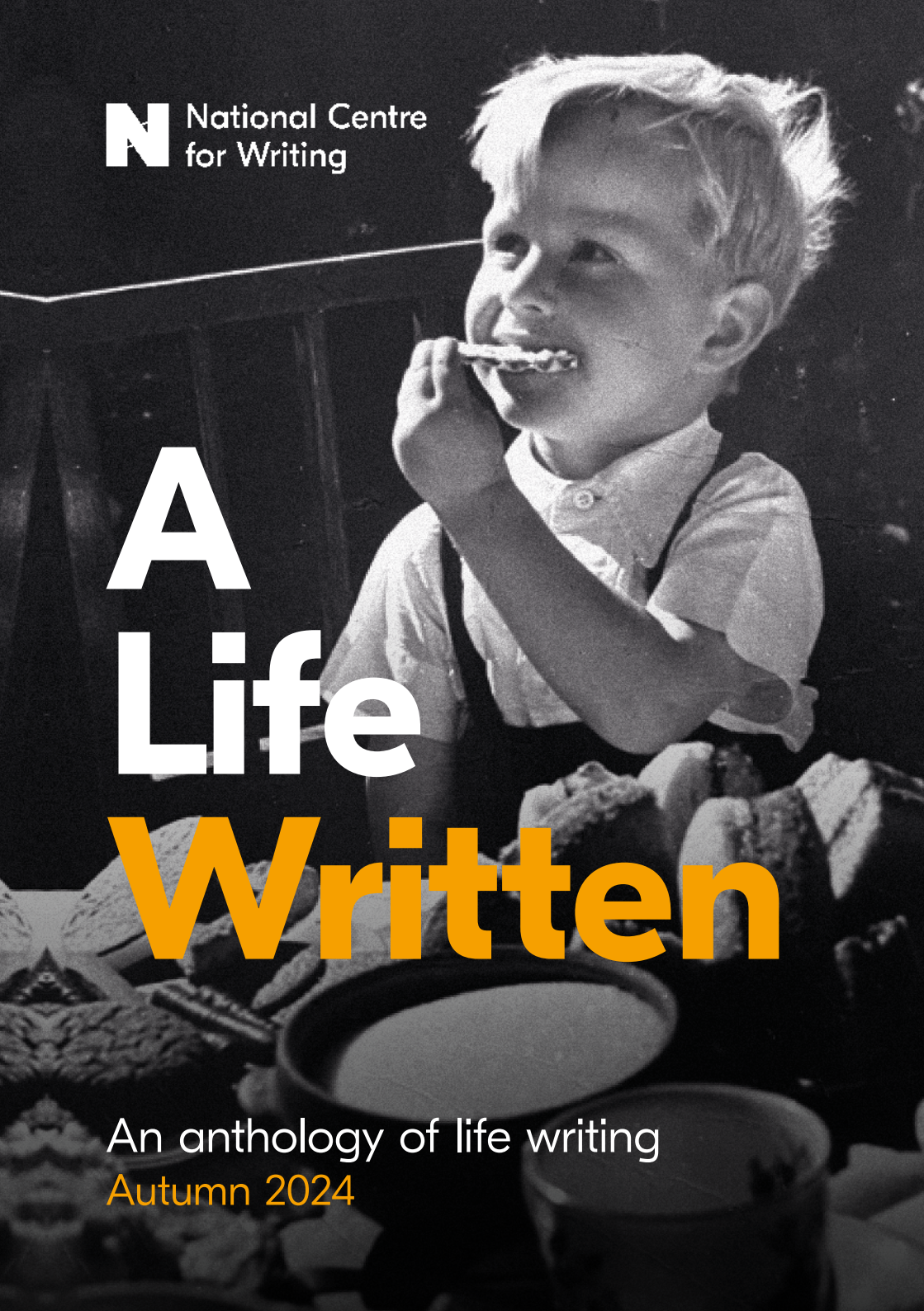
National Centre for Writing



A Life Written

An anthology of life writing

Autumn 2024

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National Centre for Writing

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Contents

This anthology forms the fifth iteration of A Life Written, a life writing programme inviting writers aged 70 and above to explore the genre through a series of creative writing and editing workshops.

A Life Written acknowledges the rich body of material that life writers of this generation can draw from, and in turn elevates and celebrates their voices, experiences and creativity. Each group is encouraged to continue meeting to write together after the course completes and there are still active groups in motion since its first iteration in 2021.

A Life Written is a collaboration between Anglia Ruskin University and National Centre for Writing, made possible through the generous funding provided by the University. Since A Life Written Two, we have involved up to five Anglia Ruskin University students per programme to respond to anthology pieces. A cross-generational conversation emerges, adding new depth. The National Centre for Writing would like to thank Professor Tory Young for her continued ingenuity around and endorsement of A Life Written; Dominique De-Light who led this year's group with such energy and made it an authentically co-created experience for all; Kate Swindlehurst for her editorial expertise and insight; the Anglia Ruskin students for their considered and moving responses; and by no means last, the life writers for their participation and for sharing their powerful stories with the world.

Hannah Garrard
Senior Programme Manager, Learning and Participation

Life writing is no easy task. We may believe we want to immortalise anecdotes, capture life-changing experiences, and share the wisdom we've gained, yet when we put pen to paper, the words often seem to slip away from us.

New memories emerge, feelings deeply buried, rise up. What we write is not always what we expect. Sometimes it is a welcome surprise, sometimes, less so. To run a life writing group one must support, inspire and gently encourage. It has been an honour and a pleasure to work with this group of writers, sharing memories of a time when the lamplighter did his rounds, spaghetti was an exotic luxury, and music was heard via 45-inch records. Writing is a time machine, giving us our past three times over. Once in the remembering, twice in the writing, and a third time in the rereading and sharing with others. Embedding our memories, bringing experiences to life once more, and enabling us to share our lives with others. When writing we become absorbed in the flow, a creative contemplation, that connects our past with our present. With just pen and paper we can entertain, provoke and inspire. These writers have done all this whilst being happy to be part of my research, studying the impact of creative writing on their wellbeing, for a PhD funded by an ARU Vice Chancellor scholarship and National Centre for Writing. I am enormously grateful for their tolerance, feedback, and joyful spirit, that had me looking forward to every Tuesday morning session. I am sure you will enjoy their writing as much as I did.

