

# write!

*Get writing, get noticed, get published...*



# FROM ROUGH DIAMONDS TO POLISHED GEMS

Welcome to the first edition of *Write!* - The Write Factor's new online e-zine, where we keep you up to date with all the news from The Write Factor offices.

The Write Factor was set up specifically to help nurture and support the creative and literary imagination by providing cost-effective services – from editing, proofreading, ghostwriting and mentoring, right through to publishing: we can help transform a book from a rough diamond into a polished gem!

For books to stand out from the crowd in today's world, they have to sparkle, be professionally presented and effectively promoted, creatively using the myriad technical advances to stay at the crest of the publishing wave.

The Write Factor can provide all these services but remains small, friendly and approachable. So if we can help you bring your novel, short stories, memoir or biography to fruition, don't hesitate to contact us. We're here to help.

## IN THIS ISSUE...

In this issue we present the winning entries from our first short story competition - Family Fortunes - together with a short story contributed by our judge, Alyson Hallett.

You will also find an extract from the forthcoming hilarious and poignant novel by John Moat, called *A Fabrication of Gold* and the Top Ten favourite books read in 2010 as voted by The Write Factor team of editors.

We hope this issue of *Write!* inspires you to ... write!



## Sophie Poklewski Koziel

TWF welcomes Sophie as Non-Fiction Commissioning Editor. Sophie is Associate Editor of *Resurgence* magazine and co-author of *Gathering Force*. She writes widely on issues ranging from sustainable development to contemporary art.

Amongst several other writing and editing projects, Sophie is also currently working on a family memoir.

"I'm looking forward to my new role at The Write Factor," says Sophie. "With several interesting proposals already on the table, these are indeed exciting times."



## Clive Gilson

TWF welcomes Clive as Commissioning Editor for Contemporary Fiction. Clive is a prize-winning poet, and author of several books, most recently his *Collected Works 2001-2009*. Clive is currently working on his new novel entitled *Acts of Faith*.

"I'm delighted that following some years working with the team at The Write Factor on various projects, I have agreed to join the group as Commissioning Editor for Contemporary Fiction," Clive said.

"I'm really looking forward to developing an exciting range of new projects and writers over the coming months. It's such an interesting time to get involved with this innovative publisher, especially with their focus on new media formats and digital marketing."



# A FABRICATION OF GOLD

BY JOHN MOAT

Published by The Write Factor in May 2011

*The extract below is from A Fabrication of Gold, a novel that delves into the strata of one man's nervous breakdown – and it really shouldn't be this funny – but as the deranged and finally fruitful process of the breakdown becomes a breakthrough, thanks in no small part to the alchemical intervention of some seriously dodgy characters, the book jubilantly surfaces from delusion to clarity. A feat of great storytelling with a pinch of magic, those who have so far plumbed its depths have done so in one sitting. The book is literally “unputdownable.”*

Check out The Write Factor website in April for podcasts from A Fabrication of Gold.



## The Heron

An extraordinary thing happens. I decide against the study. Instead I slip out the back way.

I think: I think I'll string some onions.

The onions are drying in the open shed at the end of the lawn. I can't be seen from the house.

The day has become more unsettled: one moment it's mellow fruitfulness and tortoiseshells on the sedum spectabile; the next the sun's gone, the wind's turned grey and started whimpering in the telephone wires. I can see I'm agitated from the way I fumble the strings. But I can't keep my mind even on that – I've begun to think about the heron.

The day Fiona and I moved in, nearly two years ago, we saw this huge lanky bird fly over the house, heading for the stream. I said, “Look, it's a pelican or something.”

“It's a stork”

“I sincerely hope not!”

“Well any way it's our lucky bird.”

We've allowed the idea to grow that the heron will fly by every year and that when we see it we'll know everything's fine.

I'm thinking: Know what? We haven't seen the heron this year. That's a clincher, that has to be really unlucky

I look up. Beyond the lawn, standing some thirty yards away in the drive is a tall, grey looking man. My immediate reaction is: this man isn't what he seems. He looks unfamiliar, but I feel I've seen him before. He's staring up at the house in an ominous way like that character in Hardy's novels who keeps returning after forty years with a lot on his mind.

