

SMALL  
TALK  
ON THE  
WALK



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An anthology of Leith writing

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# Foreword

When I was first approached to write the foreword for this third publication of Leith Writings, 'Small Talk on the Walk', I immediately panicked. Anyone that knows me well can tell you I am not a great reader, and the handful of books I have read tend not to be literary classics. Then I read the title again – Small Talk on the Walk. Suddenly, I felt at ease. When it comes to small talk, I can easily compete with the best!

In my role as a youth worker at the Citadel Youth Centre which began back in 1995, small talk is a very important tool of the job. Meeting a young person or a parent/carer for the very first time can be quite daunting. Engaging them in small talk can often be that 'make or break' moment that helps them make up their mind whether they like what you are offering . . . or not! Thankfully Leithers are a very talkative bunch and over the years I have enjoyed the activity of small talk with 100's if not 1000's by now.

That brings me to the Walk. Maybe I have lived a bit of a sheltered life, but I cannot think of any stretch of pavement in Edinburgh that is as exciting, or has as much variety and diversity of cultures as you stroll the mile heading north from the top of the Walk towards New Kirkgate. I asked some colleagues and friends what their favourite things were about Leith Walk. Tales of buying a 'sauce roll' at the chippy during school lunch-hour or buying fresh bakers rolls at 3.00am on the

way home from a night out were immediately shared. Perhaps my favorite food tale was the world record breaking Scotch Egg, measuring 18 inches in diameter and fried in 20 litres of oil in the Mermaid Chippy. The final egg, weighing 11 kilograms was a Guinness Book of Records Winner before being eaten by some hungry volunteers.

My personal favourite memories of walking down Leith Walk go all the way back to the mid-90's when I first came to work in Leith. I am, of course, talking about the Leith Gala Parade. Each year we gathered with children, youths, parents and carers at Pilrig Street before setting off on the slow journey on foot, down past all the shops and crowds, kids screaming and chanting trying to be heard above the pipes and drums before finally arriving at the stage area in Leith Links. Wonderful community spirit!

My final short Leith Walk tale, is about two brothers who I first met back in the early 2000's. They lived in Duke Street and when their mum was busy or at the shops, they would both 'dreep' out their second-floor window using a length of disused co-axial cable attached to the stonework. Once on the ledge, they would shimmy along to the Central Station Clock where they would turn the big hands and change the time. Real fun, mischief, adventure and risk taking! But that's just my small talk.

I know you will all enjoy fun, mischief, adventure, risk taking and much more in this edition of 'Small Talk on the Walk'. Please enjoy it, celebrate it and continue to share our stories of Leith in your small talk.

**Willy Barr**

**Manager, Citadel Youth club**

# Introduction

This 2023 collection of Leith writing has developed from an idea to mark the centenary in 2020 of the amalgamation of Leith with Edinburgh into what, we hope, will be an annual showcase of writing about, from and for Leith. The first edition was delayed by a year but emerged shouting and kicking in November 2021. *The Darting Salamander* was followed last year by *The Seagull at the Shore* and is joined in 2023 by our third compilation *Small Talk on the Walk*.

A quick throwaway comment on a car journey provided the prompt the selection panel offered in our invitation for submissions. Persevere – Leith’s motto. It seemed to have a very contemporary resonance after the Covid years; the disruption of the tramworks; the impact of austerity heightened by the cost of living crisis; crumbling public services and buildings; the climate emergency; conflict and enforced migration; and other challenges that make all of us consider how we can keep going, persevere, resist or try again at better ways to live on this planet.

What we received in response to the starter was a huge variety of writing, varied in style, form, genre and tone but each with its own unique and distinctive voice. Leith justifiably describes itself as a creative hub and the evidence for that claim was clear in the submissions we received.

The title “Small Talk on the Walk” comes from Mike Cowley’s poem which focuses on the potential of a spark to light our “tinder box of hope” when the “voices of the Walk” join together and act. This book has some of that to it. Each voice different but dynamic. All apparently small but breaking the silence and carrying a heft of meaning.

Three pieces *Blank Page* by Evie Hudson, *Persevere* by Sally Freedman and *Spittoon* by Nazaret Ranea explore the personal feat of perseverance. Evie’s poem is about every writer’s nightmare of the empty page (or maybe it’s every student when told that you have to write something to send in for possible publication!). She shows very literally that by persevering with the creative process something will emerge. Sally explores attempts at realizing one’s potential but that struggling through adversity and still being here is quite an achievement in itself. With arresting imagery Nazaret shows the effect of gruelling, exploitative physical labour and the beauty and fragility of the persevering worker.

Leith has always welcomed newcomers and many stay and make Leith their home. Young writers Linda al Harin in *A New Chapter in Leith* and Anastasia Zvarych in *Journey* tell their own stories of journeys and their arrival in Leith.

Having had creatures in the title of both our previous editions we couldn’t resist allowing some of them a space in the collection this year. Every year swans nest on the Water of Leith and raise their cygnets. *Swan* by Mina Spike is a moving observation of one of these nests. Lewis Scott charts the attempts of a snail

to reach the paradise of Leith Links in *The Snail* and in *Watery News* by Sara McAree animals take over a local media outlet.

Two writers submitted haikus. One untitled Haiku gem from Peehu Saxena and another from Barbara Ann Gaiardoni and Andrea Vanacore with an illustration making it a Haiga.

Significant Leith places appear in the pages of this volume too. Nelly Gladstone is buried in North Leith Burial Ground wedged between the river and Coburg Street. She comes alive for us in the play script by Hilary Speirs, an excerpt from a complete play by The Citadel's Playwrights Workshop and presented for the first time by the Citadel Arts Group in this June's Leith Festival at North Leith Church. *Leith Victoria Fitness Centre* by the late Dave Gilhooly versifies the physical exertions of the local gym while Kyle Bridges takes us to the best seat in the ground in *Easter Road*.

The reader will enjoy three wonderful but very different short stories. In *Papa was a Rolling Stone* by Ruth Campbell we're told of Rona's fascination with a blue VW van clamped on The Shore and its driver. We are left desperate to know what happens next. Always a sign of a successful story. Whoever heard of a pub between the Port o'Leith and The Bowlers Rest? Elspeth Alexandra introduces this mysterious hostelry in *The Landlady of Dark Measures* and a musical send off to a loved one becomes a touching story in *The Last Song of Hannah McKinnon* by Christie Mackie.

Putting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard; will this become the

new euphemism for writing?) is a powerful way to explore one's own insights, musings, convictions and questions, as well as to share them with others. The sharing generates communities. There are online communities that spread across the world, but this one is geographically local. Historically, the Leith community grew strong in adversity as it was exploited by Edinburgh up the hill. In the nineteenth century Leith thrived in municipal self-empowerment. In the last century it couldn't resist the power of being ignored and demolished. We're rebuilding from the rubble.

Keeping up a tradition and keeping it fresh as you go is a good trick if you can pull it off. Now into year 3 of what we hope will become a Leith tradition, Leith Writings is one part of a dynamic community. It will change shape, as everything does. But the power of the pen (*keyboard – Ed*) will never die.

PERSEVERE

**Annie McCrae, Megan Rudden, Aly Barr**

# Blank Page

Left mind blank on what to say  
Told to persevere  
Not too sure on what they mean  
But I have an idea.

I thought of writing stories  
With monsters long ago  
But they might scare off children  
So it has to be a no.

This is just far too hard  
I could just write a song?  
But then again it's way too hard  
And it'll take too long.

I can't think of anything  
I should just give in

How about an essay?  
That's just far too boring.

What about my sheet of plans?  
They all sort of rhyme!  
I can hand those in instead  
And I'll finish on time!

Now I have a poem  
For everyone to hear.  
I got my way around it -  
How's that for persevere?

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**Evie Hudson**  
**Trinity Academy**

# The Ghosts of North Leith

Citadel Arts Group's 2023 Leith Festival show was *Ghosts of North Leith*, scripted by seven members of the Citadel Playwrights Workshop. The play explored the lives of some of those interred in North Leith Burial Ground in Coburg Street and was performed in North Leith Parish Church.

