

As The Leaves Turn



An anthology by Lincolnshire
Writers

As The Leaves Turn

Edited by Em Burton

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Table of Contents

Foreword – Em Burton 3

Birdsong Apologies (poem) – Suzy Aldridge 4

Three Poems – Mand Austen 7 *Roots, Odd Wellies, Hope*

The Traveller (poem) – Em Burton 12

The Missing (poem) – Gracie Jewell 15

A Sense Of Place (poem) – Amy Liddy 19

The Bin Bag Witch – Tia North 22

Work In Progress (poem) – Caitlin Pearce 26

Three Poems – Rachael Phillips 29 *15:43, no.44, When the Sun Starts Setting Earlier Than Usual*

The Stag Bar – Sharon Shaw 34

The Joyful Librarian (poem) – Gav Skerry 42

Words Once Said – Venetia Welby 46

Acknowledgements 53

Foreword

It may seem like a cringe thing to say but I'm going to shout it from the rooftops anyway: I couldn't be more honoured to be surrounded by such incredible talent. Every single piece in this anthology has had hours of love, passion and hard work thrown at it, resulting in an end project that each and every author can be proud of.

This book consists of poetry, prose and non-fiction by writers from across Lincolnshire. They were tasked with submitting pieces with a cosy atmosphere, and elements of fantasy and horror. Grab a hot chocolate, drown yourself in blankets and light an autumn candle as the leaves turn outside your window, and let's dive into the wonderful array of talent Lincolnshire offers.

Birdsong Apologies

Suzy Aldridge

Birdsong Apologies

she soothes my burns
 but stokes my fire
 ash lingers over glowing coals
 as i'm carried from the pire
 where the world trussed me up
 blinded and belittled
 burned and broken down
 my flesh has become brittle

i snap out of reality
 at a click of her fingers
 she's a silhouette against the sunset
 —paints the sky with cinders
 smeared across her hand
 to trace the sky across my skin
 the enchantment an atonement
 for a self-inflicted sin

fae lights cling to the clouds
 gentle fire entwines fierce blushes
 only the smallest speak over the trees
 and whisper sweet nothings
 singing of the morrow
 —the breeze touching lips
 a melodic dance of the night
 met betwixt fingertips

we glide across the earth
 —a dream of morning mist
 her voice a balmy teal
 and her touch is amethyst
 a rock as old as time
 a natural formation
 she sharpens pricks on roses
 and weaves anticipation

inflammation is soon forgotten

when apologies are birdsong
the incantation numbs memories
as it curls across her tongue
it stills the breeze
—the music of the night
the smell of grass and loneliness
and dimmer morning light

Three Poems

Mand Austen

Amanda Austen was born and bred in Lincolnshire and is currently studying a masters in creative writing at the University of Lincoln. She is currently working on her first collection of poems reflecting her experience of battling with the menopause as well as a desire to create awareness for others.

Roots

she looks at the church
from the north,
the sun setting
in a different part
of the garden,
he no longer takes
the wrong turn
off the roundabout,
as the casserole
cooks on 180
for too long,
strangers next door
blow orange leaves
from unfamiliar soil,
she searches for the kettle
and unpacks, her
life

Odd wellies

She is wearing odd wellies one red one green she clutches a black
frayed lead and walks along the lane giggling she jumps
Amongst orange leaves mesmerised as they twist and turn
‘Which way to school? she frowns her head is
Fuzzy like a jigsaw with missing pieces confusion is driving questions
Around her head as they race for the finish line ‘Where is her mum?
‘Who is the man in her kitchen? sparkling sunshine bounces on the river she
looks at her reflection an old woman with a grey plait stares back
she blinks a child with a blonde ponytail returns her gaze
A man runs to her with an Alsatian ‘Mollie, I’ve been looking for you
you forgot Jake’ he holds out his hand ‘Dad?’ she whispers ‘No, it’s me Jack’ a flicker dances
in her eyes they stand by the
grey winding river she starts to sing he joins in his arm around her shoulder he closes
his eyes remembering
a different time a different place their sweet gentle voices
drift soulfully down the river and as the sun disappears behind a cloud she looks at him and
whispers Can we go home now Dad?

