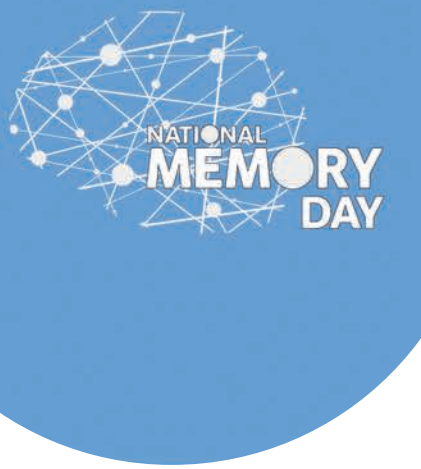
# National Memory Day 2017 Writing Competition

## Winners & Highly Commended

Celebrating the power of poetry and the positive impact of creative engagement with those affected by memory loss




Alzheimer's Society
LiteratureWorks
SHAPE THE FUTURE WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY
The Poetry Archive

**Judy O Kane – poetry winner**

***The Fig Tree***

Every year we made the pilgrimage; pillaged
and plundered, plucking wild garlic from ditches,
dangling off trees, reaching out for elderflower.
The gardener pressed seeds and cuttings

into our hands. It took two of us
to lever the tree into the car (mud everywhere)
hold it down with the seatbelt. Potatoes
in flower flashed by as Ballycotton Bay

disappeared in the rear view mirror,
the leaves pressed up against the window,
like children's faces. A man with a trolley
dragged it across the car park, into the lift.

It clung to the door, losing leaves and fruit;
we coaxed it out onto the balcony,
dragging and pulling, like a forceps birth.
The waxy leaves reflected the sun;

their swirling patterns grew into green
doilies for cheese boards. The buds promised
harvests of chutneys and ice creams.
The tree began to sicken. What are the symptoms,

asked the gardener. The leaves drooped,
figs shrivelled and dropped off. It's dying,
she said. My sister took it on a trial basis.
Branches bent back, twigs snapped, the last figs

bounced off the doorframe, rolled across the wooden floor
like marbles. It stood in a pot so it wouldn't colonise
the garden. It rallied: new shoots appeared, then buds,
which the birds ravaged before they had a chance

lo ripen. It sulked in the corner, shed Its leaves
the day after it was fed, like a patient spitting up
medicine. It became the child in a custody dispute:
I can't stand over the thing and water it

every twenty minutes, said my sister. It stood,
silent and sullen as we discussed its future.
I hoped it would bring back days stumbling about
in wellingtons, shooing away wasps;

new life springing up from raised beds.

Maybe it's just too cold for it up here,

said my mother. No, I said,

That's tree's not going  anywhere.

**SARAH VENESS – Primary Carer**

The Inner Song

1495 Words

Kate had been quietly listening to the inner song that was playing in Freda's heart and mind.

For the last few months she had been visiting Freda in her flat which now showed signs of neglect and abandonment. Once house proud she would never have let the cobwebs string their way from the light fitting to the picture rail and the curtains would have been pulled back to let in as much light as possible.

Her confidence was seeping away, it was as if she had drawn the curtains in her mind and inside the house an unheard story was being enacted.

Kate enjoyed hearing stories of Freda's past. Recently subdued and depressed it had been hard work coaxing her to communicate, any mention of activity met with a negative response. Her idea of getting her to a reminiscence group had become a distant dream.

Never one to give in easily Kate would occasionally mention the group that met in the Black Cat Cafe and what lovely cakes they had there. Freda's sweet tooth competed with her fear of the future and the dread of the past.

It was a spring day when Freda agreed to go with Kate. 'Just to have a look at the cakes.'

They set off making their way in the gentle sunshine, Freda's stick tappity tapping on the pavement.

The cafe was only a short walk away. Outside it didn't look much but inside it was clean and the food was good.

Barry and Audrey were regulars who had commandeered the sofa, and Ted was at the counter trying to decide which cake to have.

Kate motioned to Freda to pull up a chair and said she would order the drinks and cakes.

'Have a look at the menu and let me know what you fancy, the hot chocolate with marshmallows is superb.'

Raising her voice barely above a whisper Freda asked for a hot chocolate and an eclair.