I continue stringing onions determinedly but I'm watching him out of the corner of my eye. He's certainly holding something in his arms: it's grey like himself and he holds it kind of cradled.

I hear the front door open. There's Fiona on the steps in her blue cashmere jumper, looking young and stunning. The man is talking to her – about what he has in his arms.

Christ, it's our heron.

His voice is crackly but I can hear him say he's found it in trouble beside the stream. He's not sure if it's stunned or faint from hunger. Or if it's dead. It does seem to be warm. Fiona runs back into the house. Single-mindedly I continue stringing my Sturons – well, perhaps not single-minded.

Here's Fiona again, down the steps, running to the man. She says something to him. He shifts the body of the bird into the crook of one arm, and with the hand of that arm is holding its neck. With the other hand, the fingers, he forces open the beak. Fiona, calm as a theatre-sister, is pouring something down its throat from a white plastic spoon. I know what that'll be, the miraculous arnica. Little white pills – Annabel's boyfriend gave them her last winter. He thought she might need it to help with the shock of him walking out. She didn't – but nowadays the least bruise or jolt or life-crisis and we slip one under the tongue. I could use a couple now – high-potency.

I'm watching now. I can't grasp all of what's hitting me except it's like a battery of light – my love for this sure, joyful woman in her blue jumper. It makes me feel distinctly unsound. With everything in the balance, still she is deft and methodical as she works on the fateful bird. To give him the medicine she's had to dilute the pill in a teaspoon of water. My eyes are pricking with tense tears. It feels as if at the same time I'm shouting and holding my breath. I feel cut off. I see everything in the clearest detail, but I'm cut off from it.

What's happening? The man seems to be having trouble holding the bird. The thing's come alive. It's struggling in his arms. Fiona leans forward to settle the heron with her hand. It draws back from her, is poised a moment quite like a snake. Then it stabs.

Fiona has taken a step back. She has both hands over her eyes. The man shields his head as the heron struggles free. With slow lurching flaps it is gaining height. I hear it thinly, the one searing gloating shout, and then the bird-tatters are caught by a gust and toppled over the trees. Blood is leaking from between Fiona's fingers.

Whatever it is it's on my back and I can't break away. The grip of it, that's the problem – it has the muscle of undentable anger. I need to run to Fiona. Besides she's all in the world I want. But I can't. The more I force myself the tighter the grip. I feel the anger taking over, moving through me with its terrible cold.

The man has gone. Fiona walks slowly up the steps. She looks down at her fingers at the blood, and then touches her forehead. The wound is low down, almost exactly between her eyes. Right where she carries that little questioning frown.

Again I try to shout. I feel I've never been hurt by anything so much as this inability to move. Or rather to move as I would like. Because I can still move – I'm quite able to continue stringing these infernal onions.

# FAMILY FORTUNES

THE WRITE FACTOR INAUGURAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2010

## WINNER RETAIL THERAPY by Jenny Long

Judge Alyson Hallett commented on the winning entry:

“Retail Therapy stood out because it possessed emotional integrity. There are some beautiful phrases in this work, and the observations of how a human being feels and acts are wholly authentic. This story responded to the competition theme of ‘Family Fortunes’ in a complex and layered manner. In addition there are glimpses of humour and genuine surprise that punctuate the story and give it an unusual rhythm.”



Nina tried hard to push the duvet up from her body, but it hung there, moulded to her shape, the feathers weighing her down. Weak fingers of light trickled in around the edges of the heavy curtains. The bedroom smelt heavily of sleep and sweat.

One foot peeked out from under the quilt, trying to encourage the rest of her body to get up. Her brain shrank away from the concept, wanting nothing more than to sink back into stupor. At this moment, that was her own personal definition of heaven: a day when the world went away. This was the only thing she craved, to be left alone.

“Are you getting up today?” she asked.

Josh, her husband, rolled over and pulled the duvet further over his head, feigning sleep.

She groaned and made a Herculean effort to sit up, then potted around in the gloom, trying to make herself look presentable for work.