Hope

death on the square screen / she seeks life elsewhere / she feels a twinge / kneeling amongst
weeds / a robin is perched on a spade / she thinks of the faceless grave digger / tugs tendrils of
dead roots / discards into the green wheelie bin that swallows winter / she pushes aside clumps of
snowdrops / bulbs push life through the congealed bed /
she thinks of him as
she scatters
seeds for the robin

The Traveller

Em Burton

Em Burton is a prose writer from Cheshire who specialises in children's fiction. She is studying for her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She worked as the deputy news editor for The Linc during her first two years at university, and is currently writing a middle grade novel focusing on the idea of the ordinary becoming extraordinary. She has not previously published.

The Traveller

Rain gleams. Sunshine falls
Chestnuts lose their footing.

Autumn arrives.

Peaches become pears, salads turn to soup
It's time to go home.

The Missing

Gracie Jewell

Gracie Jewell is a writer from Essex who specialises in abstract fiction, nonfiction poetry, and prose. She is currently in her last year of study at the University of Lincoln, where she is studying BA Hons Film and Television Studies. Gracie has been working on self-publishing her own abstract poetry novel for the last year, which breaks down the idea of mental health. She also previously had her writing published in the Young Writers Poetry Anthology during her GCSEs.

The Missing

In a world unseen, where shadows creep,
A tale of terror, chilling and deep.
A soul lost in realms beyond our sight,
In this poem, darkness we shall ignite.

The clock strikes twelve, the hour is near,
When one vanishes, consumed by fear.
In the realm of the lost, where reality fades,
A haunting tale of someone's charade.

A figure, once known, now gone astray,
A void in existence, where they once lay.
Whispers echo through the empty halls,
A chilling presence, as darkness befalls.

Frantic footsteps trace a desperate quest,
Through fog-drenched streets, where shadows jest.
Faces blurred, strangers with piercing eyes,
Whispering secrets, weaving wicked lies.

Friends and family, filled with despair,
Searching for clues in the vacant air.
Their voices tremble, hearts tightly bound,
As the mystery of the missing confounds.

The news reports echo, a chilling refrain,
A glimpse of reality drenched in pain.
Each headline's bite, a harsh reminder,
Of a world where horrors linger and hinder.

Investigations delve into the abyss,
Seeking answers in a labyrinth of twists.
The truth elusive, obscured by deceit,
A puzzle of darkness, impossible to beat.

In nightmares, visions of the lost ones plight,
Trapped in a realm devoid of light.
Their cries for help, swallowed by the void,
Reality shattered, sanity destroyed.

As the days pass, hope begins to fade,
Realities grip slipping, memories frayed.
The missing one becomes a haunting ghost,
A presence that lingers, a mournful host.

In the hollow of night, a flickering hope,
A glimmer of truth, a rope to cope.
But beware, dear reader, for the tale is grim,
For the lost may never return from within.

So lock your doors and hold your breath,
As reality fades, plunging into death.
For in the depths where darkness thrives,
The horror of the missing forever survives.

A Sense of Place

Amy Liddy

Amy Liddy is a poet from a small village in North Lincolnshire who finds writing inspiration through nature, music, emotions, other people and her own life experiences; what it means to be human. Writing for her is a passion and a hobby; rarely planned, but her pen finds the paper whenever and wherever the mood takes her. Her poetry has featured in The Small Leaf Press, The Lit Tribune, The High Wolds Poetry Collection and a number of the Poetry 365 Anthologies published by @RDW World. Visit her on Instagram at @amylouiseliddy.

A Sense of Place

A space within magnolia and a navy feature wall
where the sun dips early and the outside whistles through the vents
centre stage – hiss and crackle sings kindling,
amidst a dusk chorus - snapping, popping
meditative flame dances from charred stepping stone
to charred stepping stone
blood ghosts wax and wane
pumpkin orange paints timber bridges - resilient to a point
until buckle and fall they must
here this space holds me, in cocooned comfort
where every part has a purpose
and imagination runs deeper than tree rings and a fort built on an iron grate
yet in the morning, cool ashen mounds, all that remains of last night's revelry

The Bin Bag Witch

Tia North

Tia North is a creative prose writer by passion and SEO content writer by profession. Since graduating with a First Class Journalism BA from the University of Lincoln, Tia has established a successful career as an automotive and SEO writer and has previously been published across a range of news outlets and online platforms. Tia specialises in feature writing and creative prose that focuses on the memories and emotions of other people - always aiming to find an extraordinary tale among our ordinary lives.