The cafe bell rang as another customer came in.
'Hi John' called Audrey 'good to see you again, how's your knee after the op?' John leant heavily on his stick, 'Fine I'm doing fine, it's good to get out again.' He made his way over to the armchair next to the sofa, and motioned to Stan the owner, 'Cup of the usual Stan and a bacon buttie.'

Kate returned to table and as she handed her the eclair she introduced Freda to the group.

Freda liked the cafe, it was warm and homely, more pleasant than she had expected.

She and Kate sat a little away from the group that was now forming, close enough to hear their conversations but keeping their distance.

Ted had finally settled on a vanilla slice and joined the others lowering his bulky frame into a vacant chair.

Barry decided to get the ball rolling and asked if anyone would like to share about their childhood.

Audrey said had learnt to knit when she was four and had built on the skill all her life.
She nodded in the direction of Barry who was modelling her latest hand knitted creation, a Fairisle pullover.

Acknowledging her skill he launched into his boyhood love of cricket.

'I played in the village cricket team using my Dad's bat which was almost as big as I was. The pitch had seemed so big then and I dreamed of making a hundred but I never made more than seven runs before I got bowled out.'

Ted joined in 'The teas were the best bit of our cricket matches.'

If you asked Ted what his hobby was he would have to admit it was eating and by the look of him he had been practising all his life.

His mind went back to the halcyon days when he would pray for bad light and rain to stop play so he could go to the clubhouse and tuck into the amazing array of sandwiches and cakes.

'First there were the sandwiches to enjoy. The sausage ones were best. Then ham and tomato, egg and cress, cheese and pickle.' Ted's eyes glowed and he was smacking his lips as he continued. 'There were scones and jam, marble cake, and Mrs Pickle's Victoria sponges which were about a foot high and oozing with jam and cream.'

He had brought a selection of sweets from Grace's Olde Sweet Shop in town with him.

He had been a customer for 60 years and whatever else he had lost, hair, hearing, his sweet tooth remained intact and he offered the paper bag around the group. He leant towards Kate and Freda and included them in his act of generosity.

Barry then was reminded of buying sweets when he was a boy 'When I was a lad I used to walk from our cottage to the nearest shop  half a mile away but it was always worth it. I'd worked up an appetite by the time I got there gripping my sixpenny piece tightly in my fist and spending it ten times over in my mind. It was hard not to eat the sweets before I got home.

'The Suffolk  village where we lived was very remote with just one weekly bus to Norwich on a Friday morning.

'On a Sunday afternoon a car would hoot its horn and we

would rush out from our cottage almost dehingeing the gate in our impatience. In the boot were the Sunday papers and comics and a choice of confectionary. We jostled with the neighbours and then went back to relax and enjoy our purchases. Reading the Beano and sucking everlasting toffees in the drowsy summer sunshine, life seemed perfect then.'

'But it wasn't' interjected Audrey 'I remember you complaining about the outside lavvy, it smelt in summer and you froze in the winter.'

Freda tilted her body towards the group, edging slightly closer but with her arms tightly folded across her chest, not wanting to be included but fearful of missing out on something.

John shifted his leg to alleviate the pain. 'My Mother was a wonderful singer, she sang in the church choir on a Sunday and in a choral society on a Wednesday night. I used to love hearing her practice' He paused to change position again, 'Sadly I didn't inherit her singing voice but I did get her good looks!'

Laughter rippled around the room, Freda smiled and Kate was pleased to see her respond.

Audrey then said 'When I was a young girl we lived near the seaside, at Leigh-on-Sea it was lovely, we used to play on the mounds of cockle shells and when the tide was out we would run across the mud to paddle in a tiny rivulet called the Ray'

Freda envisioned the scene, and the smell of ozone was almost tangible. In her mind she could hear her mother and aunt singing 'I do love to be beside the seaside', their skirts tucked into the legs of their bloomers as they paddled in the sea, giggling, forgetting how starved of pleasure their day to day lives had become. 'Well Kate would you or your

friend like to share anything?' Barry was keen to give Freda an opportunity to share if she wanted to.

Kate was unsure whether Freda would rise to the occasion and there was no pressure to take part. So she launched into sharing some of her own memories.

'I travelled between my estranged parents and their various partners. Mum lived in rural Berkshire and my Dad in the East End of London.