“The kids need breakfast, and the house could do with a tidy. It wouldn’t do you any harm to run the Hoover around either.”

There was no response from the cocoon. She sighed plaintively. For the past six months she had been stuck in her own personal groundhog day. The same hellish twenty-four hours played over and over again on a continuous loop.

Nina checked the kid’s bedrooms, but they were already up. She could hear the cheery words of the Postman Pat theme tune being emitted by the TV downstairs - something about Pat being a very happy man.

Lucky Pat.

The post splattered on to the mat, and her stomach muscles contracted involuntarily, sweat forming on her upper lip. She opened the envelopes one by one, her hands shaking, but there were no bailiff’s letters today. Just reminders and final notices.

Michael and Siobhan sat transfixed by the telly, barely noticing as she ruffled their hair by way of goodbye.

“I’m leaving for work now,” she shouted up the stairs. “The kids are on their own down here.” Silence rebounded back on her. “You might not have a job to go to anymore, but there’s still work to be done.”

Her jibe stung him into action. The bedroom floor creaked and Nina flung herself out of the front door and slammed it shut behind

her to avoid the necessity of having to look her husband in the face.

She remembered clearly the very first time she had walked into the store. It had felt like she was entering an Aladdin's cave, filled with brightly coloured silk dresses and plush, luxurious velvet clothes. Sparkling baubles and gewgaws hung from walls and podiums, adornments and accessories for every sort of special occasion.

In the beginning Nina had loved the beauty of it. Now she just resented this space that was filled with things she could no longer afford, even with her generous staff discount. Not that she had anywhere to go in a full-length gown. Balls, Charity Gala's and corporate dinners seemed a lifetime ago.

It was a relief to find that her first task was to replenish the jewellery stands. It gave her another hour in which to achieve some sort of semblance of normality. It was a repetitive job. Pick up something sparkly, put it on a hook. Bend. Pick up. Put on hook. Over and over. There was something hypnotic about the glitter and the shine and the jingle jangle of the product.

The monotony, the repetition. Valium for the soul. Quiet. Silence. Numbness. She sank lower into herself, a heavy weight sinking to the bottom of a swimming pool. Her breathing slowed palpably, her heart following suit and she drifted lazily, caught on the current of her own internal thoughts and desires. She gave up and let go, felt huge chunks of herself peel off and float away, things that she'd considered crucial, things that she'd thought were keeping her afloat.

Anxiety, guilt, pain and shame. The flotsam and jetsam of her life. She was amazed by the stillness, surprised to find that such peace existed this deep inside her, that far down. Maybe, she thought, this is what rock bottom feels like. Maybe I've finally hit it. And she wondered why, if it felt this good, she hadn't hit it sooner. She inhaled and held the bubble inside, not wanting to let her moment of serenity go.

"Nina!" It was painful to face reality again. "Nina, are you listening to me? Can you take over from Debbie in the fitting room please? It's time for her to go home."

Nina nodded mutely, and tried to pull on her game face for the customers. Recently she'd found herself fading, being subsumed into the stock, becoming just another dress or a pair of trousers on display. This invisibility had its advantages, though. When people didn't see you, you were able to see them with astonishing clarity.

The women who cluttered up the cubicles today were no different from the ones who had occupied that same small space yesterday, and the day before that. These women talked reverently about their Bridget Jones knickers, their suck-it-all-in pants, their Gok Wan's; the instruments they used to make their bodies acceptable. They would pat their bellies, trying to smooth them down and Nina could see their heads whirring, trying to do the math. How much weight can I lose in ten days? Half a stone? Maybe a stone. Perhaps if I don't eat anything at all...

She tidied up some clothes that had been dumped on the floor and then stood there for a moment observing the women in their comfy underwear, so well-loved that it was greying and coming apart at the seams. They always looked surprised if they ever caught a glimpse of themselves in a stage of undress. Not that many of them risked a glance, preferring to turn their backs on their reflection whilst they

pulled on new clothes, avoiding the sight of the folds of creamy white goose-pimpled flesh that stared back, in an accusatory way. "If only you hadn't had that last biscuit" it seemed to say "we would've been fine." They tugged at the fitting room curtains, trying desperately to hide their own nakedness.