The Bin Bag Witch

Come October, pink shiny shoes hug hot little feet and provide the best support for a glide through fallen leaves. Between puddles and piles, a routine is formed. One step: squishy leaves, two steps: puddle bath. On the third step: glide. Come December when the leaves are gone, we'll put on ice skates.

It's half past three and it's hot but also chilly. The school bell rings, and the cloakroom houses you while you deliberate – jumper and you'll be too cold, coat and you will be boiling. A top-button-cape will suffice for the half-a-mile skip to the front door, or perhaps tonight the cape makes you a vampire and you'll fly home. It's tempting, but you're too grown up for that now. Dad said so.

There's a pumpkin on your doorstep but it's not smiling yet. You've got a couple more hours and one last chance for a dress rehearsal, little Bin Bag Witch. The smell of sugar beet sprints through the door alongside you, our own personal scent that divides a town. It's as if someone stuck a huge jar of wax in the market square, a wick burning its way down and a label that says 'home'.

There's a single shade of glitter that belongs to the half hour between light and dark and it's stronger than it's ever been tonight. Alphabet spaghetti spells out 'BOO' on the edge of a plate and looks rather gourmet in the moonlight. Sticky apples prise baby teeth from their gums and sweaty hands reach into a plastic pumpkin and pull out their favourites.

Soon, it's opening night for a show that we put on once a year and the colours of the sky and the leaves are all cut from rolls of seamstress's satin. There are a thousand little monsters scurrying the streets and banging on doors and you'd maybe, just maybe, be a

tiny bit scared if Dad wasn't there. Still, he won't mind checking under the bed when we get home, right?

Uphill we march to fill our buckets; face and hair and now hands too, covered in green oil paint. You are cold, Mum was right. A jacket would have hidden your costume though and what's a witch in a pink coat? Pointless, that's what. No one would be spooked by a Pink Coat Wearing Witch.

Hot aches hit when you arrive back in the door, smudged and sticky and being wrapped up in a rare blast of savoured central heating. Piles are made: some for us, some for Dad, a couple for Mum, and none for the baby as you don't know if he has teeth yet. Maybe a lollipop would be okay for him, just to be kind - though he gets enough attention already.

A pink-pajamaed little witch scrubs the green from her face, hair, hands and now the sink, too. Pumpkin innards are discovered beneath nails and you scrub those all away, orange flesh swirling down the drain. Face washing is quick because if those eyes are closed for too long then something might sneak in. Padding across the carpeted hallway, you speed up a little at the sound of a cackle; the little monsters are mostly in bed now, but a few still linger in the streets.

Pink bed sheets keep the little witch safe - stiff and still at each creek and squeak, but NOT scared. You forgot to ask Dad to check under the bed and if you open your eyes you swear the clothes hanging on your door could be a wolf. An old friend, Mr Moon, extends long fingers through the curtains, illuminating a grey pinafore dress and giving Wolfie directions home.

It'll be November when you wake up - that's basically Christmas.

Work In Progress

Caitlin Pearce

Dear reader,
I've been asked to introduce myself
using a 100 word bio

The irony is
every time I try and explain who I am and
why I write
I can't quite find the right words
they seem to
f a d e a w a y
not as pliable as usual
not as willing to bend
into the meaning I am trying to portray
or behave how they would any other sodding day
(how does one explain to words on a page to do as they're bloody told? god knows)

so instead of some
professional
verbiage on
why I am a very serious writer
I thought I'd play the part of the angsty poet and
embrace the irony of another poem about writer's block
I've weighed up the prose (pun intended)
and decided
it might be best
to just send this lousy poem instead
it doesn't even rhyme!
but at least it's honest
(sorry Em)

Work In Progress

I used to know a girl
who's words would grow with her
Bold and proud, swelling out of her mouth
like bubblegum
Pen to paper, she unravelled
and examined within
Rhythm changing with the wind
But in the warmly lit room under the soft cotton sheets
She had a pair of clay feet
cumbersome and heavy
You see, because the words were growing with her
and she still had more growing to do
(we are never done growing)
The thoughts weren't fully formed
So the rhythm and verse were wrapped in a ribbon and
left hanging
Unfinished

Three Poems

Rachael Phillips

Rachael is a poet from the Isle of Wight, based in Lincoln. She is currently in the third year of her BA in English & Creative writing at the University of Lincoln. She won first place in Sight for Wight's Short Story Writing Competition 2017 and aspires to write poems about the self that everyone can identify with in some way. Her work has not been previously published.