Dads was best taking us to the museums and art galleries. I didn't fit into the horsey scene in Berkshire. I had no desire to ride and mucking out would have been my worst nightmare. I retreated into a world of books.
That's why I became a librarian books were my best friends.'

Freda's own childhood had been filled with love, despite living from hand to mouth. Without thinking she suddenly said 'One day my dad took my brother Bill and I to Petticoat Lane and we went to Kossoff's bakery and we bought jam doughnuts and the jam oozed out when I bit into it and trickled down onto my leg.'

Ted looked up at the mention of doughnuts, my grandfather bought me a doughnut for breakfast once, I never forgot his kindness'

The conversations then continued along the subject of food until Barry called a halt and asked for suggestions for next week's themes.

A few ideas were made including, 'games we used to play' from Audrey, 'old films' by John, school dinners from Ted but it was decided that everyone would bring a photo from their past and use that as a visual prompt.

Freda felt so much better that when she came to go her mood had lifted and she was already turning over in her mind

'what photograph to bring.

ENDS

1495words

# All that water must be unimaginably heavy

The lake is cold, fathomless, all-knowing. Its surface gleams like the barrel of a rifle, or a soldier's polished boot. Under the water, the pale bodies of roach slide like memories in thedimness.

I cannot escape the lake, not even indoors. You can see it from both the rooms in the house. I just have to glance up through the cracked windows to see it filling my vision with its vastness. I feel its permanence as a constant pressure on my chest.

I.find myself by the window a lot. I forget what I am supposed to be doing and the next thing I know I'm standing here, staring out. Staring at the sky reversed in the lake. The scene is different every day. Sometimes the water is black as slate, clouds piled above like a clenched fist, while on other days the lake and the sky are so blue and clean it's as if clouds never existed. On days like that you want to breathe it in, all that cleanness. Breathe in and never breathe out.

Beyond the lake the hills look purple. Pale mauve where the sun falls, the colour of ink in the shadows. There are abrasive patches of green - brambles maybe, or fems. Sometimes, in winter, you can see snow at the peaks. That's when the colours really fire up, at a certain time in the evening in winter. I've seen orange, violet, gold. I've seen red.

The scenery is what people come for. The tourists on boats with their brightly-coloured waterproofs. The walkers, with maps in plastic pouches and those ridiculous poles in their hands. They look like they've grown extra limbs, skinny and jointed, like insect legs. They pass close by occasionally. If I'm outside, some of them will look up and say hello. I don't respond. Why do they greet someone they haven't met? They don't know anything about me. What kind of person I am.

I walk out myself occasionally. They said it would be good for me and it's true, there is something about the swish of your feet in the grass, and the green, wet scent in the air, that stops you thinking too much. There's a lot of wildlife, if you've the eyes to spot it. I've seen osprey circling above the lake, wing-feathers spread like fingers. Butterflies flickering above the gorse. Down alongside the paths there are holes dug by rabbits and badgers. I peer inside, bending close to the earth and its tang of fur and droppings. Once I came across an adder. The black zig-zag down its body could have been painted with a brush. I managed to get quite close before it sensed me and slid, unhurried, into the undergrowth.

There's a fisherman who comes to sit by the lake. I never see him arrive or leave. I just look out some mornings and he is there. Stock-still with his back to me. Part of the landscape. He's camouflaged in dull green, from his hat down to his boots. I can't imagine this disguise makes any difference with the fish. He has a stand that he uses to rest his rod, which points out over the water, sniper-like.

Outside the house there's what you might call a garden. Gardening's another thing they said I should try. So, one day, I braved the town and bought some plants from the hardware store, which has a few garden things out back. They were as tall as the distance between my thumb and forefinger, with flopping leaves, soft as chamois. I dug them into the soil and watered them using a rusty can I found. A few days later I went to see how they were growing. I found nothing. Nothing left of the little plants except a few shreds of green, smothered beneath a network of sticky, silvery trails. There were a few slugs and snails still about, lurking near the wall. I crushed the snails between my fingers. It was harder to know what to do with the slugs. I tried a few different things. Sprinkling them with salt, snipping them in half with scissors. In the end I pierced them with a kitchen knife. Job done in a single thrust. I went out every evening for several days after, crushing snails and piercing slugs. I must have killed dozens. I thought the plants might have a chance, if I tried again, but I didn't get round to buying any more.