Dominique De-Light
Workshop Lead

This selection is impressive in its range of subject matter and approach. Several of the writers focus on childhood, exploring memories of events or activities and their resonance in later life, while others have taken the opportunity to reflect on experiences from adulthood.

Some take a key feature – an item of furniture, a house – as a starting point, moving outwards to explore the bigger picture but showing a keen feeling for structure in the skilful return to the original figure at the end. For many a sense of place is key, whether the characteristics of the family home or the impact of a journey further afield. For some, the process involves portraying a family member, with sympathy or admiration, or reflecting on relationships within the family, often tempering the naivety of their childhood selves with the point of view of their grown-up perspective. Titles are often carefully crafted.

Food is a common thread with lots of delicious detail of the odd or exotic, often with an international dimension, some using cooking as a way into tackling more challenging aspects of their family history or personal experience. City or rural landscapes are also vividly depicted and some have elected to experiment with voice, whilst some have tackled a more general reflection on life. The writers all display an admirable attention to detail, avoiding cliché and searching always for precision, with some unflinchingly tackling more difficult emotional territory. The collection includes both poetry and prose, some writers electing to submit an example of each. In all respects this is a varied, ambitious and polished anthology. Whether the writers are already practised or new to the experience, all display a commitment to the process. Taken together there is much to delight in and celebrate here.

Kate Swindlehurst
Editor

‘Owzaaaaatt!!!

Merlin Carr

Has been the strangulated shriek that has shattered the peace and quiet of summer afternoons, ever since the game of cricket captured the imagination of men, so many decades ago. The shout of one of the combatants has been part of the soundtrack of life, and it has been woven into the fabric of what it means to be English.

The shout is a quicker way of asking, ‘How is that, sir?’ and is usually accompanied by frantic arm-waving. It is asked by the aggressor in the game, who has just flung a hard leather ball at an opponent wielding a willow bat, just twenty-two yards away, and thinks that he has succeeded in removing him from the game. The arbitrator to whom the shriek and gesticulations are directed stands at one end of the battle space, usually covered in the sweaters, caps and sunglasses of the combatants, like a walking clothes stand. He has to draw on all his knowledge of the rules of the game to decide on whether the appeal is legitimate, irrespective of how frightened he is of the bowler, and the fact that he had momentarily been distracted by the sight of refreshments being brought out onto the field of play. Caught up in the tension of the moment is the crowd of onlookers, who are seated around the perimeter of the battle scene. And amongst that crowd you can find me, sitting with my dad, waiting with intense anticipation for the verdict to be given.

As a young boy of Yorkshire, most of my life revolved around the game of cricket. I couldn’t help but be enthused. After all, my first meaningful present was a cricket bat, a ball and some stumps, and there was a steady supply of adults and children who wanted to be part of the action. As well as attending games played by men who were lucky enough to be paid to take part, I played the game as often as I could, and read about the professional games in the newspapers and in the hefty tome called *Wisden Almanac* that my dad purchased at the end of every season. Whilst watching games I was also very keen on recording the scoring, so that I had a record to look back on in the dark and dreary days when the game couldn’t be played outdoors.

This was where the crafty people with the urge to prise money out of the fingers of gullible boys saw an opening. For the times when I couldn’t play the game outside, I could recreate the thrills and uncertainty in the comfort of my own home, with the table top game of ‘HOWZAT!’ It was a simple game, cheap to buy, and fitted easily into one’s pocket. It consisted of two weighty hexagonal blocks of steel, roughly three centimetres long and half that in width. One block was inscribed with the number of runs that you could score: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 — and the word ‘Howzat’. You would roll this hexagon, accumulating runs, until you rolled Howzat. You then turned to the other hexagon, which was marked with the ways that you might be dismissed, or were not out, from the action: bowled; caught; leg before wicket; stumped; and, no ball and not out. I will spare you more details of the rules of cricket: they make knitting pattern instructions seem fairly straightforward. Finally, if you purchased a fancy set, you could even get a piece of soft green fabric, on which to roll the hexagons. No such luck for me: all that I had was a table top.

And this is how ‘Drumm...Scribble....Drumm....Scribble....Drumm’ became the soundtrack of the summer of 1962, the year I turned eleven years of age. Epic games were recorded in my scorebook, between eleven random cricketers from Yorkshire and eleven

desperados from Down Under, with their baggy green caps, who would resort to all sorts of underhand tactics — grouped under the heading 'sledging' — to win a game.

To me, my hobby was just another piece of me, a piece that could be easily fitted into The Family Carr jigsaw of life. Over the years, every new event and change of circumstance was fashioned into a piece that slotted easily into, and enhanced, the overall picture. There was Dad, the jovial Yorkshireman, sportsman and gardener; happily married to Mum, the kind, loving and unflappable home-maker and local committee member. For a couple of years there had just been me, the focus of all their attention, and life to me seemed very straightforward and amenable. However, the picture had changed dramatically on Christmas Day 1953, when the unexpected present of twins arrived down the chimney. My new brother and sister. I suppose there were times when I struggled to cope with sharing the limelight, but on the whole we co-existed cheerfully, and usually they were willing participants in my games and adventures.

I grew up into the early days of the Swinging Sixties. My eyes, ears and imagination were focused not on images of flares and dancing girls in mini skirts, but on the incredible game of Howzat! The idea that a simple, non-electronic game could threaten the equilibrium of the Carr household did not even cross the mind of a ten-year-old boy. After all, my parents had let me buy it out of my pocket money, my sister was busy with dolls and prams, and my brother bumped about on his trike, so where was the harm in letting me spend time with my 'Howzat!'? Although I didn't think it at the time, my parents must have felt relieved that I wasn't becoming entwined in the tendrils of the Swinging Sixties. The scene-setters were busy defining and shaping the concept of Youth Culture, but their constructs did little to grab my attention. After all, the hexagons only made a slightly annoying incessant drumming noise on the kitchen table while my mum was trying to prepare our meals, and the revision for my upcoming 11-plus exam could always be put aside for a better day.

But I was soon to discover that one mis-placed hexagon-shaped jigsaw piece could lead to the whole picture becoming broken.

Merlin Carr, 73. A random number on the bingo card of life.