Nelly Gladstones was grandmother of the Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone. Little is known of Nelly's life. This short extract imagines her as something of a radical and a feminist. The family dropped the final 's'. Their large table tombstone is close to the entrance of the Coburg Street cemetery.

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## Nelly Gladstones

**NELLY:** Mother! Dear oh dear. I fear I am in trouble.

**JOHN:** I cannot stay long, I'm here at the behest of –

**NELLY:** Of course you are. Although why your father could not discuss his concerns with me himself –

**JOHN:** He is beyond exasperation, Mother!

**NELLY:** There is no need to raise your voice.

**JOHN:** Mother!

**NELLY:** I think you are over-excited and could do with a reviving cup of tea.

## NELLY POURS TEA

**NELLY:** John, for Heaven's sake, sit! I cannot concentrate with you pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. Will you take milk?

**JOHN:** Yes. And sugar. Please.

**NELLY:** Ah! Sugar. We have none, I'm afraid.

**JOHN:** Then I shall send some round this evening.

**NELLY:** Please do not trouble yourself, my dear. Your sugar is not to my taste.

**JOHN:** What does that mean, not to your taste?!

**NELLY:** Temper, John! I meant that you will no longer enjoy the fruits of torture and cruelty in my house.

**JOHN:** Torture!

**NELLY:** It is a source of shame to me that you are complicit in this abominable trade in slaves. That your father provisions ships that transport these innocents to a living hell.

**JOHN:** What sentimental claptrap is this?! You simply do not understand business, Mother!

**NELLY:** You know fine well that I have ever been your father's helpmeet in business. But this, this awful trade/



JOHN: /It is not a woman's business to concern herself –

NELLY: Not the business of half the world? To look at the state of that world?

JOHN: It is Man's work to explore, to invent, to –

NELLY: Exploit?

JOHN: It is a woman's duty to nurture, to serve her husband and God.

NELLY: Sixteen children? I think I have more than done my duty.

JOHN: If God wills it.

NELLY: I am not sure it is entirely due to the Almighty.

JOHN: Mother!

NELLY: And does your God will the murder of our fellow creatures?

JOHN: You are overwrought, Mother. Father was right –

NELLY: Do not lecture me. I have as good a brain as any man. I only wish I had realised it long before.

JOHN: Hah! You've no idea – writing to the newspapers –

NELLY: Ah, yes, that I admit was an error –

JOHN: I am glad that you acknowledge your folly!

NELLY: I ought to have used a man's name. They would have printed it then.

JOHN: Mother, I have much business to attend to. I do not have time –

NELLY: I have only now realised the price exacted to furnish people like us with supposed necessities. To maintain our life of comfort/

JOHN: /Comfort indeed!

NELLY: And over the past year I have listened with the deepest shame to the testimonies of witnesses such as Joseph Knight/

JOHN: /Exaggerations. . .

NELLY: Human beings, John, shackled and packed on their sides like bales of wool/

JOHN: You do not begin to understand! There are costs/

NELLY: /with a bare nine inches to lie on for months on end!

JOHN: There are good business reasons/

NELLY: Have you ever even been down to the spaces where these poor wretches are kept in misery?

*JOHN IS SILENT*

NELLY: No, better by far to leave the inhumanity out of sight. (She thrusts a pamphlet at JOHN.) See the title: Description of a Slave Ship.

**JOHN:** This has been in circulation these ten years or more.

**NELLY:** Then you will be familiar with the author's findings. 'The deck was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux/'

**JOHN:** Mother, please!

**NELLY:** /that it resembled a slaughterhouse.'

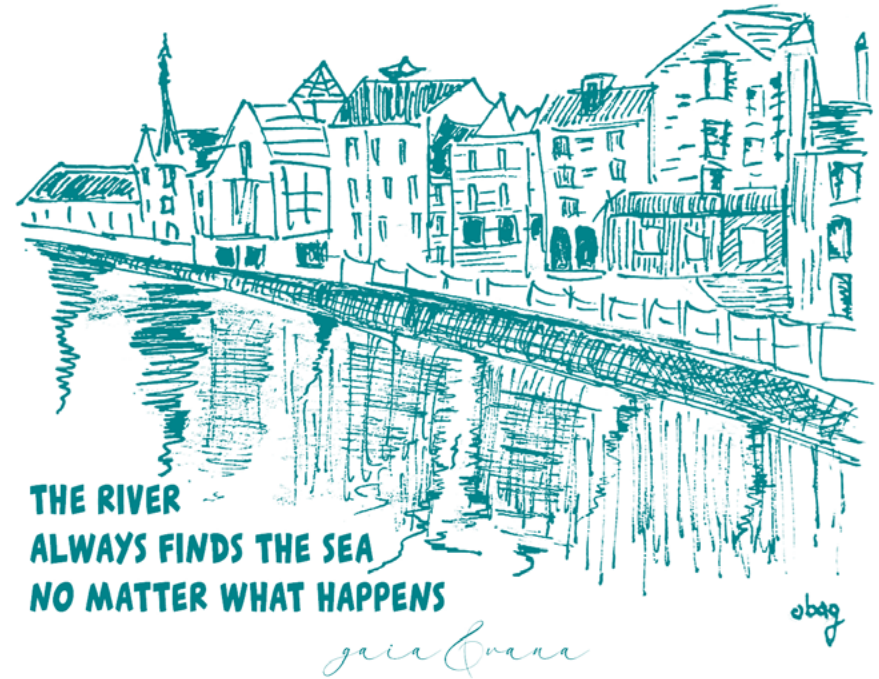
**JOHN:** Father is right to be concerned. His business interests – and mine – can only be imperilled by your intemperance!

**NELLY:** Oh John, John! You are my son and I love you very much. And yet that love is not blind. I abhor with all my soul what you – and your father allow to happen. The world – I thank God – is changing. I have been silent – and ignorant - too long. And that is why – small gesture though it may seem – that is why, while I am mistress of this house you shall have no sugar in your tea.

*JOHN STORMS OUT. NELLY REACHES FOR HER TEACUP*

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Hilary Spiers



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Barbara Anna Gaiardi and Andrea Vanacore.

## Watery News

Welcome, welcome and good morning to all. Today is a bit different, we are going to be interviewing some of the locals at the water of leith and learn about their lives living in leith. First up we have Mr Heron.

Um hi I'm Mr Heron. I spend most of my day soaring over the water and the tree tops, standing on one leg at the shore looking for food, trying to provide for my lovely wife and are two kids that each day lay in their nest getting stronger and stronger.

I hope we can all give lots of love to those little kiddos! Now we have someone the swims in the water of leith day after day. You guessed it - it's Mrs Duck!

Hi there! I'm Duck D-U-C-K! Oh how I love living in the water of leith. My day starts with waking up the others. Then I swim down, then back up, then down, then back up again and so on. When I finally feel a bit peckish I have a wee rummage for any soggy bread that the humans have thrown. Speaking of humans my favourite to do is stick my bottom up in the air for all to see. Then a...

Sorry I think we're running out of time. Aha sorry Duck. Anyway last but not least we have one of our tree top climbers, Mr Squirrel!

Hi I would like to start off by saying thanks for having me. I'm Mr Squirrel, unfortunately I am a grey Squirrel, I'm not rare like my ginger cousins.

Anyway I live alone in a tree all to myself with a great view over the Water of Leith. In the morning I go down to my stash of nuts but normally they're all gone. Yes I know I'm supposed to be saving them, so I go and kick a bird feeder off someone's tree then I devour the remains. Hehe.

Allrightie! So there you have it some stories from our locals in Leith. That's all for today see you tomorrow for some more watery news, byeeee!

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Sara McAree  
Trinity Academy

## The Landlady of Dark Measures

Have you ever woken up the morning after a pub crawl in Leith tried to remember all the places you went? Do you remember the place you went in between the Port o'Leith and The Bowlers Rest?

No. Nobody ever does.