It's not just the fisherman and the walkers. Sometimes, in the summer, people come here to have picnics. Couples, families. Women and children. I watch them

spread out blankets and unpack their food. I once thought there was something romantic about a picnic: ham sandwiches, ripe plums and home-made Victoria sponge. It seems these days picnic food comes pre-packaged from the supermarket. Polythene bags and plastic containers blowing across the grass. Even so. It's a long time since I had a picnic with anybody. A strawberry held to the lips, then crushed against the tongue. Bare skin indented by blades of grass. Now I can only look from afar. The children run back and forth in front of the lake, unburdened by the future. The women pull up their skirts and lie back in the sun.

There is such a thing as too much sun. There are places where the sun is abominable. No breeze, just the oven's fiery breath on your skin. Dust in your throat and eyes, sweat running down your body and taking your strength with it. Roadside bombs. Checkpoints. That kind of place isn't really right for picnics.

Definitely not right. A family there would be best to stay indoors. Even if it seems calm and quiet on the road. Mum, Dad, three kids in dusty clothes, holding hands. Walking slowly up to the concrete blocks and the barbed wire. Just wanting to pass. The air throbbing in the heat. Anything could happen.

Like some men sprinting from nowhere. Faces contorted, eyes wild with purpose. One waving what could be a gun, or a grenade. The jittery lads on the checkpoint wouldn't wait, they'd just fire. Trying to stop the the men before they do something. Firing over and over.

Perhaps the fisherman doesn't come to catch fish at all. I wonder ifhe just wants to find some peace. Maybe he's seen things, done things, that people can never understand. Alone by the lake there's no one shouting at him. Shouting something like it's been long enough now, time you got up off your arse, tidy the kitchen or something, at least make yourself useful. Looking out the window won't pay the bills. He can just sit, still as the reeds and the rod pointing out on its stand, staring down through the layers of water. Down through the increasing blackness.

What does he see? The lake can show you all kinds of things. Images rise through the murk. It could be something as simple as a clip in a girl's hair. A young girl, no older than eight, who'd been holding hands with her brother at the checkpoint. After the shouting and the panic and the gunfire there are bodies everywhere. Dust swirling. And you find the girl in a pool of blood. Lying exactly where you were firing, so there's no doubt about it. You shot her. You try to save her, you pick her up and run to the truck, but she's bleeding all over you, and you know it's too late. Her lifeless limbs. That clip, forever in her hair.

The storms can really be spectacular here. When the sky is the colour of nails and there is a barrage of rain across the lake. The hills disappear behind it. Cracks appear, momentarily, in the atmosphere. Thunder pounds like a hammer. All that water must be unimaginably heavy. After the downpour there is a kind of release in the air, but the lake is swollen. It holds everything. It does not forget.

**YOUNG WRITER WINNER Emily Breeds**

overthinker
memory’s soft whisper
crawling into my brain,

the destruction of
productivity.

digging through time
like white wax worms

i once buried in rough
soil under a gnarled

oak as its paper leaves
fell, unfurling.

Everything must tie
together.

i stitch lost moments
until they have knotted,

tangled axons and
carved sulci.

dear future me,
you must preserve

this in formaldehyde,
frame it in grey matter.

unstitching time hurts.
do not scour the past.

here, see the way
fog hangs over the valley

and the way light dapples
on crisp morning frost.

focus on that.

Commended Poem 1: Janet Lees

**Dunwich, 1973**

Flat stones clack and slide under our feet.
We bend, collect, send

our skimmers leaping out to sea.
He turns to me with storytelling eyes:

*There's a whole town down there, you know.*
A whole town.

See-through
children turning slow
cartwheels
on fairground mirror streets,
skipping ropes of pearl;
mothers in jellyfish skirts,
young girls' laughter bubbling up,
kelp and starfish tangled
in their shimmering clouds of hair.
Streaming chimneys,
sea horses at windows,
shops with eels for customers -
our pebbles
giant pennies
dropping
down
to their
counters.

Filled with cold water I shiver, make a fist
to curl inside his big-as-a-horse's-heart hand.

In the cafe we share crisps and Vimto;
crunch and fizz drowning out

the bone-cold church bells
calling from under the sea.