15:43

Rusty tracks of a forgotten line
Sun grazes the rooftops
setting alight the corn
Yellow husks and sunflowers swaying - drunk
on low afternoon light
The canal water is undisturbed
Except the reflection of a gold lined cloud that
drifts across the surface

no.44

At dusk, silence
Darkness has eaten the stars
The yellow of the street lamp cries refuge
But you wonder if it is safer in the shadows.
Now at the window, looking in from the outside
A ghostless corridor
Time suspended
Absent in the rubble of collapsed lungs.
The spider in the corner of the room is starving.

When the sun starts setting earlier than usual

What of the horses dancing in the fireplace

Flames licking at the hooves

Tendrils of smoke

Steam from a pot of coffee

Honey roasted carrots and rosemary

Musk of dried thistle

Last dandelion of the month

The Stag Bar

Sharon Shaw

The Stag Bar

Althea calls it a bar, but it's really more of a counter; not much other than a large cupboard (one shelf loaded with bread, cheese and fruit, and another containing bottles, mugs and small barrels), a heavy kettle full of hot chocolate standing on a thick plank of time-polished oak balanced in front of it, and a space for her to stand between the two. Behind the cupboard is a short, steep, ladder-like staircase, but the clients don't see that unless they have to climb it. Her bed is up there, but if necessary, there'll be a spare one for those who need a little more shelter than an hour or two at the bar can provide. There are three stools on the other side of the plank, and behind them a door studded with cast-iron nails. The other side of the door looks different, of course. Althea never knows their location, not until the clients come in and she can start listening to them, asking them questions, observing their clothes, maybe even catching a glimpse of the outside world when the door opens. The Stag knows, though. He always knows where they are, where they've been, where they're headed. She used to try and ask, but now she's learned to just trust him. It's always the right place; always the right time.

They've arrived, and Althea feels the Stag slowing beneath the bar as he brings himself to a gradual stop. He lowers himself beneath the level of the ground outside, shuffling into invisibility as the bar settles into the environment around it. Althea isn't sure what it'll look like outside, but the brief impression she got from the Stag's thoughts was neon, traffic and rain. A city again, then. The two of them have been spending more and more time together lately. Time was, they saw a lot of dark forests; edges of remote villages; sea views from stormy cliffs. That's where the lost folk had seemed to end up before, where they found themselves most in need of a drink, a friendly ear, maybe even a bed for the night. They would linger for a day or two, sometimes longer, while the Stag waited for the next call, and Althea waited for the Stag.

These days they never stay anywhere more than one night.

The next morning, Althea mops up the dirt and rain that had blown in through the door when yesterday's clients arrived, and again when they left. Two young men, in love but not aware of it yet, knowing only that they needed to get away from the taller one's friends and the older one's father. Just for an hour or two. Long enough for them to share a quiet drink, a whispered conversation, and enough loaded glances to set the bar on fire, if it had been an

especially dry season. Althea hadn't even needed to say much to them, just a smile when they came in to reassure them they were in a friendly place, a couple of towels to address the rain in their hair, and an occasional observation when they broke their own discussion to ask her for her opinion. She'd noticed that they left holding hands with the confidence of an established couple, which pleased her. Maybe their relationship will last a couple of nights, maybe a few years, maybe a lifetime. It doesn't matter. The connection is the point.

The floor vibrates slightly, and Althea listens for the Stag's message. They will be moving again, and soon. She finishes cleaning the floor and, stowing the mop and bucket under the counter, pushes the drinks cupboard aside to reveal the bedroom stairs. She climbs up, letting the secret door slide closed behind her, and heads up to her bunk. Last night wasn't arduous, but she is still tired. She often is; Althea doesn't remember how old she is, but she knows she's been running the bar for a long time now.

This time, when the Stag comes to rest, his thoughts are much quieter than last night.
Althea

guesses there must be a woodland or a forest nearby. He's taken them to a variety of locations over the years, but he likes to be near trees. She gets a flash of dusk over a cornfield, a handful of distant farmhouses, and... footfalls? Fast ones, getting louder. Someone running towards the bar. They must have arrived just in the nick of time for this one.