*Shwoosh.*

Nina pulled back the curtain and showed the woman into the cubicle. The man with her leaned nonchalantly against the wall. He didn't look bored, angry, irritated or impatient, which meant that he was an oddity, a curio amongst the rest of the men who were clustered around the entrance to the fitting room.

He looked good, attractive enough for Nina to do a double-take when she caught his eye. He returned her stare and looked at her, really looked at her, a rare occurrence for someone such as herself, cursed with invisibility. His shopping partner emerged from the changing room and twirled for him, and he tore his gaze away from Nina and smiled.

"Beautiful Hannah, I love it."

She inclined her head demurely and hurried back to her cubicle.

"Has your wife got a special occasion to go to?" Nina asked.

"Oh, she's not my wife, she's my sister. It's her birthday next week."

The woman came out again, dressed in a black and white chiffon silk dress that flowed around her.

"Stunning. You have to get it," he said, "it's perfect for your party."

She shook her head. "It's three hundred pounds. There's no way I can afford it. But it is beautiful." She lingered longer this time, waltzing up and down the aisle, admiring the way the dress moved with her. Finally, with great reluctance, she returned to her cubicle.

Her brother withdrew something from his wallet and motioned Nina over. He leaned in close to her, whispered discreetly in her ear and slipped his business card into her hand. She felt a dull ache deep in her belly. She tried to place the sensation, to pin it down, and she vaguely remembered, once upon a time, having a sex drive. There was something pleasurable about exploring the absence of it, like probing the gap made by a missing tooth.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" She was so engrossed in the moment, trying to file away the feeling of his fingers on the back of her hand, that she had failed to grasp what he'd said.

"Could you put it on hold for me? I'll send my secretary in to pick it up tomorrow."

"Sure," said Nina, surprised by his generosity, "Will you be my brother too?"

Her feeble attempt at flirting was cut short as Hannah emerged for the final time, dressed in her own clothes. She handed a clutch of dresses back to Nina and kept a rather ordinary looking one for herself. Her brother reached out and shook Nina's hand.

"Thanks for your help. Nice meeting you."

Nina blushed, surprised at her reaction to a simple handshake.

"Come back and see us again soon," she called to their retreating backs, and he turned round and grinned at her, acknowledging her folly.

*Shwoosh.*

"Let me know if you need a hand with anything," she said before

handing the customer the items.

“Well, to start with, you could make me two dress sizes smaller!” the woman smiled, enjoying her own joke.

“If only I could!”

The customer changed silently before peeking around the curtain.

“Could you just tell me, how does my bum look in this?”

“The trousers look good on you. A flattering shape.”

The woman glanced around the cubicle, confused, searching for something to wear on top, failing to see the clothes she had just removed, hanging from the peg on the wall.

“Would you look at that. I’m so stupid. I could just put my own t-shirt on.” She struggled into it, and stepped out from behind the curtain. “I’m so sorry - I’m in a bit of state. I didn’t think I would be this affected by it.”

“By what?” Nina fussed over her, straightening her trouser leg.

“My daughter died a year ago today. I came out shopping to take my mind off it. I thought I’d be alright.”

“Oh, how dreadful! Of course you aren’t alright. It takes a long time to get over something like that.” Nina struggled to find the right words to let this woman know how much she understood. After all, she and grief had been very intimate these past six months. Not the same kind of grief, granted, but grief all the same.

“Her name was Anne. She was only thirty-four and she’s left behind two children. Maybe you could get me these trousers in a black. And a green. Do they come in white? Get me the white as well.”

And this was how it went. Nina scurrying back and forth, bringing dresses and shirts and skirts and tops and trousers and jewellery, their interactions interspersed with snippets of information about Anne and her life. Until, finally, the woman gathered up all the clothes and walked to the till, clutching them tightly to her chest, desperately trying to fill that hole.

*Shwoosh.*

Nina was envious of the woman. She must have been in her forties but she had a fantastic figure. She was trying on a short black cocktail dress with a silver sequined bow detail, swivelling back and forth on tippy-toes in order to see the dress from all angles. There was nothing to be critical about. She looked amazing.