**Letter Home, 1920**

What I miss most

is the scent of peat-smoke on my bible
before falling into bed,

silvered with fish,
stinking. Lucky we've
a proper mattress, the three of us

head to tail
beneath newspapers pasted on the walls
to stem the stench

Dawn to nightfall, Sundays off -
me and Ceit and Mairi at the farlin,
fingers bound with flour sack rags,

the cutag's slice, twist,
turn and the guts are in the basket,
the herring in the tubs -

madgies, fulls and matties layered in barrels packed
with salt
that makes our scratches howl.

Twenty crans a day we clear -
but time wheechs by,
songs rolling over the lines of girls
like the Minch on Claigan bay.
The bosses don't understand our tongue.
On the Sabbath

Reverend McLeod leads us all in prayer,
Ar n-Athair a tha air nèamh.
Every night I pray for your and boban,

for the sheep’s good health,
peat for the hearth,
corn and turnips in the ground.

Squeezed between Cait and Mairi,
my dreams are silver – east coast
sea and sky; the shillings at the end of the season
that will buy us rubber boots
and two fine pots for the croft; the glitter
staring up from all those creels.

**Commended Short Story Robin James Ganderton**

# *You're Here Because The Daffodils Have Failed*

In the book you are reading, it says that Ramses II was buried with their bulbs on his eyelids. It says the Greeks were obsessed, from the scribblings of Sophocles to the tangled braids of the Furies, and after the crumbling of Rome they were reared and nurtured by the men of the Mediterranean littoral for a thousand years until Turkish flower traders began making the long trek across Europe, their saddlebags packed and bulging.

*

The day before, you drove down to her house to collect her favourite straight-backed armchair with leonine feet and mahogany curlicues and the framed Ruby Wedding cross-stitch. You picked up kitchy ornaments and taffeta cushions and together they combined to make her room look exactly nothing like home.

Her name was already on the door, in large blac Comic Sans, halfway above the laminated picture of the cartoon letterbox.

As you left, you ran your tongue delicately over the mantras. You have several different mantras, and they all involve the word 'lucky'.

On your first visit, you bring roses. On the way down, you stopped off at Bethan's Flower Box, and bought three of every colour except yellow.

*

In the book you are reading, it says that European growing began in Holland. It says that as British influence expanded, the daffodil became a global flower, hitching a ride on the coattails of empire.

In the book you are reading, it says that like cats, daffodils are only partly domesticated.

*

On your next visit, or your next, or the visit after that, you help her crooked, light-as-an-insect frame into the dining room and hover on the outline as a nurse walks round pouring blackcurrant squash from a thick glass jug into coloured plastic beakers.

You're alone. Intentions, once carried so carefully, have dented the floor with a thud. In a strange way, it is bringing you closer. It is something you pull tight to yourself each time you walk in through those doors.

This time, you rub together a conversation with a couple; puce-cheeked and gaze-flicking. His mother's condition forced them to return from Mallorca.

"It was awful," says the wife suddenly, in short, shredded bursts. "She sobbed the whole way here. Begged us not to do it. Called us every vening, telling us there'd been a mistake. That she didn't belong here. That she wanted to come home."

Behind you, a nurse begins spooning out Sunday from its stainless-s eel container.

*

In 1807 ,. as Napoleon invaded Russia and Britain abolished the Slave Trade and the Oystermouth Line in Swansea became the world's first passenger-carrying railway, William Wordsworth published *Poems in Two Volumes.*

Over the next two centuries, 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' became the best-known poem in the English language. On its two-hundredth anniversary it was r·ecited aloud, simultaneously, by one hundred and fifty thousand pupils across Britain. But in Trinidad and Tobago, where V.S. Naipaul was born and Derek Walcott raised a family, there is a campaign to remove it from the curriculum. Jamaica Kincaid recalled howschoolchildren across the Caribbean were forced to memorise it despite having never,. not once, seen a daffodil. Across the Commonwealth, it is becoming the yellow-gold ghost of Empire.

You put *Lucy* back on the shelf, between Kerouac and Barbara Kingsolver. You are not here for your obsession.