10. The number of teammates when playing soccer and cricket.

The challenge of teaching classes of 33.

45. The RPM of discs I played, as Tall Boy Short, DJ.

51. Years happily married.

66. The Route I have yet to take on my travels.

Postcards from Germany

Cathleen Catt

Growing up in the post-war years on a Council estate, it is perhaps surprising that a major influence in my life has been the language, literature and history of Germany. I cannot lay claim to any family connection which could explain my interest and enduring fascination with the country, to which I have returned many times over the years.

Hessen, West Germany, 1969

'What have I done?' I ask my 17-year-old self. Here I am, transported from the London suburbs to a deeply conservative farming community bordering the Iron Curtain. Tomorrow I will be joining the family's children, Sonnhild and Georg, at their local gymnasium (grammar school) which I will be attending for the next term, taking advantage of a British Council scholarship to study German.

The contrast could not be more pronounced. The farmhouse is a half-timbered building, with barns and pigsty attached. All the living areas are on the upper storey, reached by a wooden outside staircase. The smell of new mown hay mixes with an undercurrent of animal manure and I am not sure I will survive the next twelve weeks.

Ludwigshafen, West Germany, 1977

Picture a shabby, five storey, 19th century tenement in the industrial city of Ludwigshafen am Rhein. The area has yet not succumbed to any form of gentrification and the buildings are stark reminders of the thousands of workers who lived here. While much of the rest of the city suffered extensive damage during the war, this enclave was relatively unscathed. The city is still dominated by the giant chemical works of BASF. Indeed, the very air is a constant reminder, every open space permeated with an artificial chemical tang. You have to travel across the wide, meandering Rhine to Mannheim, its sister city, to escape.

It is October and a group of English and German students are living in the attic flat of this building. There is Cath, an English student gathering sources and information for a history thesis; her partner, Jim, who has a position in the Biology department of Kaiserslautern University some 50km away; Anneliese, a tall, earnest social work student, studying right here in Ludwigshafen; Gunther, a gregarious engineer who is studying in Darmstadt to become a technical teacher and Gerd who appears mysteriously from time to time. No one is ever sure who he is or what he does.

They had been looking forward to this day for weeks.

At four o'clock Gholam arrived. He brought with him an enormous cooking pot which had accompanied him during his epic journey as a refugee from a remote tribal area of Afghanistan to Munich, then on to Mannheim, where he trained as a welder and car mechanic — a sort of reverse hippie trail.

Gholam was in high good humour, his dark eyes sparkling, as he directed them in chopping the vegetables — onions, garlic, multi-hued peppers, carrots, plump raisins, flame-red chillies — and juicing the lemons, which Anneliese and Cath had got up early to buy from the market. Gunther, who had been the first to befriend Gholam, joined in washing the rice and helping to prepare the lamb at the huge communal table.

Twenty minutes later, with the precision of a ringmaster, Gholam held up his hand: 'Now we cook!'. Rice on first, allowed to boil, then

covered and set aside. Gholam added the onions, garlic, lemon juice, chillies with a little water into the battered metal pot. The air became infused with a tantalising smell. When the liquid had evaporated, the other ingredients were added and allowed to soften in the sizzling lamb fat.

Then, with a flourish, Gholam produced a tin. 'The secret spice mix' he proclaimed. At his insistence, they all took a pinch. The dried spices were hard to identify. A hint of cardamom, cumin and coriander? Definitely cinnamon, maybe cloves? Ceremoniously, Gholam added the spice mix, stirred the pot and in an instant the kitchen was filled with the most intoxicating aroma, evoking distant home for Gholam, dreams of far-off Eastern lands to the others. All concentrated in a moment of pure sensual delight.

The meal lasted long into the night.

Schoeneberg, Berlin, 2023

The station for the Berlin suburb of Schoeneberg is the penultimate stop on Berlin's shortest underground line.

You emerge from the station with a fine choice before you. You can either turn left and wander through the greenery of the local park, pausing to admire the elegant statue of a golden hind gracing the fountain where newly married couples can be seen having their wedding photos taken. A little further into the park there is a popular beer garden where local workers and officials enjoy lunch or an after-work drink.

If you turn right from the station, you enter the main town square, presided over by the impressive Town Hall, from whose balcony President Kennedy addressed the Berlin crowds. On a Saturday the square is home to a bustling market where you can buy anything from old East German alarm clocks to artisan cheese and sausage.

In the evening, wander the maze of streets beyond the centre, savouring the aromas emanating from the many small independent restaurants and inviting bars — Italian, Turkish, Greek and a new crop of Indian restaurants. Enjoy the mix of architectural styles crammed into this corner of a modern, thriving city.

You cannot go far however before catching echoes of the troubled past — there are over 1000 'Stolpersteine' in this area alone — literally 'stumbling stones' which mark the last known voluntary residence of those who were persecuted by the Nazis. It only takes half an hour to walk to Tempelhof, the former airfield where the allied planes kept the population of West Berlin fed through the dark days of the Russian blockade 1948–49. The airfield has now been reborn as a wonderful green space, where the local residents can cycle, run, picnic and which in September hosts the 'Festival of the Giant Kites', a truly spectacular sight.

Cath Catt. Retired. Enthusiastic reader, cook and traveller. Aged three, she insisted on being called Mevagissey after returning from a family holiday in Cornwall.

A Family Meal in my Childhood Home

Julia Donat

Where did it come from, the round table in our breakfast room? None of us remember but I do recall that we were 'looking after it' for somebody, as with the mysterious violin in the attic. The owners of these objects never turned up to reclaim them. Maybe they didn't make it to Britain at all.

The large antique, mahogany-veneered table did not fit in with the furniture my parents chose which tended to be modernist and plain. It had a row of little round decorative carved wooden beads round its edge and a huge pedestal with claw feet underneath. It was always carefully covered up, the first layer an insulating cloth and then a wipeable decorative cover. On high days and holidays a proper table cloth would be used but the wooden top of the table was never revealed.

The house I grew up in had a very small 'scullery' which served as a kitchen and laundry and a walk-in larder where food was stored. All our meals were eaten in the adjoining room, 'the breakfast room', most of which was taken up by the table. A round table is gemütlich and can accommodate a surprisingly large number of people. This it often did. Above it was the pulley, and the ceiling was not high, so unlucky people had to eat underneath the wet washing if it was raining outside whilst the room filled with the steam from both food and wet washing.