Even as you're reading this, you can't picture where it could be, can you? Good.

My pub is a quiet pub. Basic. You might be surprised it survived the smoking ban, but the fact is, it's always been quiet. That's how I like it. It takes just enough money to keep going.

We don't serve lunch, or craft beer. We don't have live music or a quiz. There's no pie at half time - not least because there's no telly. You'll come in for one drink - probably a measure, the beer's usually off - then you'll leave, and you'll forget you were ever here.

I work hard to make sure it stays this way. So did my dad, and his dad. There's been a pub here for as long as anyone can't remember. My family has persevered in the licensed trade, appropriately enough.

Not for me the 'mission statements' or 'vision boards' recommended by shiny business coaches. I don't get time off. I can't go on holiday. I put up with the soul-destroying tedium of the day-in-day-out. It's boring and unrewarding, making sure nobody pays too much attention: but it's important.

I admit that lately, I've been wondering if the trams have meant the end of the basic pub. Maybe if I want to stay unnoticed in Leith I'd be better closing the pub and re-opening as an artisan coffee shop. But for now, it's a pub.

I live upstairs with my son, Haydn, and Sir Bert, our border terrier. Haydn's dad was a sailor. I knew early on that if I was going to stay in this pub for my whole life, a man would be the last thing I needed around. But eventually I will need someone to take over from me, and so I had a tolerable wee rendezvous with a sailor after closing time one night, and then I had Haydn.

Am I lonely? Of course I'm bloody lonely. Only a gangly sullen teenager to share my life with, who wouldn't be? But, while there's no regulars as such, I usually get a few customers with decent banter. Sir Bert's a good dog. There's a library full of books just half an hour away, and I'm fond of romances and biographies. And - I can't stress this enough - this is how my life's always been. The thought of being out there, away from the pub makes me need to go to the toilet.

That night, when the last customer left, I bolted the door and turned out the lights. "Come on Sir Bert. Let's check the cellar before bed."

I stripped down to my t-shirt and shorts, and unlocked the door at the back of the bar. I opened it and hot dry air hit me.

Even in that terrible winter, the one they called the Beast From The East, the snow outside the pub always melted. Our snug is a cosy snug. There's no wifi though, so don't be thinking you can bring your laptop in and work from the pub to beat the cost of living crisis.

My fingers found the old switch on the wall, and one hundred watts of electrical power raced to the naked bulb. I surveyed the entire contents of the cellar: one broom. I made my way down the ancient stone steps and started my nightly sweep.

I always sing while I'm in the cellar. It's good to make some noise here. Down Down by the Quo is a favourite, or something by Meatloaf. I keep time with the skssh, skssh of the broom over the floor.

My oxters were dripping by the time I got to the old iron trapdoor in the middle of the cellar floor. I tapped it with the broom handle, as always. It sounded the same as always. Fine.

Sir Berty barked and I heard Haydn's feet coming down the stone steps.

"Hiya love", I called. "You not in bed yet?" Lately he's been restless, and it's been worrying me. It's like something's coming.

I never encouraged Haydn at school. What would be the point? As long as he knows enough to keep the pub going, that's all that's needed from him. But, despite my best efforts, his teachers are pleased with him. At least he doesn't have friends, thank goodness. Having pals is a liability. They'd be like "oh your maw runs a pub, gonnae get us a bottla voddy? Goan, she'll no notice." Or he'd get drunk and blab, and have folks over for visits and nosing about.

He was looking nervous. I stopped sweeping and leaned on the broom.

"What's on your mind, pet?"

He held out a letter. University of Glasgow. Unconditional

acceptance. My heart sank. I handed it back to him.

"No."

"I'm going away, mum."

"You can't." My heart was racing but I need to stay firm, keep in control. There's no way he could leave.

He started whining. "I hate it here. I'm so bored. You've never let me have friends, or join clubs. I can't spend my life in just one little poky flat and this dump of a pub. Godsake, you won't even let me wash the windows! Nobody lives like this!"

"C'mon Hades. Everyone lived like this in 2020."

"That was a pandemic! It's over! There's a whole wide world out there to explore!"

I shook my head. It's the bloody internet that's got to him. Bloody TikTok, letting people pretend their lives are really interesting and getting ordinary people all wanty. It's nothing but trouble.

"No. I need you here."

"I've been thinking, mum. You can come with me!"

"Don't be ridiculous. I can't leave the pub. And you know you can't leave it either."

I glanced at the trap door. When I looked back at his face and, I saw his eyes had flickered there too.

"Nothing ever happens, mum. Nobody comes here."

"Nobody comes here because we've kept them out. What if we leave and someone breaks in? Turns the place over, and all hell

breaks loose?”

“Stop that, mum! You’re worrying about nothing! It’ll be alright. You’ll be okay without me.”

“You’ll never come back, Hades. We both know it. Then I’ll go to my grave and everything will go right up the shit. I thought you understood. It’s not our lot in life, to go gallivanting to university, just like it wasn’t your great-great-great grandpa’s lot in life to go and die in Flanders, and it wasn’t your grandpa’s lot in life to sail to Australia. Our family stays here. It’s our lot in life.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this, mum.” He’s holding out his hands, like he’s offering me something, trying to talk gently. “Listen, there’s tech that can help us now. You’d be surprised. We can set up some wee cameras and motion sensors. We could get a security company to monitor it for us. Or we can get the camera feed to go straight to our phones. If anything weird starts to happen, or anyone comes in, we can come back.”

“Technology can’t do what we do. This is just how it needs to be, and you need to accept it. People will start asking questions. Technology doesn’t keep secrets.”

His face tightened, like it always does when I say no, ever since he was a toddler. “You care more about secrets than you do about me! You always have!”

That’s when I lost it. He’d hit the nail on the head, but I didn’t need to be reminded of it. If I’d cared about my child I’d never have had him, never have brought him into the world to do this dreadful job. But he was a cheeky wee bastard for saying so, and he made me angry.

I grabbed him by the ear - he’s bigger than me, but he’s a good

boy and he won’t use his strength against his mother.

Sir Berty growled and barked, jumping up on me, but I ignored him. I pulled Haydn down by the ear, down till he was on his knees, and I pushed his head down until it was an inch away from the trap door. We both felt the vicious heat rising. I put my head on the stone floor beside him, so we were nose to nose.

“Listen!” I rasped, my breath coming fast and sore.

We could both hear it.

Rising up through the old steel trapdoor are cries of terrible pain. There are pathetic calls for help. They are human voices with all humanity removed, and despite the heat, they turn your blood to ice. It’s the endless sound of torture. These are roars that come from slit throats, pain that comes from disconnected brains. There are screeches that could be from ancient machines or from long-extinct creatures or maybe from levels of human misery we have yet to imagine.

It is terrible.

This is what my father showed me when I was a child. This is what I’ve shown Haydn time and again.

I put my mouth to his ear and I said: “This is why we persevere.”

He looked terrified. His brow was crumpled and his eyes were wet. His breath was coming in big shuddery gasps. That’s good, I thought, he needs to be scared. It’s us being scared that keeps everyone else safe. I counted to ten, just to make sure, and then I let him go.

We sat on the floor. I was still angry, even when Sir Berty came

over and licked my face.

I stared into Haydn's eyes. "If you want a challenge in life, son, stay here. Keep on going, even when you're bored, or when you're miserable, or when you're questioning why you're alive. You are needed. Essential. Indispensable. This is your hero's journey, Haydn. This is what we do."

Our eyes locked. I thought, be a good boy. Give in.

He stopped panting.

He shook his head.

Haydn pushed himself forward, onto all fours and brought his face right up to mine.

"It's not what I do. Not any more."

He stood over the trapdoor and picked up the metal ring set into it. He'd never touched it before, I've kept him too scared, so when he realised it was far too hot to touch, he cursed and dropped it. He took off his jumper, wrapped it round his hand, and started to heave it up.

"Stop it, Haydn. Don't. You'll destroy everything. Stop it right now!"