Your mother can no longer write, something that rakes between your ribs every time you come across an old letter in her spotless copperplate, or think of the rows of diaries still lined up on the shelf in her spare room, but last week, on the nurse's suggestion, you bought her a colouring book.

She loves it almost as much as the doll they have given her, the one she takes everywhere, tucked under her cardigan as she inches forward, one hand outstretched for the green guiderails that course along every wall of the home.

You pay for *Wild Flowers To Colour* and leave. Last night you read on the internet that despite her fierce and he·art felt anti-colonialism, Jamaica Kincaid filled her garden with tens of thousands of daffodils.

"After all," she said, "it's not *their* fault."

*

You are driving towards work and turn left, because left leads you past the dappled traffic cones and tranquil shopping trolleys of the old canal to the carehome. You park up and wall< through the automatic doors which don't open until you pull on them, and once you've put your name in the visitors' book and tried not to count how many names have been scribbled since you last did this, you turn left, because right takes you to the main part of the home, and you are going to Dementia &Alzheimer's.

You come early, before work, because early's the only time you can be sure she'll be awake. You use your fob to let yourself through the security door, and the familiar blend of lavender, Dettol and urine tickles the back of your throat. You smile at Louise or Kyra or Stacey, just coming off their night shift, and you walk down the corridor, past the mostly open doors, trying not to look in.

You've almost made it to the end when a voice makes you start.

"They're outside, you know."

You smile at her mint green jumper and lilac beret and say, "Good morning, Alice."

"They're outside," she says again, more urgently, "and they're looking for you. The police," she explains. She lurches forward, grabbing your arm. "You can hide in here, if you like," she whispers. "I know you never meant to do it."

"Thank you, Alice," you say, carefully disengaging yourself. "Thank you."

You move on, towards the lounge. She's in one of the old armchairs, staring at a TV that hasnot yet been switched on.

"Morning, Mum," you say, and she turns her head to look at you without the faintest glimmer of recognition, and you sink into the chair next to her, your heart sinking with you, because you know it will be a bad visit.

This is the other reason you come before work, though you never admit this, even to yourself: because it gives you an excuse, after twenty minutes of answering your own questions, to leave.

The minute hand hits thirty and you kiss the top of her head and you go, and on the way to your car you kick the heads from the clump of daffodils on the verge, because they are bright and because they are brilliant and because they are joyous and because they have failed.

Then you gun the engine and drive to work and when you walk in through the doors you turn left, because left is the way to the bathrooms, and you're too proud to ever let your colleagues see you cry.

*

In the book you are reading, it says that David Lloyd George was responsible for its elevation to national symbol. Before this, the emblem of Wales was not a flower at all, something reflected in the Welsh name of the daffodil.

*Cennin Pedr*.

St. Peter's leek.

Fifteen shillings were paid, on St. David's Day, 1536, for a leek to be presented to Mary Tudor at the court of King Henry VIII.

The daffodil was still in the Turkish saddlebags.

Lloyd George died a few months before the end of WWII, his reputation dragged down by scandal. Today, he is barely mentioned.

*Cennin Pedr*.

St. Peter's leek.

The blossom on the gates of God.

*

You get in the car and you drive. You drive north, past Pontypool, past Little Mill and Penperlleni, past Llanover and Abergavenny and on, up into the Black Mountains of Powys.

*Y Mynyddoed* Duon.

Daffodils grow all over Wales, but here, at fourteen hundred feet, in the rolling hillrange that spans the border, they are special.

In its pure form, galantamine is a bitter white powder. It has an oral bioavailability of between eighty and one-hundred percent. It has a half-life of around seven hours. And it is hypothesised by scientists to relieve the symptoms of Alzheimer's.

Found in the Caucasian snowdrop, the common daffodil, and *lycoris radiata-the* red spiderlily-it began to be studied medically in Soviet Russia, after a Bulgarian pharmacologist observed Central European villagers rubbing their foreheads with the bulbs and leaves. As the Cold War faded, Western studies were commissioned. It was after one such study that Alzeim

planted the sight you see before you: one hundred and twenty acres ofmeticulously
selected, bright gold daffodils.

Wary of cliche, they do not flutter or dance.

Once, these petals were hope. When she first started the Reminyl XL, moving quickly

from the 8mg to the 16mg to the bright orange 24mg prolonged release capsules, they were the buttery gut-tug of optimism.

