,
an orchestra performed,
a fanfare heralded a farewell.
There was no music at her funeral.

3rd Place: In Which Granddaughter Kitty Plays Grieg's Nocturn Opus 54 No.4 –
by Roger Elkin

She doesn't really need the piano score
with its laddering rise and fall of notes,
but it's a sort of a security that underpins
her affinity with the music's Nordic world.

In fact, you could say she who was born
with a hole in her heart and at just under
six months old had it stitched whole again
is charting the heart within it, almost as if

she shares the suffering that Greig nursed
when daughter Alexandra died of meningitis
and his own weak heart declined. See how
her playing makes this music hers, with

its tender hesitancies, her searching fingers
lingering on the notes' resolutions, and
those chordings that have her small hands
spanned, the hushed bass notes anchoring

in sad antiphons. How she thrills to the music's
continuing: the left-hand's rhythmic flow,
those trilling bird-calls, the throbbing
bass, its gentle *cantabile*, its yearning soul

and quiet calm enshrined in those silent bars
heralding the falling night-sky, the restful end.
The all of it a balm to heal the world's hurt,
caught in her teenage hands, her open heart.

Highly Commended: Genesis – by Sally Blackmore

and there was evening and there was morning
and already there was music –
the carillon of morning,
the nocturne of evening.

and called the dome sky
infinity painting it cerulean, the soft sough of cumulus daubing in
the white, para-diddle of water pencils in the grey,
basso profundo storms in with tones of purple.

from the earth came vegetation,
a psalmody of green and so, there is the tonic, keynote of melody
from chime of chartreuse to thrum of myrtle,
the salvo of emerald to the hush of the hunter.

then two great lights separate day from night.
Rhythm has begun, relentless, essential -

the beat of the great heart. The scherzo of sun
then the measure of moon's fugue – essential counterpoint.

every creature that moves on earth, in water, through sky -
the potential for discord, the jangle, scrape, grate
of claw, of beak, of tail, call and response, croak
and grunt with atonal grace notes of roar, snap.

humankind, the final tempo rubato, not content
with voice. Always striving – scratch of wood on wood,
grind of stone on stone, rap of palm on skin, stretched,
pluck of finger on gut, strung – a metronomic tick tock tick.

blessed rest. Time to hear, if we still can,
the symphony of the universe, with untrained ear -
bedevilled by strum, thump, jam, vamp – pushing
always pushing simple scritch of mouse, crackle of leaf underfoot
out

Highly Commended: The Plastic Shanty – by Nancy Charley

The Plastic Shanty

by Float Bottle and the Empties

*“Help me to journey beyond the familiar
And into the unknown”*

St. Brendan

Drained of all our juice or pop,
Float away you trashy lovelies,
Bottled out and loose screw tops,
Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Microbes work with sun, surf, rain,
Float away you trashy lovelies,
We're breaking down to micro-grains,
Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Resin pellets ape fish eggs,
Float away you trashy lovelies
Chicks fed on them can starve to death,
Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Our mate Bags plays jellyfish,
Float away you trashy lovelies,
Tricks turtles from a tasty dish,
Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Trawlers jettison used lines,
 Float away you trashy lovelies,
Ghost-fishing with their nets and twine,
 Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Shipwrecks eject exotic stash,
 Float away you trashy lovelies,
A laptop, Lego, low-tech hash,
 Bound for Seasoup Debris.

Float Bottle till there's no return,
 Float away you trashy lovelies,
When Empties kill our great oceans,
 Bound up in Seasoup Debris.

Highly Commended: The Music of the Spheres – by Ann Doery

Pythagoras said the square of the hypotenuse is equal
to the sum of the squares of the two opposite sides.
I've never heard anyone argue with that.
But, when he claimed the spinning of the planets
created *Music of the Spheres*, inaudible to humans,
the men of science said it was a load of tosh. Bish. Bosh.
But I say what about dog whistles, or air guitars?
Pythagoras said if something moves, it must emit sound,
that geometry underlies even the humming of guitar strings.
Pythagoras said mathematical equations create musical notes,
which means planets are playing silent symphonies in space.
For years I tried imagining sweet orchestral strings
to match the earworm squirming round inside my head.
It would so nice if Pythagoras was right.
Now, Science eavesdrops on electromagnetic plasma waves,
translating them into sound waves for us to hear, at last.
However, the actuality is devoid of rhapsodies, pizzicatos or harmonies.
The brittle, scratchy music of space is truly MAD.
It booms, whistles, sizzles and squeaks.
From automata birds popping and screeching in leafless
forests of iron, to other-worldly whales keening through
mystical sea water, this electronic cacophony substantiates his view.
Instead of being long-dead, Pythagoras should be giving TED
talks about how the square of the hyper tenuous is equalled
by the hum of the true, apposite asides of astronomers in chorus
with him, Pythagoras. Raise your voices, join the cheers.
For, after all these years and years and years,
we can hear the *Music of the Spheres*.