But the power of an angry teenage boy is more than I could stem. He leaned back with his long body, yanked on the ring and the door lurched open, for the first time in hundreds of years.

Heat rushed into the cellar like an explosion. The air stank of sulphur a million times worse than Seaford on a hot day, and suddenly it hurt to breathe.

"Y'see?" he shouted. "Nothing happened!"

The sizzling sound was louder then. The screeching continued, but the cries stopped. I looked at him and he looked at me.

"Close. It. Now." I croaked, the putrid dry air choking me.

His face was bright with the light of a thousand fires, and he was grinning, victorious. Then he looked down and his expression changed to horror. It's something no mother ever wants to see on her child's face.

The next few moments passed by in a lifetime.

Haydn stumbled in terror, and lost his grip on the trapdoor. It's hinges opened fully and it fell backwards, slamming flat onto the stone floor of the cellar. Too late he realised his only chance was to close it, and all at once he was scrambling, grappling with the heavy iron square, but it was too hot to get his fingers under. I crawled to him, try to get my fingers under it too, but it was too heavy.

There was a terrible hush from below us. There was only sizzle, Sir Berty's barking and our agonised breathing of desert air.

Something began to rise up from the depths of the earth. A long, low whoosh was building, getting louder and more awful with each passing moment. Every bit of my body was heavy with dread.

We were side by side, scraping our fingers under the trap door. "One, two, LIFT!" Panic had given us each a strength we could never imagine. Together we flipped the door to a vertical position where it teetered, deciding which way to go, defying gravity for just a second, before it fell into the frame and closed

with the loudest crash and one final explosion of heat.

Thinking about it now, I can see it was that one, teetering moment. That single second was all it took.

The darkest, blackest shape flew out in that instant. It shot out like a rocket, and it sucked all the light out of the cellar. It filled every inch of the room and it gripped my heart, like centuries of pressure transforming coal into diamonds. Terror filled me. Nothing mattered. I didn't care if I died. I wanted to be dead, if I had to live with that darkness.

There we stood, buried in shadow, surrounded by a paralysing stillness. Then the blackness formed itself into a huge, oily face, with shiny obsidian eyes like a bird, and fuliginous teeth as strong and sleek as razors. It opened what might have been a mouth but looked like a passage to a greater darkness, if that could exist, and it said in a vicious, smirking voice like an arid wind howling down a desert gully:

“Thank you for your service.”

It swarmed to the door at the top of the stairs, and it was gone.

There we lay, on the hot stone floor, panting. Sir Berty was whimpering, and so was Haydn, his burned hands were trapped tight in his armpits. He kept saying sorry, sorry, but I didn't know whether to comfort him or kick him. We just lay there until we heard the sirens.

We made tea for the police when they knocked. We gave statements, along with everyone else in the street, but of course we'd seen nothing. We didn't know what was underneath any of the white forensic tents that lay across the North of the city that night, any more than anyone else did.

After a few months, people forgot. They moved on. Whatever happened that night, leaving six people dead between my pub and the City Chambers, nobody made it their life's mission to find out. Nobody persevered.

Most people don't.

I do. And so does Haydn, now. There's been no more talk of university.

I'm glad he finally understands.

---

Elspeth Alexandra



## Journey

My story will begin after we left Ukraine. We all know that on the twenty-fourth of February in 2022, the war in Ukraine began. I remember very well that day and all the days when we were going to Scotland. At six in the morning my mother woke me up and she didn't tell me that the war had started, she just said that I wasn't going to school because we started home learning. I was very happy that I didn't have to go to school, but I realized that something was wrong and took my phone to see what my friends were writing and at the hour when I read that the war had started, I heard an explosion. It was very scary because my mother went to work and I was left alone. I called my sister and my grandmother and asked how they were doing. When my mother got home she called her friend and they arranged for us to come to their place because they lived in a different neighborhood and it was safer. We lived with them for two weeks. Those two weeks I heard explosions and helicopters, it was scary, but me and my friend tried to distract myself as much as possible.

One day, my mother and my friend's parents decided that we needed to go, and we found people who could take my sister from Kyiv abroad. My sister was supposed to be taken to Poland, but they decided that there would be a very long queue at the border and they decided to go another way. We were originally going to Romania, but our plan changed and we were going to Moldova. We were standing at the border beside Moldova for thirty-two hours, and my mother was driving for forty-two hours. When we were standing at the border with Romania, my mother had a connection, my sister called her and said that they were going to Moldova, then our plan changed.

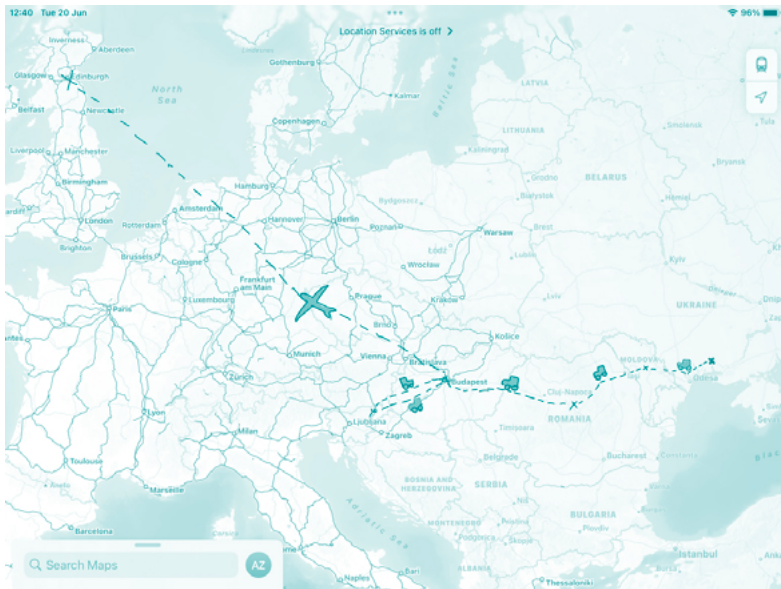
When we got close to the border with Moldova, they gave out food for Ukrainians. When we got to the capital of Moldova, we were waiting for my sister. My sister had a little problem at the border. The problem was that my aunt's friends were not allowed abroad, but my sister was offered a ride by a man to the capital of Moldova, because he was also going there. When we met, we had one plan to go to Budapest. It took us three or four days. After we got to Budapest, we went to apply for a UK visa. After two days, we found a very kind woman with whom we could live with for a whole month. This woman's name was Tanya and she had a very nice daughter, they lived in Slovenia. They have two dogs and five cats. I am very grateful to them because they helped us in such a difficult time. A month later we went to pick up our visa in Budapest and the next day we flew to Edinburgh because my aunt lives there.

Three days after we flew into Edinburgh. I went to Trinity Primary School and it was very difficult for me because my brain did not understand what had happened, why all these children were speaking a different language. But I used Google Translate and the children, including Chiara, helped me. It was very difficult for me because I felt different because I couldn't speak English like others. When we moved to high school, I could understand a little English, but I was very afraid to speak. In the middle of the school year, my brain started to get used to English and I realized that I don't need to be afraid, I need to act, and I started trying to speak English. Teachers and classmates helped and still help me, if I don't know or don't understand something, they try to explain to me what they mean. I communicate very well with Eva, Mya, Sara, Emily, Chiara, Amirah and Ella. I am very happy to be in Scotland and have the opportunity to go to school. I am glad that I have the opportunity to communicate

with Chiara, Eva, Sara, Emily, Ella, Amirah and Mya and I am glad that I am surrounded by very kind, funny and cool people.

After the war started and I came to Scotland and went to school. I realized that there is no need to be afraid or ashamed. I try not to give up and do my best. I am very grateful to everyone who helps me and communicates with me.