You stand, on the tip of the Black Mountains, staring up at the sky.

It isn't the clouds that are lonely.

Commended Young Writer: Caitlin Corcoran

# The Memory Thief

Three generations sat together,
Around a table.

Its dress suggesting the past's tight grasp

on the mind of the woman residing in the house,
Within which the table stood.

The memory thief joined us for dinner

His presence perceived

Although not visible to the eye.

And his victim sat with us,

The head of the table

Her lost mind turning.

We sat with her and talked.

Her questions ever flowing,

Yet left unfulfilled,

Due to the hijacker abducting our answers.

So again,
She asks,

What kind of wine

Fills the glass.

And then she mentions,

Once  again,

The doodlebugs  overhead.

So softly we tell her once more,

That time has passed,

And the war long gone.

We watch the confusion burrow her brow,

Paining my grieving heart,  again.

I was too young to recall,

The time which she remembered.

We barely know each other at all.

Yet still I mourn,

For the woman

Whose true mind I never met.

So with empathy running high,

I take her hand into my palms,

And smile into her aching soul.

She glances up

Into my eyes,

And for a moment,

I see a spark of recognition

Flutter across her features.

And for a moment she understands,

The world around her has changed

And she is living in a time gone by.

And then it is gone.

As soon as it came.

Displacing her mind

Leaving destruction in its wake.

The bandit at work again.

And so again,

She asks,

What kind of wine

Fills the glass.

And then she mentions,

Once again,

The doodlebugs overhead.

Commended Primary Carer Voice: Donna McLuskie

**For All Time**

She turns on the tap a sensible amount, then opens it further. She's in a rush, which shouldn't be happening at 82 years old. He wants a bath and demands only her help.

Yet she needs to, must, go out. Her hearing isn't good but the tick of their clock seems louder.

An hour later she finally manages to set off, leaving him in Judy's professional care. She hastens down Cally Road, not lingering to admire the periwinkle hydrangeas in full bloom at No. 241. She's flustered, but the distorted sounds of children's play, swirled by autumn gusts, and a rumble of double-decker buses soothe her. Despite a month of worrying broadcasts about violence and climate change, the outside world is reassuringly familiar.

She passes the prison and is cheered to think that her situation is better. She, at least, has the freedom of her monthly walk.

The shops seem the same but different. Wasn't that a Chinese, not Vietnamese, restaurant last month? She doesn't recall this many pound shops either. Can it really require three so close together to stock everything that costs exactly £1? Or maybe they all sell the same things, but she won't waste her precious time out checking.

Never mind the traffic, her biggest concern is whether someone might not notice and walk straight into her. She isn't as tall as most people these days and everyone seems so distracted, looking down, transfixed by a mobile phone screen and tapping away messages while they zigzag along. With faces practically hidden behind hair draped over, they could be anyone, everyone, she hardly recognises any people on

the street these days. Some have died, some migrated south or been taken into care homes or to live with relatives. Her friends, their friends one way or another all seem to have disappeared.

This was her street that she skipped down, over there around the corner most days they would chalk up hopscotch. She could name every shop in order from memory. They used to test each other on the swings for a game that she would always win.

Finally she arrives at her favourite café near the bottom of Cally Road, almost as far as Kings Cross. She struggles to enter until Maximilian glides over to be doorman. The steamy glass gets heavier and stiffer on its hinges every time she visits.

‘Szechuan Aubergine or Scheherazade Casserole?’ he offers.

‘The casserole please,’ she beams and aims for a seat in the corner, where she can watch people, soak up the warmth of gossip and effortless luxury of prepared food.

‘When is your birthday?’ Maximilian asks as he pulls the chair back for her.

‘That’ll be next year now,’ she says, sitting down.

‘If you were born in East Asia, you would be a year or two older,’ he teases and lifts one eyebrow as he twists his charming smile.

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely. They call it age reckoning,’ he says, then whispers that it has to do with the sun, as if telling her a secret. She loves him for his timeless waiterliness, if that’s a word. His service makes her tingle, which is worth the long walk. She watches as Maximilian disappears into the kitchen.

The café is bustling now. For a fleeting moment she blames her husband for making her late getting away from their house. He will find a million annoying little

ways to keep Judy busy all day, though she never complains, but then she wouldn't as it's proper paid work.