The door slams open and a girl, maybe fourteen, maybe a little older but not much, falls inside and drops to her knees. She's panting, half-sobbing. Althea darts out from behind the counter and closes the door quickly; partly because there's always a risk that someone who isn't meant to find the bar will glimpse inside (although not much of one; people are very good at not seeing things that aren't in their immediate field of understanding), but mainly because she knows someone who's trying to flee something when she sees them, and she wants to make sure the girl is safe. She can't resist a quick glance around the door before she pushes it to, and sure enough she sees trees; a thick wall of trunks topped with a forest green canopy, the last of the daylight disappearing through the leaves. The Stag seems to have squeezed the bar between two trunks, and unless Althea is very much mistaken, the exterior wall is camouflaged perfectly there. The door, when viewed from the outside, looks like a large split in the still-living wood. No one

would even spot it unless they were, in sheer desperation, hurling themselves at it in the hope of a place to hide.

Which, of course, is the point.

Althea makes sure they're secure, and then turns to her new client, who is still sitting on the ground, still breathing hard, but now looking around the bar in shock. It is very apparent that she wasn't expecting to find this interior when she dashed into the forest's edge to get away from – whatever had been chasing her. But it's also apparent that she isn't entirely astounded. Her expression is a blend of gradually fading fear, open-mouthed surprise, and something else, especially when she turns and gets a good look at Althea. Recognition.

"I've seen you before," she gasps.

"You have? When?" Althea doesn't recall the girl, but of course she could have been much younger

the first time. If they have met before. Which Althea doubts. She never gets repeat clients. Never.

"I'm... not sure," the girl says, now looking down at her hands, still on the floor. She's questioning

her own memory. Althea knows that feeling when she sees it.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asks. The girl nods, not looking up.

"You have hot chocolate, don't you?"

"I do." Althea gets a mug from the cupboard, ladling some of the steaming, rich chocolate out of the kettle. She places it on the counter and the girl gets up, moving slowly to one of the stools and sitting down. She wraps her hands around the cup, staring at it, briefly closing her eyes and breathing in the warm, welcoming scent of the drink.

"Yes, I've definitely been here before," the girl states, after finally taking a drink from the mug and putting it back down on the counter. "You gave me this mug then, too." "How long ago was that?" Althea asks, cutting herself off before she adds "for you". "I think I was about four.

So maybe ten years?" The girl looks around the bar. "It hasn't changed in here. Like... at all. Although it looks different outside. It was a barn last time."

"It always looks different," Althea replies. "What led you here today?"

It was her usual opening question, and she was unsettled enough by the situation that she wanted to try and get the evening back on track.

"Same as last time," the girl says, burying her face in the mug again.

"You didn't want to tell me then, either, did you?" Althea observes, taking a cloth from underneath the counter and wiping some glasses. She's getting some flashes now, of a much younger girl in a muddy, torn shirt and jeans that were already too small for her, stumbling through a field and opening the door of what seemed from the outside to be a rust-coloured barn. They're not her memories, she knows, but the girl's, channelled through the Stag. The girl shakes her head.

"Nora," she mumbles, still staring into the hot chocolate, which is almost all gone. "My name is Nora."

"And what do you need, Nora? You wouldn't have found yourself here unless there was something we could give you. What would help you right now, at this moment?" "Sleep," Nora replies without hesitation. "I'm cold, and I'm tired. If I could just curl up in the corner for a few minutes..."

"I can do better than that," Althea says, and pushes the cupboard aside. "If you go up those steps, you'll find two bunks. The one with the green quilt is mine, but you're welcome to take the other."

Nora stares at the ladder.

"He won't find me here, will he?" she asks, her voice shaking.

"He won't find you here," Althea assures her. "Folks don't see us unless they need us. That's how it works."

Nora nods, and climbs up to the bed. Althea closes the door and goes back to the counter. They will stay here until Nora wakes up. It frustrates Althea that she still doesn't remember her. She takes out the client diary from the bottom shelf, and opens it from the back. The last few pages are empty, but she comes to the end of the handwritten entries and reads the few scrawled notes about the couple from last night. London, the location says. There's no date; there never is. The previous night had been an old man in a high rise flat, missing his wife, wandering the

hallways looking for someone to talk to. The Stag had settled them next to the lift, so the fellow found himself face to face with Althea instead of heading down and wandering out into the night; not the safest habit in his part of town.