## Подорож



Моя історія розпочнеться с того як ми виїхали з України. Всі ми знаємо, що двадцять четвертого лютого двадцять другого року розпочалась війна в Україні. Я дуже добре пам'ятаю цей день та усі дні як ми добиралися до Шотландії. О шостій ранку мене розбудила мама та вона не сказала мені, що розпочалась війна, вона просто сказала, що я не їду до школи бо в нас розпочалось дистанційне навчання. Я дуже була рада, що не потрібно іти до школи, але я зрозуміла що щось не так і взяла свій телефон подивитись, що пишуть мої однолітки і у ту годину коли я прочитала, що розпочалась війна я почула вибух. Було дуже страшно, бо моя мама поїхала на роботу та я залишилась одна. Я подзвонила своїй сестрі та бабусі та запитала, як в них справи. Коли моя мама приїхала до дому вона подзвонила своєму другу та вони домовились, що ми приїдемо до них, бо вони жили в іншому районі та він був більш безпечним. Ми жили в них дві неділі. Ці дві неділі я чула вибухи та гелікоптери, це було страшно, але я та мій друг намагались відволікатись, як тільки можна.

В один день моя мама та батьки мого друга вирішали, що потрібно їхати та ми знайшли людей, які зможуть відвезти мою сестру з Києва за кордон. Мою сестру повинні були відвезти до Польщі, але вони вирішали, що там буде дуже довга черга на кордоні та вони вирішали їхати іншим шляхом. Ми спочатку їхали до Румунії, але в нас змінився план та ми їхали до Молдови. Ми стояли на кордоні з Молдовою тридцять дві години, а моя мам була за рулем сорок дві години. Коли ми стояли на кордоні з Румунією у моєї мами з'явився зв'язок, їй подзвонила моя сестра та сказала, що вони поїдуть до Молдови, тоді наш план змінився.

Коли ми вже приблизились до кордону з Молдовою там видавали їжу для українців. Коли ми добрались до столиці Молдови, ми чекали на мою сестру. У моєї сестри була невелика проблема на кордоні. Проблема була у тому, що друзів моєї тітки не випускали за кордон, але моїй сестрі запропонував один чоловік підвезти її до столиці Молдови, тому що він також їхав туди. Коли ми зустрілись, в нас був один план поїхати Будапешту. В нас це зайняло три чи чотири дні. Після того, як ми доїхали до Будапешту, ми пішли робити візу у Великобританію. Після двох днів, ми знайшли дуже добру жінку у котрій ми змогли жити цілий місяць. Цю жінку звали Таня та в неї була дуже добра донька, вони жили у Словенії. В них є дві собаки та п'ять котів. Я дуже вдячна їм бо вони допомогли нам у таку трудну годину. Через місяць ми поїхали забрати нашу візу у Будапешт та на наступний день ми полетіли в Единбург, бо ту живе моя тітка.

Через три дні, після того як ми прилетіли в Единбург. Я пішла в Trinity Primary school мені було дуже складно, бо моїй мозок не розумів, що трапилось, чому всі ці діти розмовляють на іншій мові. Але я користувалась гугл перекладачем та мені допомагали діти у тому числі Chiara. Мені було дуже складно бо я відчувала себе іншою, тому що я не могла розмовляти англійською як інші. Коли ми перейшли до старшої школи я трішки могла розуміти англійську, але я дуже боялася розмовляти. Восени мій мозок звик до англійської та я зрозуміла, що не треба боятися, треба діяти, та я почала намагатися розмовляти англійською. Вчителі та однокласники допомагали та допомагають до сих пір, якщо я щось не знаю чи не розумію вони намагаються пояснити мені, що вони мають на увазі.

Я дуже добре спілкуюсь з Eva, Mya, Sara, Emily, Chiara та Ella. Я дуже рада, що знаходжусь у Шотландії та маю можливість ходити до школи. Я рада що я маю можливість спілкуватись з Chiara, Eva, Sara, Emily, Ella and Mya та я рада що знаходжусь в оточенні дуже добрих, веселих та класних людей.

Після того як розпочалась війна та я приїхала до Шотландії та пішла в школу. Я зрозуміла, що не треба боятися чи соромитись. Я намагаюсь не здаватися та робити все можливо, що в моїх силах. Я дуже вдячна всім хто допомагає мені та спілкується зі мною.

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Anastasia Zvarych  
Trinity Academy

# The Snail

The glowing sun beamed down on the hot tarmac road. Cars zooming back and forth like it was a race. Leith Walk was no place to be for a small defenceless mollusk. On one side of the road were lush plants, shady vegetation and greenery. A snail paradise named Leith Links. On the other side was a hopeful, determined little snail. He only had one goal in mind. To escape the stressful city and reach the calming paradise beyond.

Carefully he slithered off the cobble pavement leaving a slimy silver trail behind him. The little snail could see the warm tarmac bubbling and breaking apart forming a thick matt black liquid, but still he knew that he wouldn't give up. He could feel the fast air of the cars blasting in front of his face. He started to slither into the road. Fear took hold of him. His little heart began to race. There were only a few seconds left before the next car would hit him - whoosh, zoom it went. He only just made it through the dense traffic.

The next obstacle he faced was the hot metal of the tram tracks. The little snail was utterly terrified about burning himself and maybe even dying, but he would give anything to just get to the other side. Cautiously he made his move. He slithered as fast as he could towards the other side of the tracks. As soon as he touched the burning hot metal, steam started to appear from underneath him. He was being cooked alive. A horrible smell filled the air. As quick as he

could the tiny snail wiggled to the other side. Finally he had made it. Only a few more seconds and he would have been burnt like toast.

All the little snail had to do now was climb up the mossy cobble path into the paradise beyond. Once he was up he crawled to the nearest wet patch of moss to cool his scabby black body. He could smell the lush green grass all around him now. The little snail thought to himself 'finally I'm here'. This was all he wanted. All he had ever dreamed of. But then ... with a loud crunch! It was all over for the brave little snail.

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Lewis Scott  
Trinity Academy

## The Last Song of Hannah McKinnon

We had said we'd only go for one wee tune while we waited for Stu, but as the night went on, pint glasses piling up and our repertoire growing thin, it became clear that we had been hiding the same feelings all night. The pints of Campervan and riotous laughter were nothing but a mask we all put on, disguising our concern. Maisie from behind the bar pointedly upturned the chairs onto the sticky tables around us. Tom shifted his gaze uneasily, nervously scratching his salt and pepper beard, but he seemed to be at a loss for words. I think we all were.

Helen, the sole lassie among our ranks, was the first to break the silence. "Well," she said, loading her beaten-up Tanglewood into its even more dilapidated case, "I'd better be off. I've no got much time left on my parking. Pleasure as always, guys. Hopefully we see Stu again next week, eh?"

She plonked her empty lemonade glass on the bar as she left and was gone with nothing more than a nonchalant waggle of her fingers and a whirl of beige trench coat. As if it were just another jam session. As if we hadn't just been totally dingied, out of the blue, by the man who brought us all together in the first place.

"D'you think I should call him?" I asked Tom as we meandered to the bus stop, cautious of the Shore's cobbles that could make one far too closely acquainted with the ground after a heavy session, even a sturdy guy like me. It had happened more times than I'd care to admit.

Tom blew out through pursed lips, shaking his head. "Nae point, pal. I texted him earlier. He just said 'Will talk to you about it later, just need an evening off. I'm okay.' Delightfully vague as ever, oor Stu."

"You texted him earlier? When? Do you not think it would've been good to tell us all what he said? I've been going pure frantic all evening, thought he might have fallen into the water or something!"

"Awright, simmer doon, the main thing is he's okay. I just checked in when I was in the bogs earlier. I didnae really think it was my place to go telling yous all if he was having a bad time or whatever, that's all I'm saying."

Through the mizzle, the 35 rounded the corner, crawling towards us as if even a bus could take a wee tumble on the cobblestones. I sighed as I held out my arm to flag it down. "I get it. I'm sorry I gave you a hard time, pal. See you next week? And Stu too, I hope."

"Aye, me too, pal. Me too. You get home safe now."

\*

Weeks went by before Stu showed his face again and I'll be honest, I'd been starting to think he'd patched us completely. Bit rich of him, I thought, given that this wee guitar group thing was his idea to begin with. Still, I figured it was best to give him the benefit of the doubt, and sure enough, there he was in his usual spot on the last Tuesday of November. He was already half a pint down and was noodling away when Tom and I arrived.