At breakfast the milk was delivered by a horse and cart and I was allowed to give a carrot to the horse. Before I could read, I asked what it said on the bottle. 'Express Dairy, College Farm, Finchley' was the answer. What does it say on the bottle? I repeated every day and the answer was always the same.

My mother was regarded by her friends as a good cook as her dishes were European, Hungarian or generally Jewish in origin. Exotic in those days for the English guests and reminders of home for the others. Gefülte paprika, goulash, chicken soup with dumplings, schnitzel, meatloaf and red cabbage all served with sauerkraut or gherkins — this was the food served round the table. There was only one cook book in the house, Florence Greenberg's *Jewish Cookery*.

The truth was, however, that my mother did not love cooking. Duty and necessity rather than pleasure motivated the daily task of providing for her three children and husband when he was not away working, and I realise now, she had a complex relationship with food as her childhood had been one of deprivation and starvation.

My mother loved people and had many friends and feeding them was part of the generosity and warmth of her character. My parents' circle was a mixture of other refugees from various Europe and English contacts of my father's from the film industry or photography magazines. The Hampstead Garden Suburb had attracted a large number of exiles and also a slightly unconventional English artistic community. Friends of my brothers' and mine were also welcome. For our birthdays we were allowed to choose the menu. I inevitably chose roast chicken which was a real treat in those days. It would probably be served with red cabbage and baked potatoes. Roast potatoes were not in my mother's repertoire, and I learned how to cook them many years later from a woman who lived on King Street in Norwich and made clothes for a hippy shop in the Lanes called Dove's.

On Christmas Eve the tree was decorated in secret by my father and his two cousins and candles were carefully placed on it in special holders. When all the candles on the tree were lit after supper we were allowed into the sitting room and given some presents. I never had a stocking until I was at university and friends took pity on me and made one for me. My mother meanwhile would be slaving over a hot stove in the kitchen. The Christmas dinner was a mixture of traditional and European food. Roast turkey was served with red cabbage and baked potatoes. I don't remember what we had for pudding.

Puddings were an extra challenge for my mother. Where on earth she learned to make trifle I have no idea but it became a pièce de résistance on special occasions. More interesting was the yearly feast of Zwetschen Knödel. This feast was seasonal as it required a particular sort of small dark plum known as Zwetschen, which when squeezed opened up easily. Once the stone had been taken out it was replaced with a sugar lump and the plum would be wrapped in a dough made from mashed potato and flour. The dumplings were carefully put into boiling water and rose to the surface when cooked. They were then covered in breadcrumbs fried in butter and sprinkled with sugar. The resulting dumplings were delicious albeit rather heavy and filling. There was a competition as to who could eat the most and my brother Misha's friend Peter Newmark always won.

Years later Florence Greenberg was joined by a *World Cookery Book* so my mother's repertoire was expanded to include moussaka, spaghetti bolognese (on one occasion famously served with sprouts) and Baked Alaska which we thought was utterly magic as the ice cream covered with meringue did not melt in the oven.

Once we had children of our own they also sat round the table, and their grandmother cooked for them. They did once wonder what she

was feeding them when she produced pasta for pudding. Lokshen Pudding is a Jewish dish and consists of layers of flat pasta or angel hair noodles with apricot jam, cream cheese and dried fruit.

As I write, the round table is in an empty house waiting to be disposed of as my brother's ex-wife, who kept it after their divorce, has died and the house is being sold. Unfortunately, no one in the family can accommodate it, and I don't know what its end will be as it is even more unfashionable now than it was in my childhood.

Julia worked for many years in theatre as a directors' assistant, casting director and producer. In retirement she studied Life Writing at the University of East Anglia and has been intermittently writing a memoir of her family for several years. Julia is also the administrator of a chamber music series in Norwich.

A response to Julia Donat

If I Knew You Were Coming, I'd Have Baked a Cake

Jenna Cockman

Until last week, Grandma had not baked a cake for a while. She'd attempted what she calls 'buns', I would call them fairy cakes, but not my favourite chocolate cake. Some may say it is one of the simplest cakes to ever grace the earth, but my grandma's chocolate cake with thick vanilla buttercream in the middle has been and will always be my favourite cake.

Her last attempt at a proper big cake was my 18th birthday, over two years ago now. At that point in my life, it was a well-known fact I was obsessed with angel cakes. I would eat Mr. Kipling's pink rectangles or even Tesco's own brand of small slabs of deliciousness on a weekly basis, however my favourite was the yellow, white, and pink sponge kept on the bottom shelf of the cake stand at my local Co-op. My consumption of this cake was almost ritualistic. I would cut the chunk of sponge in half, and then half again, wrap the remaining cake back in its plastic and flick my piece of cake into a bowl. Then I would peel apart the pink top and pale bottom away from the yellow centre slice, and eat them separately, leaving the middle until last, as this had the most icing on. I am not sure that I would make it such a formal event now, but I do still enjoy them very much. It goes without saying

that when I was told Grandma would be making me my very own angel birthday cake, I was incredibly excited.

However, as soon as we had gotten inside the door, she made it truly clear my cake had turned into a disaster. To this day, we do not know how she made the sponge that texture, but moreover, instead of the traditional pink, yellow and plain sponge, she had managed to make two of the three layers look green. This was a result of my grandma's phobia of food-colouring, her hamartia you may argue. Even when I made cakes with her after school as a child, I was never allowed to use as much pink or blue food colouring in the icing as my eight-year-old-self wanted to. And she would never let me use green.

After this incident, she essentially retired from baking cakes. While she did make the occasional 'buns,' it was not the same. In recent weeks, I have made clear my desire for one of her chocolate cakes, but she had seemed dubious about her baking abilities of present. So, it made for the loveliest surprise when I walked into the kitchen and she began to sing, 'If I knew you were coming, I'd have baked a cake...', and I spotted the icing sugar covered sponge waiting for me on the dining room table.

Jenna is a second-year English Literature undergraduate student. She has previously been involved in scriptwriting courses and enjoys the introspective element of her writing. In the future, she looks forward to a career in publishing or cultural heritage work.