Before that, a young woman walking the street with a newborn in her arms, trying to find a shop that was still open and might let her have some baby formula, despite the lack of money in her pocket. Not only had the Stag hidden them behind the door of the brightly lit 24 hour garage, but Althea found a box of exactly what the lady needed on the upper shelf of the drinks cupboard. She had made some up for the child, and given them the rest to take home.

Althea keeps turning the pages, back through the weeks and months and years, trying to spot the notes for a four year old girl who had tried to hide in an unfamiliar barn, refused to discuss what was chasing her, and sat quietly drinking hot chocolate until she was ready to leave. She can't find anything. Eventually she closes the book and puts it back on the shelf. Taking a seat at the counter, on the client side for once, she folds her hands together and stares at her fingers. She picks up the mug Nora had been drinking from and tries to read the cocoa residue at the bottom, as if it were tea leaves.

"No one finds us twice," she thinks firmly, addressing the Stag. She feels his amusement.

Not that you remember, he responds.

"You mean we've had clients come back before? Why isn't that in the book?" She tries not to sound annoyed. Althea doesn't like it when things change; it makes her feel uncomfortable. She's here because... well, she doesn't recall exactly, but she knows the routine of it suits her.

The diary doesn't log second visits, the Stag tells her. Most people get what they need from one. That feeling of safety, of sanctuary... it lasts. They carry it with them. If they need us again, if they have to escape sideways from their life for another evening, something's gone badly wrong. I keep a close eye on them after that. If you look under the counter, you'll find a small address book. Althea reaches to the back of the shelf under the counter, where she usually finds the cleaning equipment. Eventually her hand closes on a tiny notebook. She flicks through it, and as the Stag suggested, there are only a few entries. Still no dates, and this time no descriptions of why they were here, but as well as locations, this one has names. She sees Nora. Someone called

Archie, from Chicago. Elise, who they met in Frankfurt. And then, at the very beginning...

Althea. Cardiff.

"This is me."

Yes.

"I was your first repeat client?"

No. But no one can see anything written before their own entry. And if they come back a third time —

"Yes?"

Well, that means they need complete sanctuary.

Althea stares at the book. At her name.

"They stay?"

They do.

"What was I running away from?"

Does it matter, now?

She looks at the book again, closes it, puts it back on the shelf.

"No, I suppose not. Will Nora be coming back again?"

She won't need to.

"This isn't her second visit, is it?"

No.

"It's her third."

Yes.

Althea sighs. "When will she take over from me?"

When she's ready.

"And until then?"

She'll sleep.

There is a long pause.

"And what will happen to me?"

The Stag doesn't reply for a good long moment, and when he starts to explain, Althea interrupts him.

"I'll sleep."

Yes. Is that all right?

Althea looks at her hands, dry and creased, lined with time, and pain she can't remember,

and love, and caring, and support, that she can. She smiles.

“Yes. Yes, I think that would be all right.”

The Joyful Librarian

Gav Skerry

Gavin Skerry is a 48 year old struggling writer from Wragby! But it's the struggle that's important, right?

In his spare time he works as a community therapy assistant with the NHS.

He likes to dabble in poetry, prose and comedy!

He is currently working on a poetry collection, a short story and a novel. Shouldn't take long, he hopes!

The Joyful Librarian

Josiah, a man in love
A passion of words
Of ideas, places
Vistas of creation
Landscapes of the mind

He tended the stacks
With quiet duty
The gentle care
Of a life's calling
But now twas the autumn

His days were short
His vigil nearly done
Yellowed books
Matched yellow fingers
As time wound down

In the midst of his realm
He plucked a volume
Gazed at the cover
Red Rocket home
Another world

His fantasy writ large
Caressing the letters
The other world
The other life
His true home

He flicked the cover
A sparkle began
Energy coursing
That hit began
To build and grow

Wide eyes scanning
The opening lines
An incantation
Soul fizzle
Next life jazz

Sensing the glow
The orange aura
Covering the form
Of Josiah, the man
Taking the spirit

A blissful smile
Life concluded
Vanished in a burst
Red Rocket fell

For the final time.