"Awright, keen bean?" "Awright, stragglers?"

“It’s only just gone six the now, nae need to get sarcy,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. I punched Tom in the arm. “What I think Thomas means is ‘welcome back, pal.’” “Cheers man, good to be back. It’s been a time.”

“Aye?”

“Aye...”

A silence fell between us and I could see Tom glancing at me out my periphery. He’s not the most subtle guy, is our Tom. Shrugging off his conspiratorial looks, I smiled at Stu with a look that I hoped conveyed empathy and not just its unwanted cousin, sympathy. Nothing worse than a pity party when all you want is a pint and a play with your pals. Stu would hate that.

Tom nodded towards Stu’s nearly-drained IPA. “Nae Helen today so I guess we can get going. Another one to get the creative juices flowing?”

We were about three pints (maybe even four in Stu’s case – a rarity for our usually measured pal) and a handful of songs deep before any more came to light. As the last chords of ‘Wild World’ were absorbed by the throng of the post-work punters, Stu sighed heavily. I could tell his misty eyes weren’t just the extra ales.

“Hannah loves that one.”

“Aw yeah?”

“She wanted it as our first dance, actually. I said no. Thought it was too depressing. I wanted ‘Sunshine on Leith’, so that’s what we had. What a stupid cliché. Bet every man and his granny who gets married round here uses that stupid song. ‘Sunshine on Leith’. Jeez...”

“Hey,” Tom said, tentatively reaching out to pat Stu on the back before realising he was a wee bit out of reach and settling back into his seat awkwardly, “It’s no a bad song. And it clearly meant something to you. No the end of the world, pal. Plenty of special moments to come.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Aye! Everyone says your wedding day is the best day of your life but I don’t buy it. Surely every day you get together is the best, eh? No need to get all caught up on one day.”

Stu’s tears were properly rolling now. I’d never seen him cry to be honest, apart from maybe on the wedding day in question. Even then, I saw him sneaking tissues from his sporran, trying to hold it together in front of everyone. But to sit there and see his tears just roll down, not caring to wipe up all the snot and salt...It almost got me going too actually. I was just thinking how I could –

“She’s going to die, guys. Hannah. My Hannah. My gorgeous Hannah is dying.”

\*

Honestly, fair play to Stu for the way he kept on keeping on. If it were me – not that I’ve got a wife as lovely as Hannah, or any wife at all for that matter – I think I’d want to shut the rest of the world out. Just me and my lass for the last of her days. Nobody else would matter, I don’t think. But Stu was a real trooper, there with his guitar in the same spot, week in, week out, like he was part of the furniture. Sometimes we talked about Hannah. Sometimes the sunken bags under his eyes said all there was to say.

The song thing was Tom's idea, actually. He may not always be the smoothest operator but sometimes Tom will play an absolute blinder. He's kind of special that way. He drained the last wee drops of his pint and slammed the glass down triumphantly. He seemed so mad keen to get his words out that I'm surprised he didn't start burbling them out through a mouthful of stout.

"So you know what Isla's doing for next term's class project?" he asked, a glint of mischief in his eye.

"I don't think you've told us, no," replied Helen, absent-mindedly twiddling the ladder of silver hoops running up her ear.

"Aw, you're gonnae love this one Helen. They're writing a song as a class! All about how they feel about moving up to high school after the summer, and they're gonnae sing it in from of the whole school for their last assembly!"

Helen stopped fidgeting, her face aglow. "Aw Tom, that's brilliant! I cannae wait to see if wee Isla's in my class once she moves up. I bet she's gonnae love music. Promise I'll go easy on her with the homework too!"

"Aye, she's a pretty talented lassie, if I do say so myself," continued Tom, "But anyway, that's no the point I was gonnae make."

We all looked at him eagerly.

"Why don't we write Hannah a song? Bet she'd love that. We could record it for her down that place on Great Junction Street. I know the guy that runs it – he'd probably give us mates rates if I told him what it was for."

Stu had this real thousand mile stare as the tears started to

gather again. His silence was a wee bit worrying, to be honest. Tom was clearly feart that he'd crossed a line or something – you could've seen his beamer from Fife, he was like a glowing like a traffic light or something. Stu and Hannah had been planning on kids for themselves – maybe it was all this chat of what Isla was up to at school that set him off. I wouldn't be surprised. Isla loved her Auntie Hannah. I remember how she'd kept asking Hannah when she'd get a new wee baby pal to play with that time they had us all round their bit for a barbeque a couple of years ago.

The tension crumbled as Stu cleared his throat and shook his head, shaking off whatever dark thoughts had been rattling his brain. "I love it," he said, the corners of his mouth rising till they practically met his damp eyes. "But I've got an even better idea."

\*

The 16 pulled up and deposited a frazzled-looking Helen before trundling away, onto the exotic climes of Silverknowes. With her arrival, the gang was all there, our old faithful acoustics slung over our sweat-soaked backs in the late June sunshine. The seasons had changed dramatically in the seven months since Stu's big announcement. The dodgy cobblestones outside the pub faded from slick November rain, to the salty precautions of a particularly crisp winter, to a hazy vapour rising off the ground as we were hit by our annual heatwave earlier than ever before.

Alongside crisp packets and discarded vape pens, the only constant was our commitment to each other and to Stu. We met as usual, every single week, crafting Hannah's perfect send-off – although we hated to think of it that way. Love kept us anchored – Stu's love for Hannah, our love for Stu, everyone's love for the one wee glimmer of normality that we could hold onto as

everything shifted around us. In those seven months, love had led us here.

I'd never been to a hospice before and I was surprised at how unlike a hospital it was. There was no denying the grief that followed us as we traipsed the corridors like the merry troubadours of St Columba's, but there was also an undeniable sense of peace. Comfort. A feeling that just because someone had stopped singing, didn't mean that their song was over – it could ring out and persevere into whatever lay beyond.

"She's just in here." We followed Stu into what could have been a simple hotel room in any other context. It was cosy, nothing like the clinical set-up I'd imagined. There was Hannah, cooed up under a blanket on the plush single bed, idly thumbing through a battered Stephen King novel. Despite her shrunken body and the pallor of her skin, she was unequivocally Hannah. I'd even say that she looked more like Hannah than she ever had before. Her flowery tattoos curled up her thin forearms, bold against her pale skin like hard-earned battle scars, and there remained a playful sparkle in her hazel eyes. Her lips were painted with the most gorgeous shade of red. Scarlet, I think you'd call it.

"Hey Hannah. You're looking as bonnie as ever," Tom said, leaning in for a gentle hug. "Aye, well, not having eyelashes kind of limits my makeup options, you know?"

"I'm so sorry, Hannah," I weighed in.

"It's okay. Eyelashes are overrated anyway, there's no need to get too apologetic about it."

None of us knew what to say, lingering in awkward silence until she roared with laughter. "Honestly guys, I always thought you

were down with a bit of gallows humour! Anyway, how are you all? You been practising today or something?" She flickered her gaze between our gig bags.

"Actually, babes," Stu said, his cheeks beginning to flush, "we thought maybe you'd like a private gig."

We tuned up as Hannah continued to work her way through 'Pet Sematary', and pulled up three plastic chairs, arranged in vigil around her bedside. Stu perched on her bed, leaned in to plant a kiss on her rosy, vivacious lips, and counted us in. I could see he was starting to get all teary again but he pushed through, his voice barely shaking as he cut across our introductory vocals.

As we watched the summer gloaming fall onto the harbour, we kept on strumming. Stu lowered his hand from the guitar and wrapped his fingers around Hannah's. He sang with more passion than we'd ever heard before. He sang about how it's a wild world.

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Christie Mackie



# SPITTOON

My father wonders  
if it's worth it  
to spend the whole day  
pounding the earth,  
moving stubble,  
ploughing rows of cement  
with his broken heels.