Home

Tricia Frances

When I first saw my house I was parked outside. I looked at it across a lush green through tall lime trees. I didn't need to go inside; I just knew that I would always live there. And here I still am 35 years later. Houses have history — mine is 100 years old. Sometimes we are unaware of our history with a place until sometime later. And sometimes those historical events collide.

When my daughter Cassie was young, probably around eight or nine years old (she is 30 this year), she visited Dragon Hall with her school. I had never been there. Whilst the children were being shown around the Great Hall, the woodworm in the beams was pointed out to them.

She came home telling me excitedly about her day, then went up to her bedroom and a few minutes later rushed downstairs to tell me she had found woodworm. We have lovely wooden floors in most rooms. I went to look and sure enough she was right — it was in the floorboards.

In the ensuing months, her bedroom and the hallway floors had to be treated and the boards replaced. During this process we discovered that the house needed a rewire!

Due to dust and toxic fumes, Cassie spent months travelling from room to room around the house with her belongings, sleeping on a fishing camp bed, whilst the renovations were carried out. It was a tough time for both of us and it was difficult to socialise in our home, but if not for her visit to Dragon Hall we may well have had the floor

collapse — or even worse the whole house may have become infected!

But that is not the end of the story……

Around two or three years ago, almost 20 years after Cassie's visit, I finally went to Dragon Hall, to the Writers' Social, where I have become a regular. I had not thought about woodworm again until this year, when I joined one of their projects and learnt about the history of the hall and the woodworm!

I had been trying to place exactly when my daughter would have been there, then last week the electrician came to replace a light fitting in my office. He removed a screwed up piece of newspaper which had been used to stuff the light fitting hole. When he unscrewed it we found that it was dated 2007. So Cassie was 12 or 13 when the rewire was done which would have made her around 10 or 11 when she visited Dragon Hall and learned about woodworm!

I love the way that piece of paper became evidence of something unique to our lives, a historical fact about our house and our connection to Dragon Hall.

Seeds of Life

Tricia Frances

If I did it all again would I do it all the same?
Would I pay attention, or travel in the fast lane?
Would I miss the birthdays or send them just a card?
Or would I take more notice when life was really hard?
I planted many seeds back then and as they began to grow,
I moved on to the next thing with kids and home in tow.
Now that I am older and look back on my life,
I wonder what it would be like if I'd been a better wife?
I wouldn't be alone as I am so often now,
But really, for the life of me, I cannot see just how.
I was often unaware of the seeds that came my way,
Too busy to nurture them before they blew away.
Sometimes shoots that grew from healthy, vibrant seeds,
Later turned into complex tangled weeds.
My life is very peaceful now, I never hear a shout.
But in my younger years that's what marriage was about.
I have had a full life of adventure and of fun.
With trips around the world and days spent in the sun.
I love the place I live now, the green space outside my door.
With friends and family close by, I couldn't ask for more.
I look back across the years and see the seeds I've sown.
I really am quite happy with the way my life has grown.

Tricia worked as a mixed media artist, costumier and teacher before recently retiring to return to her love of writing. She has published six books, including one of the first vegan cookbooks in early 1990's and her recent autobiography: *It's All About Me & William the Conqueror's Grandfather.*

A response to Tricia Frances

Hiraeth [here-eyeth]

n. (Welsh) a deep longing for a home you cannot return to

Megan Rouse

Upon reading the work of Tricia Frances, I was immediately inspired. I appreciated her background as an artist and teacher due to my own love of drawing and experience working in a nursery. Her poem 'Seeds of Life' spoke to me as I am familiar with the feeling of wondering what could have been. It brought to my mind the Emily Dickinson quote, 'That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.' I also resonated with her piece 'Home', and it's exploration of how your home can connect you with different places and peoples and times. My response describes the comfort and familiarity of home, and the impression of one left behind. The title, 'Hiraeth', comes from a book I read about 'words both strange and lovely'. Due to my Welsh ancestry from my great-grandmother, I felt this word was especially fitting.

So Many Seeds Unsown

A quintessential English village nestled amidst the rolling Downs, a patchwork of green and gold spooling all around. I've been there many times, to see the home where my family lived so very long ago. Set back from the road by a wide gravel driveway, it's different now from what they knew, though its bones are still the same. Smooth cream above warm orange brick, but with a new oak-framed porch to beckon us in. New sash windows hint at change inside. Walls torn down and rooms resized. The house has grown, and I wonder if that's why it's now on the market for one million, just shy. A punch to the gut knowing my grandparents sold it for seventy-two grand.

It's hard to say goodbye to the lost places of your past. To the home you spent so much of your life. Or to the home that never was. I have never known my family's house, just the tales of it like a storybook read to me over and over. The ache for it lingers and clings like honey. But this home, like time, has slipped on by like sand through an hourglass. I often wonder what life might have been if they chose to stay. My mum would not know her best friend. And she might not know me. Strange to think how such a thing could mean I might never be.

The Way My Life Has Grown

Through that window to the past, those glimpses of life melt away like frost on a pane. I let them go and think of now. Of my own home, and the one I used to know. Once, I lived like Coraline, in a flat carved out of an old Georgian house. Our home, crooked and cold, contained to one floor. Yet my room seemed vast, and the memory is warm like dim candlelight. Sometimes I wish to be there again, if only for the feeling. But recollection is a place too, and I go there often.

The way the world moves on is painful when you leave a place behind only to see how everything changes. All that remains is a familiar impression on my mind. I carry it with me, despite the ache, like a shadow fading in and out of view. I cannot define it, but I know the feeling well. It eases with time, and I've been lucky to revisit those places of my past. Finding work at my childhood nursery and my old primary school. I can put that feeling to rest, the nostalgia of it all.

Home is the Hearth

There's something about the sensation of home. Soothing like a balm. It's the warm glow of the lamps at dusk, the kettle whistling on the stove, the green space outside our door. A little hill to our left and a common at our back. It's taken time but we've made it our own. A new kitchen and bathroom, a bookcase and faux-wood floor in the living room. We've captured the seasons. My bedroom speaks of spring, my mum's of winter. There's autumn in the living room and summer in the kitchen. Our house isn't perfect but it's home. There's still that feeling. Susurrations of wind that roll through the trees like a restless sea. The speculation of what might have been. There are so many seeds that we didn't plant. And there are so many that we did.