Words Once Said

Venetia Welby

Venetia Welby is the author of two novels – *Dreamtime*, which featured in The Observer’s books of the year, and *Mother of Darkness*. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in *The London Magazine*, *Irish Times*, *Spectator* and anthologies *Garden Among Fires* and *Trauma*, among others. ‘Words Once Said’ was first published in *The Parracombe Prize Collection, 2023*, for which it was shortlisted. The story was inspired by her son, Hal’s question: what if the words we spoke hung around? Venetia lives near Grantham and can be found online at www.venetiawelby.com, X: @venwelby and Insta: @vwwelby

Words Once Said

‘Watch it,’ I warned him. ‘You’re getting seriously close to the limit.’

‘Fuck the limit,’ he screamed, and I saw the expletive bounce along in a fury of sparking green before it rolled under the spindly chair that housed so many of its relatives. We’d come to think of it as the fuck chair.

I couldn’t face the consequences of continuing. ‘I’m going to leave,’ I mouthed – the last syllable was too exaggerated and the little letters hopped out, spread to the far corners of the room and then swarmed together, some kind of hokey cokey nonsense.

He looked at me as if to say, nice one. But mercifully he didn’t say it. Maybe even he recognises that we have enough sarcasm in this house, sometimes.

Marry an academic and you get a bigger quota. Well, they get a bigger quota and they can share some of that with you, their non-academic wife. This is supposed to be a privilege, and it was certainly part of the draw when I decided to marry Mike. But now, of course, I’ve come to realise that a bigger quota by itself is a curse. It’s like saying hey you, you’ve got style. You’re now state sanctioned to spend more money on clothes than other less stylish people. Unworthy, ill-dressed people. What they don’t add is: and we will give you more money, or we will build you an extra-large wardrobe or whatever.

So it is with the extra words. Say your extra words, you deserve them, Mr Clever Clogs – and then what? Do we get a bigger house to keep them in? Do we get, I don’t know, therapy or something? Not a fucking thing. We just have to deal with them, spilling out all over the place, straining so hard at the windows that all our glass is convex. And another thing they don’t warn you about is the very high correlation (ugh correlation, a four syllable stinker that really lingers) between academics and sleep talking. Too many ideas for one little human head perhaps. Sometimes they pour out of him any way they can, snorted through a nose, expelled like steam from an ear, or growled via the lower duodenum (never say that one out loud if you can possibly avoid it).

I tried once or twice to have a quiet conversation about it, aware of the futility of verbal communication. Every time, Mike would lose it and lash out, filling up the kitchen with absolutely unnecessary speech bubbles. And he’d use longer words too, to put me in my place. He knew lots of Latinate ones from his fossils. Once he called me caecilians – which I understand

now is a wormlike, almost blind, tropical amphibian. I looked it up, but I needn't have because that's exactly how the word crawled out. Sometimes I see it poking about under the fridge still. It's disgusting. The kitchen is particularly full of horrifying letter chains.

And so I say less. I've had no choice. But inevitably, arguments happen. Lately Mike has been provoking them. Sometimes the hostile alphabet we live in creates the tiff. No kids thank god, or we'd have no space at all now, every ga ga goo goo from birth crystallised into crawling space-fillers, with their scent of nappy and talcum powder. I'd seen them in the houses of others, back when we were younger and people had the space in their houses to invite us round for dinner. Back when it wasn't dangerous to drive our road-rage filled cars and the trains weren't static with the tunes of strikers. Did you hear about the poor woman who was blinded by a picket attack before they finally decommissioned them?

A dinner of words, as I say, made no difference in those early days – the words were small, harmless. Ah god, there was still so much space! How I miss those days of no consequence. My friend Beth's house is still, she texts me, like that. She signs the same to me when we meet. She's not trying to rub it in, at least I don't think so, but she can't risk having me and Mike over. She lives alone. She only ever thinks happy thoughts, so that if one happens to spill out in her sleep in the night it will be a cosy word like fireplace or lover. Beth never reads the news and spends most of her time doing yoga or meditating. She only ever sees people outside the house, in a public space. I envy her. She's done everything right. And she has a pristine home. When I look in through the window, I see no paleontological lurkers and crawlers. Just everything in its place. Space to move. Space to breathe! I increasingly worry about that. Only last week I woke up with a word stuck in my windpipe. I squawked as best I could and Mike woke up, did the Heimlich on me. It was one of his (obviously): a coccolithophore down the throat again. Not as microscopic as he'd have you believe, not in word form anyway.