“What’s the occasion?” asked Nina.

“My daughter’s Ball,” she paused and Nina moved nearer and touched her lightly on the elbow, forced into motion by the customer’s obvious anguish.

“A Ball for my daughter’s charity. She has cancer. We’re committed to raising £100,000 this year.”

It proved to be too much, this revealing of oneself to a stranger in the fitting room of a clothes shop and the tears started to flow.

“Would you listen to something for me?” the woman asked. “I’ve written a speech and I’d be really grateful if you’d hear it and tell me if it’s okay.”

Nina nodded and waited patiently while the woman scabbled around in her bag for the piece of paper. She spoke eloquently, primarily about her daughter’s life and then, movingly, about the teenager’s long war with cancer. It appeared to Nina that all of the most recent battles had been won by the disease - it wasn’t a speech,

it was a eulogy.

Nina’s heart ruptured, with a deep longing to pour everything that flooded out of it into this woman before her, to gift her some of her own essence, to fortify her, to heal her. They sank to the floor, caught in the grip of something more powerful than either of them could comprehend. The woman trembled, and Nina hugged her tightly, feeling her own body reverberate in response. Eventually their sobbing subsided.

“Will you pray for her for me, my daughter?”

“Of course,” replied Nina. Who could refuse this woman anything? “What’s her name?”

“Grace,” said the woman, “her name’s Grace.”

She left work reluctantly that night, lingering in the fitting room even after the store had shut. When she eventually made it home she slunk in, closed the front door silently, remaining in the dark of the hallway in order to observe her family.

The living room had been haphazardly tidied, clutter shoved to the edges. Hoover tracks criss-crossed the centre of the carpet. A man’s definition of tidy. It was a start. Michael and Siobhan rolled around on the floor in some kind of tickling game.

“Stop it Siobhan,” shrieked Michael, “stop making me larf.”

A noise, halfway between a laugh and a sob hiccupped out of her, and she pressed her fingers on her lips to stop any more escaping. She felt her husband’s body pressed against her back, his hands on her shoulders. He smelt of aftershave and minty fresh breath.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. She understood it was easier for him to say this to her here in the blackness, where he didn’t have to see her expression.

She stood still for a moment, drinking in the sight of her children, remembering the intoxication of giving birth to them, the power that lay in creating life, bestowing love. She turned to face Josh, his features barely discernible in the half-light, and laced her fingers around his neck, pulling his face down to hers, moulding her body to his.

“I have a present for you.” Nina murmured, stretching up onto tiptoes, drawing their faces level. She held him there for a moment, studying him, watching, registering the pain in his eyes. Seeing, really seeing his shame and despair. Words deserted her, too weak and impotent to convey her emotions. So she made a prayer for him, pressed her lips to his and kissed him hard, filling him up with her love.

**Jenny Long is a 34 year-old wife and mother based in Essex. On winning the £250 First Prize, Jenny commented, “By winning The Write Factor’s inaugural competition, I have received something far more valuable than prize money: I have received validation. To spend great swathes of my time writing, without any guarantee that it will enrich our family life, sometimes seems rather selfish. Alyson’s generous critique and feedback has given me an injection of confidence to pursue my dream”.**

# FAMILY FORTUNES

THE WRITE FACTOR INAUGURAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2010

## RUNNER-UP

PROVIDENCE by Marvin Rabinovitch

If she wasn't at school or off somewhere with her friends, Uriel Bitterbroit's pre-adolescent daughter, Rechab, would watch as her father slowly added an extension to the chicken coop where his newly licensed broilers were to be housed. If he was feeling especially expansive, Uriel would sometimes give her a ride on the feed trolley that ran on an overhead rail between his supplies shed and the centre of the original structure. Entering the dim enclosure, Rechabi would, from long habit and sly humour, always ask the same question.

"Abba, why does it stink so bad in here?"

Catechized thus, Uriel never varied his answer. "Money does not stink, little one." And to illustrate his point, he would take a deep breath, and exhale with gusto. His old yokemate, Hadass, ever practical, had no patience for such whimsies.