Megan grew up in the Cambridgeshire fens, and from an early age has had a love for storytelling. Through her BA in Writing and English Literature, she has been able to explore the craft in its many forms. Writing has allowed her to bring her imagination to life and it is a passion she continues to pursue.

High Tea in the Garden, 1949

Ruth Liss

What are you looking at Philip, little brother, perched on the chair up close to the tea table? You look angelic in your home-made white shirt and short trousers with straps. Your fair hair is sprouting in all directions, despite attempts to tame it. Tea has not yet been poured, but we are clearly expecting a crowd. The table is loaded with biscuits and cakes. You are three years old.

You are already tucking in. To what? Ryvita? Maybe Mum has

forbidden you from starting on the cake! Who are you looking at, pausing mid-bite? Not Dad, the photographer.

Are you feeling as contented as you look, or is there a wariness about your eyes? Do you know you are the apple of our parents' eyes, or do you have a premonition that soon, an unthinking gesture from Mum, 'Get off Philip! You're hurting me!' will cause you to feel rejected and begin a life-long obsession with not being touched. You, who were so attractive and affable and collected friends, but shied away from physical contact. I'm sure she never meant to be unkind. It was a thing of the moment and yet it escalated in your mind and was never resolved. Mum died when you were 19. No time to come to an adult understanding.

I'm sorry I didn't know you carried this burden. Years later when Jane, clearly attracted to you — and you were very handsome — placed her hand on your knee, you snapped, 'Please don't do that. I don't like being touched.' I have never forgotten that revelation.

Running marathons, listening to The Archers on the way to and from work, crosswords, going to the pub, these activities became fixed routines, bordering on obsessions. And you drank too much. Was it suppressed unhappiness that could make you a difficult husband? Yet your wife and daughters adored you. When you died suddenly in Paris, aged 58, they were shattered.

There was standing room only at your funeral. So many, many people cared about you. We smiled when we saw your running shoes on top of your coffin and The Archers theme music played you out.

See Mum's sugar basin in the middle of the table, just in front of you? It is here on my kitchen shelf. Seventy-five years later, I can reach out and touch it.

The Way It Was

Ruth Liss

My paternal grandmother came to England from a small village in Russia (now in Ukraine) at the turn of the last century as a young married woman. She never lost her accent.

Granny Hinda brought with her many stories and memories of the food of her childhood, which she fed to my father and his brothers and then to us: chicken soup with lokshen (noodles), helzel (stuffed chicken neck), veranikas (potato and onion-filled dumplings), and peas and taiglach. Peas and taiglach were my father's favourite and the making and eating of it was an annual, and strictly summertime, family affair.

Granny would arrive early at our house, apron on and sleeves rolled up. She would start by making the dough. Mum would get out her three largest saucepans and Dad would start chopping copious amounts of onion which went into one of the saucepans with a large helping of golden chicken fat, the biproduct of weeks of home-made chicken soup. Soon the aroma of caramelising onions would seep through the house.

Now it was our turn to make the pasta from Granny's large ball of dough. We rolled and rolled it on the kitchen table until Granny pronounced it the right thinness. Then we slowly and carefully cut it into equal strips which were dusted with flour and hung over the backs of the kitchen chairs. We shelled the peas and for every one that pinged into the colander, my brother and I popped one in our mouths. When the onions had been inspected to ensure they were richly brown and crisp, the strips of dough were laid back on the table and cut into

small squares (the taiglach). Now the two other saucepans were filled with water and salted. Into one pot went the taiglach and into the other, the peas.

We sat round the table with the largest bowls we had, spoons at the ready. Mum doled out one ladleful of peas with a little of their water, one ladleful of soft, floating taiglach and then a hefty helping of onions in chicken fat. The hot fat sizzled and with a collective sigh we dived in with our spoons! Remember this was summer. It wasn't long before everyone was red in the face and having what my father always called a good 'schwitz'. It was cheap, simple peasant food I suppose. High in calories and loaded with cholesterol from the chicken fat. But we spared no thought for our arteries. We had made it together and it was delicious.

Ruth spent her working life in education. On retirement she started a book club, a walking group and a cinema club. She also loves travelling, gardening, cooking, eating and seeing her family and friends. She and Peter have three sons and four grandchildren, and she is now writing her memoir...

A response to Ruth Liss

I Can Still Taste the Day

Rebekah Sardeson-Coe

Upon reading Ruth Liss's story about her brother, I was moved by the sense of love and loss that ran through it. I was particularly struck by the unanswered questions left behind, of someone whose pain ran deeper than you could comprehend, and how memories can become bittersweet. My grandfather's time in National Service in the 1950s was hard, but it was something he never talked about, leaving me to always wonder what he went through; those questions are mixed in with my grief. I felt a connection to the writing due to the way Ruth explores the feeling of loss and the scale of her brother's funeral, and I felt drawn to write something about my own experience and the mirrors I could see in what I read.

I can still taste the day

You would not talk, of that time
though sometimes I'd catch
a pain, behind your eyes,
a quiet life your wife prefers,
did you seek the peace because of her?

I work backwards — from the moment of loss,
I can still taste the day
the day that had to come.
I'm still 23 — when you were better
or so it seemed to me — the ocean on my lips
There was standing room only
a sea of people come to give their respects — Honouring a man now
    gone
for the first time since I heard the words — I let myself cry.
You deserved all the sadness of that room — But also the joy,
the laughter of the memory — an aching in my chest.
The stubborn man you were.
The lovely man you were.

I still look for you — Do you know?
I can still taste the day — the metal on my tongue.
The curtains pull together — and still, I think
of the pain, you hid,
as I hide mine.

Rebekah is in her third year studying for a BA in Writing and English Literature. Rebekah has loved reading and writing from an early age and her love of poetry has grown while at university. She loves the way the form allows personal emotions to be told but in an abstract way.

Social Climbing
Kevin O'Connor

He had always thought that the incident at the fire station had make his father think, 'Mummy's boy!'

War, the Navy, guns and cold steel, both in the dockyard and at sea, had dropped a cloak of manly detachment over his dad. He had wondered whether this was useful, or not, in Dad's mid-life switch to primary teaching. It hadn't, however, stopped his mother from haranguing her husband for having 'ideas above his station' as he adapted to life in 'a profession'.