He was not born to be a bullfighter  
because his feet are frayed.  
I've seen blood stains  
on his insoles  
like carnation petals  
falling in the ring.  
One of these days they will amputate  
his pinky toe, as they do  
with ballerinas too.

When the insatiable night arrives,  
the poor man opens a beer.  
He looks at the defiant moon, although  
then he lowers his head  
as murmurs in his inner lament:

*the sting*  
*in the centre of the chest*

*the weight*  
*at the bottom of the chest*

*the fury*  
*at the edge of the chest.*

Then he lies in bed  
like a piece of beam,  
a cut log to size,  
that, although it starts to fossilize,  
never ends.

---

Nazaret Ranea

## Easter Road

I think I'm the best seat in the whole stadium. I can see the whole pitch, from here at the tiptop. And I'm the comfiest seat of them all. I am a special seat because all the the old Hibs players sit on me and on the seats next to me.

But the best feeling is when the stadium is empty but full of rubbish and memories. One time we beat Celtic 4-2 right here at Easter Road. It was electric at full time for the boys in green and white. I nearly snapped in half with all the people jumping on me and it was really noisy.

That day they all went home happy – apart from the Celtic fans of course. They went back to Glasgow with tears running down their faces!

---

Kyle Bridges  
Trinity Academy

## Small Talk on the Walk

This town is a tinder box of hope,  
Ready to ignite at night's first cloak.

A conspiracy of fires

Waiting to combust.

All we need are accelerants,

A final recognition that

All is lost.

Let it die. It was never truly alive

To begin with.

But on the Walk,

With this kind of talk?

The gods are all ears.

Their fictions have woven incantations for so long,

We've grown accustomed to blinking into a sun

Whose warmth we dared not believe in.

But nature has yet to coalesce a flammable as dangerous

As a people set to blow.

A billion suspect devices,  
A weapons cache for the many.  
Arming the unarmed with  
A hardware of hope.  
That's us, by the way.  
Sometimes, poets have a way of waxing peripheral lyrical  
around  
The plainest of truths.  
Sometimes, poets need to shut the fuck up,  
And let the un-stepped on hard stuff do their talking.

The underground railway idles on tracks  
Mapped out as a firmament.  
A starry guide and freedom ride to we know where.  
Not anywhere but here,  
But the place where justice went to nest,  
Patiently awaiting our arrival,  
Like refugees from a centre which could not hold.  
Where the long arc of history ends, and we begin.  
Where the voices of the Walk,

Long silenced by static at the broadband's margins,  
See their chance,  
A glimpse of the impossible,  
And turn the Walk's  
Last corner.

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Mike Cowley

## Leith Victoria Fitness Centre

Grab my bag and step outside sniffing in the rain  
Push against the elements to reach the place of pain  
Water shivers in large puddles as the wind cuts through  
Dampness seeping into layers, fingers turning blue  
In the gym I look around at others in the group  
Bending low and tugging on a kind of hula hoop

Visualising cape and whip the dominatrix arrives  
Dressed in red and full of smiles slapping hand on thighs  
Stand up straight, lift your arms, keep those shoulders wide  
Wiggle fingers, wiggle toes, move from side to side  
Now march on the spot but stop those moaning groans  
Pushing knees higher will give you stronger bones

Resistance bands are next to test our willingness for pain  
Pulling and stretching muscles desperate for gain  
No slacking there, get on the bike and pedal hard and fast  
Dreams of glory, Tour de France, well and truly past

Don't slow down or stop and chat just keep the rhythm going  
Feel the blood pump through your veins, sense your face is  
glowing

One more task she shouts with glee  
So loosen up and follow me  
Before the treat of tea and cake  
Treadmill miles you must make  
Soft and wobbly legs like jelly  
I'm off home to watch the telly.

---

Dave Gilhooly

## A New Chapter in Leith

I remember the day I moved into my new house with my family. It was a very interesting experience as I had just come to Edinburgh from Germany. Scotland felt very different compared to Germany. As I was walking through the street, I could feel the cold breeze swirling around my cold face and making me shiver. When I walked into the new house, I could feel something different about Edinburgh, and mostly Leith. It felt as if I was in my home town, I felt like I was connected to Leith in a way I have never experienced before.

New house means new school, and I had to go back to being the new kid like how I was in Germany. While I was eating breakfast, my mum could see that I wasn't comfortable nor ready to start all over again. She walked to me slowly and put her arm round my shoulders, then she said 'I know that you don't want to begin a new school again, but I remember what my Grandad told me before I began university, 'you can do it sweetheart, never give up, persevere'".

I walked in through the main door of the school where there was a lady who was going to give me a tour of the school. She said her name is Miss Scott and that the school is called Leith Primary School. I liked the way her name was pronounced, it sounded so new and beautiful to me. I struggled to understand what she was saying, but I understood bits and pieces. I could hear the difference of Scottish accent than to the accent I was used to hearing. Then I realised I was smiling the whole time! I usually only smile when I am doing a hobby or if I am enjoying something, which means I was actually enjoying it.

I could feel the whiteness of my happiness overtake all the darkness of worry that I was feeling at the time, but the feeling didn't last long.

I walked into the class to see a silent classroom all looking at me. I could feel all eyes staring and staring. I was so nervous I couldn't even look at anyone, I just continued gazing blankly at the floor. The teacher led me to a seat at the front beside a girl that looked older than me. She introduced herself as Sana. That was also a lovely name, but I was a bit familiar with it as one of my old friends was also called Sana. I was struggling to concentrate on what the teacher was saying, not because I couldn't understand, but because I was thinking about my old school, how much fun it would have been with my old friends. Then I remembered what my Great Grandad had told me before school, 'you can do it sweetheart, never give up, persevere.'

The teacher finished what he was saying and handed out jotters and textbooks, then he handed me two pieces of paper. I looked down at them and then I took a pencil out and started working. It was so easy that I had to ask for more tasks to complete. Then I told the teacher that I already knew my times tables and that they were really easy for me. So then he handed me a textbook, it looked a bit different to the one the teacher gave the rest of the class. But when I opened it, it was a lot harder than the sheets he gave me before so I started working. Then a bell rang and everyone got up to go outside, and then I realised I still didn't have anyone to play with, but then Sana asked if it was OK for her to play with me, of course I had to say yes.

After that, time flew by like a cheetah chasing its food. I ended up finding myself with a whole group of people eagerly wanting to talk to me and be my friends, which made me feel a bit more

comfortable. Sana became my best friend and I also had other friends like Mya, Lily and Yifan. We used to meet up after school and go to Leith Links to play in the park. Even though I can't see my old friends anymore, we still kept in touch by calling and texting each other. Life is a range of chapters, and I felt like that was one of the chapters that let me move on to the next. Maybe Friendship is the main chapter in life as friends can help support everyone, and everyone has experienced a friendship that ended at a point. So in the end, my Great grandad was right, 'never give up, persevere.'

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Linda al Hariri  
Trinity Academy

## Papa Was a Rolling Stone

Papa was a rolling stone. It was her favourite song and she often sang it to herself. Wherever he laid his hat was his home. She liked that line. Papa had once laid his hat in her home – her mother's home, the Banana Flats. The song faded from her before the next line. Rona did not want to think of her father as potentially dead. He was a rolling stone, gathered no moss. In her mind's eye, he winked at her from beneath a faded canvas cap, and looked intently at the horizon from their high windows with curious eyes. But it was true, anyway. Her mother dead now, a fact she couldn't wish away, all her father had left her, was alone.

Rona was susceptible, her mother would say. Easily carried away with notions. A dreamer. She romanticised bohemians and rootlessness: Freya Stark, Martha Gelhorn, pioneers and adventurers; even though she had never ventured out of Leith, nor away from the home she grew up in with her mother. There were boundaries to her life: Dalton's scrap yard in Seafield to the south, and Waugh's scrap yard beyond Newhaven, to the north. It made imagining the wide, wide world beyond easy. Reality did not have to beat fantasy down or handshake on a compromise. She should be grateful for that, at least.