'Just open the window, for christ's sake it's not the end of the world. I—'

I held up a shushing finger. Opening the window, ha! Oh I hadn't thought of that, my features attempted to convey. Yeah it was true that you could shake off one or two through an open window, particularly if you used the big standing fan too. In the kitchen, the extractor hood was another evergreen tool. But they were clingers, most of the words. Felt they belonged here. They just did not want to go.

'They're part of you,' Beth had whispered once. She always whispered, believing that the words would be softer, kinder, nicer to have around. Like singing to your child in the womb,

hoping that what comes out will be happier, more loved. More loving. Mike's words were particularly clingsome: sludgy and stagnant. They stank up the air, filled it with the unspeakable. The sarky ones that had once been nice were the bitterest. They climbed inside your mouth and turned it acrid. Burnt bonfire apples exploding, shards in your gums and the toffee in your teeth.

And of course it's a problem outside the home now too. Yes, the university can keep expanding but what about everyone else? All those homeless words! You can smell them on the sea breeze. In the streets words multiply on the tongues of others. You have to duck and dive to get to the shops. So many happy clappy street performers trying to spread beautiful words. They're all words, you want to yell at them! They'll all get us in the end. We should be signing, like Beth.

I haven't left our town in years thanks to the transport issues, but you can tell from the pics that other places have the same problem. Unlike Beth I do watch the news, I do read the internet. I see the young pop stars up in London persecuted by their own lyrics, like clouds of bees. Madonna was one of the first to undergo the experimental dewatering treatment that killed her. It doesn't work. Nothing works.

Everyone on the internet has a theory about how this happened to us. Where we're headed.

It's just human nature to try to find meaning in words, I suppose, but you have to agree with Beth: It's quite depressing. Sometimes I like to listen to an audiobook and pretend we're in the before times. They're illegal – the old government missing the point again – but a harmless treat really: those words can't manifest and plague you forever. I tried to get Mike to record his angry speeches, his descriptions of a long day at the university, and play them back to me. 'Then they'll be contained in the device,' I murmured.

'You're forgetting, my adorable little ostracoderm, that, although the words will not spread when the device is triggered – no matter how many times it—'. I was doing the wind- it up- signal. 'Very well.' He even had the good grace to lower his voice: 'Wherever I record it, there the words will seep out.'

'So, darling, don't record it in the house,' I wanted to snarl at him but instead wrote down on one of the little notepads I had positioned everywhere for just such occasions. I had to reach through a slew of writhing terms just to pick this one up. He laughed at me, thinks I'm quaint. He, who is educated, loves his own words, the sound of his own voice, the look of his knowledge laid

bare across the floors, the chairs, every surface there is. I didn't go to university. I do not understand.

The thing is, I know him by his words now. Or at least, I know his words, his glossary of terms, the style of his limited emotions upon them – the grey-blue tone of smugness, the lifting bursts of testosterone, the occasional glee woven into such terms as dinoflagellate and Valanginian. I'm the one who had to tidy the buggers up, wade through them to have a bath, be dive bombed by them as I tried to roast a chicken. Naturally, I started to notice when the new words began to creep in.

They were inseparable groups of words. Phrases, I suppose, but not ones I recognised. They weren't university speak. Not Mike's usual fossil chat, not his balls-out confrontational style. There was a dancing feminine aspect to the new words that I'd come to associate with my own, and yet they were not mine. I didn't know what they meant, strung together like that. There was a softness to them. I pinned one down: boil the ocean – and the phrase wriggled seductively before heading off to entwine itself in an old foraminifer. Phrases didn't tend to hang together in this house. Mike said they were lazy.

I have resolved to become a detective. I realise that I have just about had the known vocab under control – Mike under control, I mean, despite his outbursts. This is something else. Every Thursday I find them: Jump the shark, low-hanging fruit, thought shower. I always go to Silent Book Club (companionable reading, you could call it) with Beth on Thursdays - which we like to follow up with an outdoor lunch, picnic-style on the beach, no matter the weather, and then a lengthy stroll. When I came home this Thursday, though no one had been there, the words were slithering about all hot air and tongue: Open the kimono, bleeding edge, trim the fat. What did they mean! How had they got there?

I am determined to find out.

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— Em