(Visit here to hear two clips at: <https://blogs.nasa.gov/sunspot/2018/12/11/eavesdropping-in-space-how-nasa-records-erie-sounds-around-earth/>)

Highly Commended: Cloudburst *After Eric Whitacre* – by Isabel White

I love your wet kisses,
their sudden reveal,
stealing from this ochre shroud,
the louring big girls' blouse of you,
the aspens' breathless adulation,
the jubilation of sobbing pines,
whose jazz hands greet the nation
with thunderous applause.

I love your rapid rapture,
your white-water quenching,
the gushing web-foot lashing
upsplash down drizzling drench of you,
your saturate effervescent refrains,
your sodden reframing of sheets and buckets;
the pelting, hammering, drumming,
brisk frisk of your soaking,
with your cats and dogs and stair-rods,
top down tipping.

It's a good day for absolution,
but your Monsoon's over all too soon
and that dry old prune of a sun is waiting.

Commended: And The Wrens Would Not Stop Singing – by Elizabeth Barton

for all the blasting of the horns,
the fetid air, rumbling of the bulldozers;

for all the treeless gardens,
silence of the nightingale and lark;

for all the buzzing of the phones,
the hurrying, the restless questioning;

they sang unseen among the leaves,
flickered in the briars

and though we had no time

to pause and wonder

and though the traffic hurtled by,
from every roadside, ditch

and thicket in the land, they wove
their rhapsody of hope.

Commended: A Record Player's Lament – by Ken Bridgeman

I'm getting so old and so grey
My braincells decrease by the day
But what can I do?
I've thought of a clue
Music might be the right way

The recorder looks easy to play
But the wife wouldn't like it, I'd say
"The notes split my head
So go play in the shed!"
I'll go join the U3A

But which of recorders to grace
With few of my skills yet in place
There's the high sopranino
The tenor, the alto
think I'll start low with the bass

I'm all fingers and thumbs at the start
But kind teacher says, "Ken, do take heart,
With patience and skill
I'll soon bolster your will
And you'll be playing your musical part"

But reading the music is tough
And bass blowing needs plenty of puff
But the more that I strive
My mind comes alive
And my braincells just can't get enough!

Commended: The Rusty Hacksaw Dad – by Dr Marcus Jones

I am a confused and lonesome boy; my ma would make you cry;
My da would twist your arm for fun and poke you in the eye.

When I was only five years old, tried on my sister's dress,
He chased me with a hacksaw blade and caused me such distress.
At nine I joined the church choir and learnt to do the twist,
He bound my hands with barbed wire to straighten my limp wrist.

At twelve I was a lead tenor and gosh! How I could sing,
Till he got out that old hacksaw blade, to saw my ting a ling.
Each day I went out for a run, my dad will never know;
I was singing to the birds and bees, in my best soprano.

No knocks on doors in our home, and certainly no calls;
He barged into my room one night, tripped on my Barbie dolls.
The hacksaw came out again, to teach me another lesson;
I took off through the window with, my mammy's heels and dress on.

My mam was tired of it all and said it was quite sad;
It's time for me to man up and, stop winding up my dad.
I took up sport and archery, and joined a rugby team;
Smoked fags behind the bike sheds, and made the schoolgirls scream.

My voice grew hoarse my chest grew hair, ripped muscles knobbly knees;
Girls chased me everywhere I went; I looked like Hercules.
Pint after pint on Friday night; Guinness then beefsteak;
And if by chance we had a fight, t'was icing on the cake.

Despite my popularity, inside I was a mess;
Designer hoodies looked quite cool, but I yearned my girlfriend's dress.
After agonising soul searching, mustered all the strength I had;
To confess my gender preferences, to my rusty hacksaw dad.

Mam called a dinner meeting, to keep our family stable;
To expose our hidden issues and discuss them around the table.
Secrets struck with shock and awe, and who was the prize winner?
Dad the rusty hacksaw man - wore nan's wedding dress to dinner.

Commended: Jazz On A Spring Morning – by Andrew Lunn

Murmurs of a first spring sermon
float across the fields,
under a new sky, a budding sun,
to a woodpecker among the trees,
who breaks the mood,
taps out a nest – molto presto.

Perched at the high point of a pine

a blackbird knows the score,
the melody is hers alone.
No rules of rhythm, free of rhyme
this is her solo –
it's jazz, improv, a song sublime.

Cool cat, thinks he's smart to stalk
two magpies on a bough,
till they strut their stuff, jab and rap
cackle, nag, ack-ack attack, scat cat
with your ears swept back
down to the ground, escape that sound.

Something's happening here –
intro on bass, it's crow
then thrush with her fluted riff,
a few bars in, robin's whistling lick
sets brassy starlings jamming,
birds in full-throated finale.

Quiet now but for the buzz and bounce
of early bees – and a breeze,
like the kiss of brushes on a drum skin.
Muffled voices carry the closing hymn
over the fields – with a hum and whirr
of the world tuning in.

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 25 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