"Don't forget, Bitterbroit. The ice wagon is due tomorrow afternoon and we need three new blocks. A little folding money would help."

"Won't the iceman take a tray of eggs instead?" Uriel asked.

"Eggs cost too much."

"Broken eggs, I mean. The shell slightly cracked."

Pursing her lips, she considered this suggestion. Hadass was a skillful player of the barter game. "Three quarters of a tray, maybe. Rechabi, check the number of damaged eggs in today's collection."

The collection cart was piled high with trays by the time they had finished wheeling it past the cages, deftly retrieving the warm, shit-bespattered eggs from the wire catchment gutter that trapped each hen's yield. On the lower level of the cart, a special tray held rejects, whether soft-shelled, misshapen or cracked, that could not be marketed through the agricultural board.

"You see, little one," he would lecture, "Even the bad eggs are good. Good for the iceman, anyway."

"Money does not stink," she would parrot with a grin.

"And the gold of the yolk or citrus is the only real gold." That was another oft-repeated aphorism of his.

"Is that the gold you're laying away for a rainy day?" she asked, deadpan.

"So you've heard those stories, hey? Well, let's say an iceless day."

"Abba, please. Tell me the secret."

"This is not a secret for little girls' ears. Maybe when you're grown up."

“Will you tell me if I help you build the new extension?”

Uriel chuckled and tousled her hair. “How can you help me, sweet one?”

“I’ll screw in all the light bulbs,” she offered, with such childlike innocence that he roared with laughter.

“Then you’ll be working very hard, because I plan to have nothing but fluorescents, and those are heavy things.”

As was his wont, poultry farmer Bitterbroit had read up on the latest theories of raising broilers for maximum profit. The idea, he explained to his daughter, was to fatten the chickens at an accelerated pace, which meant encouraging them to eat for as long as possible throughout the daily cycle, even far into the night. Instead of sleeping, they should gorge, but how could they do that in the dark? The solution, constant illumination, and electric lights that drew the least power were fluorescent tubes, a marvelous invention by the American Edmund Germer. He’d ordered a consignment from a Dutch manufacturer, a trailblazer in the field, and they were already en route in a cargo steamer that was due to dock in Haifa at the end of the month.

“Abba, you’re a wonder,” the girl said, eyes large with admiration. “You can do anything.”

Uriel smiled modestly. He was very much of the same opinion himself. As a boy in Poland, he had excelled at the yeshiva and been ordained a rabbi at the age of sixteen. The fact that he had later renounced the faith of his fathers made no difference. He had still been an ilui, a child prodigy. The memory which had enabled him to master the Oral Law, the Talmud, Mishna and Gemarah at a tender age, was now simply being applied to more practical ends, that was all.

Halfway through the roof-raising, it became apparent that a gap less than thirty centimeters wide remained in the ceiling at the far end of the structure. Like the missing slat of a blind, it let in the roseate hues of the Mediterranean sunset. Muttering angrily to himself, Uriel folded his arms across his chest and glared at the impudent shortfall. He had been so certain about his measurements, had checked and rechecked his calculations before ordering the corrugated sheet metal. No doubt about it, the supplier had short-weighted him.

Uriel gave the matter a moment’s thought before dismissing his first impulse. To demand an addition would either end in a choleric outburst or be an admission of faulty planning. It would be much easier to close such a tiny opening by means more readily to hand. A strip of old but serviceable tarpaulin was available in the woodshed. He congratulated himself on his habit of providence. Never throw anything away today that you can use tomorrow. The fact that the seam would not be perfect did not bother him. Hermetic seals were abundant only in the mythic realm of cabala.

As far as his fluorescent tubes were concerned, Uriel congratulated himself - he had not miscalculated. The stubby cylinders of glass fitted exactly between the connectors he had improvised for each ten-hen module of the broiler cages, ready and waiting for their tenants. Every second connector dropped a well insulated pair of braided wires to the floor, ending in a grounded plug that snapped into one of the sockets protruding every three meters from the heavy-duty electrical cable snaking underfoot from one end of the broiler coop to the other. A junction box set into the wall above the entryway connected the cable to the power grid already supplying the original layers’ annex.