"There's a camper van clamped on The Shore", the bottom flat neighbour barked as she passed his window. He slammed it shut and glowered. He didn't mean anything by it. Surly Jim, her mother called him, but fondly. He looked out for them by fixing things and giving them daily weather updates. "It's raining", he would say, "they got it right today". Or, with a snarl of pleasure,

“They didn’t see that coming, did they?”

It wasn’t until Rona was buying milk in Henderson’s paper shop that she understood the significance of the breakdown Surly Jim had reported.

“Hippies!” old Mrs Mason huffed, snatching together the handles of her carrier bag as though shielding it from a hippy attack. “They won’t find anything here!”

Silently, Rona agreed, wasn’t sure what hippies would be looking for in these grey-lined streets overlooking the black Water of Leith crusted with litter. The storekeeper smiled and took Rona’s change, his attention already drifting back to his newspaper.

Rona needed more, to fix a picture for herself of the hippy breakdown on The Shore. She could take the long way home.

The blue van was visible from a distance, giving Rona time to appreciate its list towards the quayside, cringing away from the buses that had to slow and skirt it impatiently. It was one of those Volkswagens with a soft top, which had been lifted, emphasising the tilt. A towel flapped in the breeze from the open front passenger window, its improvised domesticity creating a sense of permanence. As she drew near, a car rushed past it with a horn blaring and receding into the distance. A hand flapped a two-fingered rebuke out of the open side door and flopped back inside.

Rona heard a soft voice. “Sorry, that wasn’t meant for you”.

It came from a pair of torn, dusty baseball boots poking out of the van’s shadowed interior. Unsure who the apology was meant

for her, Rona passed on. When she had almost left the van behind, her heart thudding with the thrill of being up close to such an oddity - a hippy van with talking hippy feet - she heard feet plant themselves softly on the road. She turned to see that a body followed, languid, eventually standing loosely, arms hanging limp and knees barely holding skinny legs under dirty, torn denim.

Rona waited. Eventually, a hand lifted in a half circle and dropped back to its dangle. “Tony”. It took Rona a little too long to realise it was an introduction. His shoulders sagged back towards the open door before she blurted out her own name. He re-emerged, raising an eyebrow, smiling.

She liked his smile but did not smile back. It was too soon. She wanted to peer around him, past his slack stance and slight, pasty features. There was ginger tinged soft fringe on his chin – beard seemed too robust a description. His shaggy, almost spiky, darker hair appeared ambushed by dirtiness and neglect, topped by a shapeless cap. Wherever he laid his hat was his home. A home, with wheels. How did a direction beckon? she wanted to know. What shape is an adventure? How does it smell?

From the first twitch of his faded crimplene curtains Surly Jim let it be known that Tony was an alien invader. Rona couldn’t disagree. Inside the bricks and mortar of the Banana Flats, Tony marvelled at the fridge, the electric kettle and running water. Off the road, he seemed unable to occupy rooms. Hippy life had cramped him into a physical economy of posture and movement. Instead of reaching across space to touch something, he rippled towards it, limbs and body compact like an eel.

In the weeks of waiting, first for a spare part to reach the mechanic at the garage on Pitt Street, and then for an appropriate deal to be struck on payment, Rona explored Tony as her new adventure. Skin on skin, tangled together, listening to birdsong through the open window and contemplating dusky sky as the sun set over the city horizon, the open road quietly beckoned. The van would be repaired, the rolling stone would move on. Rona watched Tony's eyelids flutter in sleep and thirsted to experience time as an unfolding of daylight and starlight and road beneath wheels. She craved an escape from the parochial measuring of days, Surly Jim's daily window slam marking time, seasons impatient to impress upon her their expectations. With Tony, she learned to dunk bread into the jam jar and drink from the carton, to wear jeans until they accumulated a grey patina and an earthy scent she associated with nature. Mrs Mason sniffed loudly in the Henderson Store's queue.

Tony gifted her bouquets of weeds from the North Leith graveyard. In the spaces between ancient headstones, watched by their skulls and crossed bones, he rolled over uncut grass to create a bower from which they watched clouds gather in the late afternoon. He pressed his nose to her hair as it absorbed the sun's heat, showed her lacewings' translucent splendour as they spun in a spider's web. Later, he made angel's wings in her sheets, marvelling at the scope of a real bed. Gradually, he began to spread himself out in sleep, started to uncoil in the spaces of her flat, while Rona learned to cede space, needing less of it.

The day came when the throaty rhythm of the Volkswagen camper grew as it approached them, fading again as it halted

outside the flats. Tony and Rona stood reacquainting themselves with its blistered paint and sun-faded curtains. An unspoken invitation hovered between them.

Surly Jim opened his window and eyed the van. "There's rain forecast," he grunted, about turned, and slammed his window again. His shadow stood just beyond his curtains.

Tony suggested a cup of tea. They stood in the kitchen of the flat, his skinny frame gently rising and falling from heel to toe as the kettle climbed towards a noisy boil. Rona watched, feeling sunshine reach across the hallway to her bare feet from the window. The warm smell of the van, its metal, rubber and foosy interior still lingered in her mind, had shocked her into understanding.

"I'll miss this kettle," Tony offered up as an opener. Rona looked at the faded kitchen. She could never, ever miss a kettle.

As the engine turned over, the van shook its walls, settling into a pleasant vibration rising through the seat. The noisy fan stirred the smell of sweat and stale bedding. Dust motes rose in spirals of air illuminated by shafts of sunlight. Orange seat covers and striped curtains glowed, bathing the shabby interior in golden promise. The tiny cooker added its tympani to the van's orchestral announcement of imminent departure. The twist-and-turn handbrake plunged back towards the dashboard and forward momentum gathered by degrees, almost as a dream, dispelling the anticipation of an engine stall or other sign that would trap the rolling stone beneath a steady foot.



Surly Jim emerged from his window again. His mouth hung loosely, hinged by his arched tufted eyebrows, as he watched. His hand raised uncertainly. He looked over at Tony, still rocking slowly, heel to toe, hands stuffed in the too-small pockets of his raggy jeans.

“Hope the rain holds off,” Tony said softly, his head tilted to one side, testing, gently, the correct form of address for a neighbour.

Surly Jim let out a small puff of air as his mouth flapped shut. His hand dropped, then pawed again at his curtains, unsure of a resting place. “They never get it right,” he said, steadying himself on the sill. “Hardly, anyway,” he qualified, looking down the road, now empty of the van and all life’s known parameters.

Papa was a rolling stone. Tony had laid his hat in her home. But dreams must persevere. The open road reeled Rona in towards the horizon with its unknown weather and its limitless potential.

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Ruth Campbell

## Persevere

Potential,

Enough to fuel a rocket they said

Rarin’ to go and change the world, or find another,

She shot into space

Every year a new orbit until,

Veering seawards, she’d

Exhausted all projections after

Rarely landing on target.

Ended up, per astra ad ardua, severe and here.

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Sally Freedman



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Kristabel Ewaleifoh  
Trinity Academy

## Swan

Evening wind blew over the river, the water cold and dark.

The last remains of the sun fell behind the buildings, the clouds overhead smothering the stars, in dark grey and black.

The nest was filled with tiny shuffling grey shapes, all tumbling over one another, the water below suffocating and pitch black.

Three little lumps of feathers, where there should be four.

The water churned beneath the cygnets webbed feet, the only light the dancing reflections of the windows on the river.

As the little feathered ball began to grow limp, a sound in the night rippled towards him, his mother.

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Mina Spike  
Trinity Academy

## A New Chapter in Leith

Through cobbled alleys,  
Where history whispers tales,  
Indomitable.

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# Message from the Makar



Leith has always held this city's most vibrant stories. In these times which require so much from us all, that requires such tenacity and endurance, community is what can sustain us and inspire us. In this collection of stories, a community emerges from the pages. One which offers the readers solidarity and insight. It is so heartening to see that even in times we often describe as divisive, we can find ways to come together. The motto may be persevere but let us not forget we move forward together.

**Hannah Lavery. Edinburgh Makar.**

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