His mother had carried the scars of a young war widow. A post-war marriage and children were late consolations for her, but her new groom had always felt second best.

She'd noted her son's school successes, but had too easily slipped into ridiculing his nervousness, his appearance, his tastes or any attempt to be popular. Nothing had seemed to please her, especially the distance that he'd quickly put between them when adulthood arrived. For years, then decades, Christmas or summer visits would have to do, along with a weekly phone call.

On his most recent visit, he had chattered enthusiastically about the interesting challenges of his job and the trust shown by children and their parents. His parents had seemed to listen properly, so his mother's reaction had hit him hard:

'You've had a bit of a wasted life, haven't you?'

The room had thrummed.

'How is it that you could pass your eleven-plus a year early, do really well at the grammar school, get excellent A-levels in all three sciences, then get an 'alright' degree, work at a top high school, study for an extra year at Cambridge, and then…' She paused. '…only to end up doing what your dad did: just a primary school teacher?'

That exchange was still with him right through the new term.

Charles Dickens, himself, would be pleased with this, he thought, gazing around the classroom of engaged ten-year-olds. They were a pleasant bunch and the decision to read a dramatised version of *A Christmas Carol* had been a good one. This was why he had changed careers. He'd left the didactic routines of high school science syllabi and plunged enthusiastically into cross-curricular activity and autonomy. He felt born to it.

A pause in the delivery of the script pulled him out of his introspection. They had reached the visions of the Ghost of Christmas Future. Scrooge's former associates were discussing his demise outside the Stock Exchange. The scene's setting needed an explanation.

'A building where people buy and sell stocks and shares….', then he quickly added, 'Ah! Shares…. they're pieces of paper that prove the owner has loaned….'

Suddenly, a voice from the desk by the window,

'Ah, but Mr. O'Connor, you kin also trim yer hedge with em!'

The teacher had to think fast. Any second now one of the middle-class kids would scoff at this *Naarrich* accent. His reaction was instantaneous.

'That's a great joke Alan. No-one outside of Norfolk would get that.'

There was no challenge and Alan — kind, gentle, unremarkable Alan — looked puzzled, but was thankfully spared any teasing.

A couple of months later he and Alan were in the same group,

awaiting instructions for their first activity at the Adventure Centre. They sat on low benches staring at the abseiling tower. The lead instructor leaned into the teacher's ear, *I think you need to walk him around for a bit*.

The teacher looked in the direction of the slight hand movement. Alan was visibly shaking right down to his boots. He took the boy and they sauntered casually away from the group. Alan definitely didn't want to abseil!

As they walked, the teacher revealed his memory of a similar panic, a long time ago. In plain language he described how his much-anticipated class visit to the fire station had ended in abject disappointment. Of the 49 members of his class of ten-year-olds, he had been the only one too frightened to leap, to cling, to slide down the legendary fireman's pole. No-one, least of all himself, had adjusted their opinion of his wimpy behaviour just because he was a year younger, and smaller. His humiliation had been multiplied by the desperate tug at his teacher's sleeve, the plea to go back in and try again. The refusal had been both obvious and emphatic. There had never been a chance to recover that opportunity.

Back with the group, Alan explained that scaling the ladder was his main worry, so the teacher offered to climb with him for support. Within minutes, they had cautiously emerged onto the tower's platform, ready to abseil.

'What's he doing up here without a harness on?' the instructor barked.

'He can have mine,' replied the teacher.

'I'm not messing 'bout with changing that up here — he'll have to climb back down!'

Alan did as he was told, this time without company. As they wandered back to the chalets, he said,

'I know I didn't get to abseil, but thank you ever so much Mr. O'Connor for staying with me, and telling me that story.'

Next morning their first activity was....

.... the Climbing Wall.

Sitting on plastic bucket seats, they stared at the multi-coloured studs dotting the vertical surface. Alice, then David, then Debbie, then Gary, made decent attempts but all gave up before the top. Now it was Alan's turn....

He started slowly, carefully selecting each new grip. When he was sure that he'd reached a point beyond any of the previous children's attempts, Alan stopped and looked down, checking that his teacher was watching. Their gazes locked for a long moment, both aware of the height that had been conquered.

The journey to that instance has often been described in the years since. In fact, telling this story always makes the old teacher emotional. His dad has enjoyed it too.

Kevin grew up in Plymouth, expecting to work in the naval dockyard. Instead, student life in late 60s swinging London led to 50 years of teaching in Norwich. Late-life marriage, punk accordion, girls' football, dance deejaying, hod-carrying, open-air theatre, the miners' strike, cycle touring and supporting two teams all had to be squeezed in, especially the punk accordion!

A response to Kevin O'Connor

A Fork in the Road

Will Hardy

The interminable quest for happiness feels like an endless traipse across our landscape. There is no right path to achieve it, but we know it deep inside; that feeling that guides us onto the definitive path. As a young person, there are times I will pause and reflect on my present situation and piece together the events that have led me towards a destination greater than what came before it. Kevin, your story is a reminder that what is expected of us, isn't a destination that'll provide us with fulfilment in our lives. You were expected to work in the Naval Dockyard, presumably at Devonport, facing cold steel, physical labour and challenges only a man's competent nature could undertake. Your destination from the dockyard changed course, as did your path. Your mother's response to your career change, after such distance must have left you feeling like a small child to her, unworthy of changing your path or undeserving of receiving the love we all need to find solace. I find that a woman as traumatised as her would lack the ability to see the same change you've experienced. Her response is hard-hitting, almost like it's a reflection of her own wasted time mocking her son's life path. Alas, it was not her torch to bear and there was no stopping the wheels you set in motion to further your career.

You pressed on, knowing full well you had a job to do. Amidst teaching Dickens, you introspectively paused to evaluate your situation. 'I am standing here teaching and influencing young minds.' I do wonder if the conversation about stocks and shares made its way into the final cut?

At the culmination of your story, the young lad Alan faces his fears on the climbing wall. This is a pivotal time for any child to show his true character that's kept him hidden under a blanket. The other true event that occurred that day is a reminder to you as well; that you faced a fear and courageously helped a lost boy from long ago take the leap onto a legendary fireman's pole. In both instances you persevered to allow change to affect itself onto a child who won't forget his mentor. I'm convinced you saw yourself in him.