If she herself had, likewise, been paid for looking after him all these years, she would be rich. But how would she spend that much money? If she thinks of wanting something, it might start her wanting many things and then he might want new things too until their lives would become overwrought. Better, at this point, to maintain simplicity.

Maximilian proudly sets her bubbling casserole portion before her.

'Be very careful. It's hot as Beckham's bum,' he blurts out, then reconsiders. 'Hot as a thief's banknotes.'

'It smells wonderful,' she coos. And it is delicious. She eats every bit, slowly, as she eavesdrops on three conversations at once. The mothers with their little ones and pushchairs that clog the aisle, two workmen hardly talking, eating together but both reading different newspapers, one a tabloid and the other, The Telegraph. A bit further on is a couple having a quiet and serious discussion that she would really like to hear better.

'Pudding?' Maximilian asks as he whisks her plate away.

She nods.

'It's ginger brandy cheesecake today,' he tells her and asks if that will be O.K., though he knows it will.

She nods again and rubs together her bony hands, with veins prominent, then realises that however youthful she imagines her face to be, hands always tell the truth.

'Are you Roman Catholic?' Maximilian asks as he sets her slice of cake down and, with her blessing, carefully pours a warm chocolate sauce over top.

‘No, I’m not,’ she answers.

‘Because if you were, you would be twenty-eight weeks older than you are. It’s called the quickening,’ he explains and whispers that this depends on age being calculated from the moment a foetus starts to move.

‘But what if it first moves when the mother is busy and doesn’t notice?’ she asks.

‘Ah!’ he says, winks and glides off to serve others.

She feels giddy as she stands to leave. Maximilian, as always, kisses the air by her cheek.

It’s afternoon as she retreats back up Cally Road, against the breeze and rise in a direction that cattle, driven to market, never saw. Defiant, she switches her mobile off and teeters down steps to feel the canal’s surreal tranquillity.

Road traffic rattles over the bridge above, then mumbles, then hums as she walks further along the towpath and away from noise. She watches coots bobbing on the water as they rest on bits of debris, clogs of greenery wedged between a tangle of ropes and an old half-sunken buoy, and a pair of mallard ducks perched on a drifting plank of wood. She smells the diesel, sees gurgling from a houseboat’s idling engine. Time slows, her breathing does too until low sun casts an orange glow across the rippled canal. She must head back.

But further along Cally Road she detours again to stand under an enormous clock tower at the site where cows were butchered and processed into prime cuts, glue and pet food. She tries to imagine the bloody-aproned workers squinting upwards to read the time as they passed the clock or, perhaps, they only saw it from outside at the beginning and end of their long shifts? And where exactly were all of those cows slaughtered? She wonders if some haunt this place at night the way her mother said,

yet she doesn't really want to know and now she never will, with her life set out and her remaining time predetermined by her husband's full schedule of needs.

All these years, since she was nineteen, at his service, more servant than wife because his doings were always so urgent and more important than any other way he or she could think to spend her time. Yet now, with him as he is, so forgetful and dreamy, hardly even aware of what he has achieved during his lifetime, she wonders why she didn't try to do more than just support him. She might have been able to do something great but no one will know now the time has passed.

What if he died, suddenly, today or tomorrow? She would have whole days of free time. How would she spend them? She could travel but it might cost more than expected and she could run out of money before the trip's end. She could join a club. She would be the oldest and there's always one, isn't there? One in every group whose voice or manner rankles and she's not as patient as she once was. Or she could shop and finally buy all of those things he refused her over the years. But now that she tries to imagine what they were, a lifetime of little regrets, they meld into one ball of unhappiness she would rather forget.

Hurrying back up Cally Road, she dreads the day he dies because now she knows that it will leave her both alone and lonely.

At dusk she returns, exhausted, exhilarated, back late.

"Where have you been? You…" he barks in his tired, croaky voice when he sees her. Sometimes he can remember but tonight he's forgotten her name. She sees in his furrowed brow the frustration of small, isolated remnants of memory that can no longer be interwoven. But at least tonight he does recognise her and knows that she's been out. "Out for so long," he says, indignant, "that I thought you left the country!"

He’s prickly as a thistle but she kisses him, glad to be home.

And he smiles.