Experiences such as yours are part of the reason I am following a writing path, and sharing with others has been invaluable in the process. From this, I am writing so others can emotionally connect with pieces that may fit into their own lives. This grounded approach is what I appreciate about the craft, and a minuscule conversation at work encouraged me to set these wheels in motion. I thought I was incapable of learning the craft, but as I reached 22, I realised there is no better time to learn than the here and now. I took a chance and applied to ARU whilst I was working in customer service, and a choice to better myself has put me on a road that's still being written. Then again, it's a path we're both still on.

Reading stories and consuming fiction has influenced my responsibility towards writing my experiences whilst living in Cambridge, but most notably at university have I began searching to find my voice to use within the craft. I like navigating my emotional patterns and writing about them from my time growing up in Cambridge.

Agenda
Clare Williamson

I am a fence sitter, perching precariously,
wobbling back and forth but on certain things
I feel sure footed: my stance is strong.

Item 1: Religion is ridiculous, a negative,
power-hungry blight on people's lives.
It brings false comfort. But – here I go again...

Why should I deny anyone their beliefs?
And spriritуality, finding the god within, well that's
on a higher level, beautiful, transcendent.

Item 2: Who doesn't believe we are ruining our planet?
But what do I do about it except save soft plastic,
use glass milk bottles, avoid weed killer and travel by bus?

Oh, I'm as fallen as the rest into the pit
of human desire, liking warmth in winter,
easy access, a comfort blanket across my knees.

Item 3: So we are all capitalists but there must be
kindness too and help for those who struggle,
a generosity towards this cruel, foolhardy world.

But it's easy for me, I have not been tested,
I don't need to escape from an enemy, bombs don't fall
in my back garden or into my child's arms.

And still, I keep on clambering up, unable to find
Any simple solutions, seeing the world in all its beautiful
Imperfections stretching out before me.

The Road to Robin Hood's Bay

Clare Williamson

If you drive over the moors from the A19, you move through a flat, rusty landscape — all tufts of scrubby grass, clumps of old heather and sheep. Then comes the surprise of Rosebery Topping, a summer pudding of a hill rising suddenly out of all this level ground.

We are high above the sea and St Hilda's Abbey stands on the horizon, a black broken tooth in the mouth of the sky. We will not be drawn in by Whitby's charms. Instead we venture further south to begin the descent into Robin Hood's Bay. At first a few houses and an ancient church indicate that we are getting close as the road drops down and curves round the sheep-filled fields where the constant chatter of the occupants competes with the nattering seagulls circling in the skies above.

The houses expand as we near the old station car park — Victorian seaside villas proudly declaring their high status over the fishermen's cottages below. It is to these we are drawn, walking down the vertiginous hill with the sea disappearing on our left as we enter the tunnelled streets of the Bay. Here you can lose yourself, muddling your way past tea shops, bucket and spade gift shops, Dolly Brown's sweet shop to the end of the road. Then there is no where else to go but to the beach, past the Bay Hotel, down the concrete causeway with the houses piled up on the crumbling cliffs on either side and out into a wide open stretch of sand and rocks and sea.

We made this journey to Robin Hood's Bay many times after we moved there in 1978 with our second hand furniture, our posters and pot plants. Me with no job but an urgent desire to make bread, a garden and a baby; Phil to work at the Marine Laboratory down at the bottom of the hill.

Ours was a house at the top of the bay, not quite a seaside villa but Victorian and red brick, part of a terrace just above the defunct railway line. On foot, it required a climb from the pavement up a steep path and then along to No 7, through the gate and up the garden to the front door where a sign you might find in an old railway station proclaimed that this house was called Bunkerton, named, so we discovered, after Lord Snooty's castle in the Dandy comic.

Inside there was a bay-windowed living room and, at the back, a dining room with a high mantled black and white fireplace filled by an ancient cast iron stove that I cleaned to a shine with Zebrite blacking polish. Upstairs there was a large bedroom on the first floor but we chose to sleep in the attic with its fabulous Egyptian murals painted by the previous owner and, from the dormer window, the long sweeping view of the village, the cliffs and the sea.

In my thirties, I considered myself a poet, writing and performing in a supportive group. Moving abroad, I was too busy living in the moment to write anything apart from a journal. Landing in Norwich thirty years ago, my creative energies were fulfilled teaching drama and directing theatre, until now...

A response to Clare Williamson

How We Survive Through One Another

Morgan Winterburn

As I read Clare's writing, I realised that it spoke to a question that I often ask myself: 'How do I continue to survive in this world?' Today more than ever, capitalism seems to grow into a void that takes and takes. Everything is unaffordable, and the people with the money to make a difference care little. A single mother works two jobs and is still unable to pay all of her bills. A family that once lived on a salary considered good now relies on food banks to get by. Plastic continues to suffocate the environment. Even as somebody who, like Clare, is lucky enough to have not experienced the extreme horrors of war and destruction, it can be hard to imagine living a meaningful future in a world where these issues are likely to only get worse. So, what can we do?

First, the discussion of religion piqued my interest. As a non-religious person, much of what she said resonated with my struggles to understand religion. It's always been an enigma to me; beautiful but difficult to comprehend. But over the years I've seen how it can be a meaningful comfort to others; a way to endure the hardships of modern life. It is another way of continuing to maintain hope even as the future continues to look bleak. For others, it is their answer to how to survive in this world.

What religion can tell us, no matter our personal beliefs, is that there are different aspects to consider when we talk of surviving. Not only is there the importance of money and food, but also how we can avoid becoming cynical; avoid becoming trapped in our suffering. There is survival through religion, but also surviving through one another. It's important to not only see the beauty in the flawed world itself, but in the people around us.

Clare, you and I are the same in that we are unable to find any simple solutions to the world. Us, and everyone else. And maybe there are no simple answers, only a complicated world filled with complicated people. All of us are on our own ladders desperately trying to find meanings or purpose in life, but the fact that is less spoken is that we are all climbing these ladders next to one another. We must always remember to lend a hand to one another. Check on your neighbours. Make sure your friends are doing alright. While this in itself won't give us any firm answers, it's definitely a step in the right direction in discovering our own self-truths.

I study English Literature. Having been a strong reader my whole life, it's perhaps not surprising that I would also be drawn to writing itself. I believe both analytical study and creative writing have the potential to be powerful.

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