Fists on hips, Uriel surveyed his work with satisfaction and pride. The fuse panel, as beautifully designed as a tapestry, filled him with pure aesthetic delight: the pleasure of a creator who contemplates a work well conceived and well executed.

“Not bad for a former yeshiva student who never dirtied his hands with a screwdriver until he crossed the sea as an adult,” he preened. Sender Har-Levy, the village’s circuitry maven, was less effusive.

“I don’t know, Reb Bitterbroit, seems to me you ought to have a backup shunt in case the juice goes out of control.”

“Never mind,” Uriel roared. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as our British masters like to say. Watch close.”

With a grand air of consequence, Uriel threw a double-pole switch. One after the other, the glass-enclosed inert gas flickered and lit. The enclosure filled with illumination of an unearthly pallor.

“Impressive,” the heating-and-light man acknowledged.

“And look at the way the light shines directly into each cage,” Uriel pointed out with undisguised glee. “Those Cornish lovelies won’t get a wink of sleep. They’ll stuff themselves day and night.”

The other just shrugged his shoulders in mute surrender and gazed up absently through the window at the cloudless sky.

“If only we could make it rain as easily as you plan to raise broilers, Reb Bitterbroit,” he said with a sigh. “Looks like this will be a drought year.”

“Get yourself a rabbi and let him say the prayer for rain,” Uriel said, enjoying the other’s discomfiture.

“Who can afford the rebbe gelt in these lean years?” Sender said, referring to the fee for rabbinical services. Then, as if in desperation: “Didn’t I hear somewhere that you were ordained a rabbi in the old country?”

Uriel snorted with contempt. “I left that garbage behind along with my fur coat. You have to be a hardheaded man to survive in this wilderness.”

“Well, what does it matter?” Har-Levy replied disconsolately. “You’ve probably forgotten the prayer anyway after such a long time.”

Uriel smiled condescendingly. “My dear friend, I never forgot a line I ever read even just once at any time of life. No matter how nonsensical.”

“So you have prayed for rain.”

“Every yeshiva student has been taught the prayer for rain. Sometimes when I’m depressed, I repeat it to myself and feel better after a good laugh.”

The truth was that Uriel Bitterbroit enjoyed a good laugh at any time, especially at the expense of pious absurdities. This was too good an opportunity for free amusement to pass up. In the end, the electrician was pleasantly surprised at how easily his stubborn neighbour was persuaded to lead the prayer for rain.

In solemn conclave with the traditional religious quorum of ten Jewish males gathered around his dining table that evening, the poulterer-intercessor briefly summarized the powers he was about to invoke.

“The angel in charge of the distribution of rain is named ‘Af-Bri.’ This name refers to the two ways in which rain can be delivered to the earth. ‘Af’ means anger and represents torrential, flood-creating rainfall. ‘Bri’ denotes health and corresponds to the gentle rain which is beneficial to humanity and to the environment in general. Af-Bri,



the angel of rain, thickens and forms clouds, and empties them to cause rain. But only at the behest of the Almighty. It's Him we have to convince now."

He bent and straightened his knees, then intoned: "Oh Master of the Universe, send water with which to crown the valley's vegetation. May it not be withheld because of our unredeemed debt." He darted a look at his congregation: "And say ye amen."

"Amen," came the ragged chorus.

"For the sake of the faithful Patriarchs, protect the ones who pray for rain. Blessed are You, Hashem, Shield of Abraham." Uriel bent his knees on uttering 'blessed,' bowed when the divine 'second person singular' passed his lips, and straightened after naming the ineffable Name, Hashem. "And say ye amen."

"Amen. Amen. Amen." They would definitely have to work on synchronicity.

He harangued them for the next hour and a half, invoking Moses who coerced the very rocks to yield water, and most of the prophets who thirsted in the wilderness. His clamour and the congregation's assaulted the ceiling and no doubt mounted to the firmament.

"That was a wonderful prayer, Abba," Rechab said when the last supplicant finally disappeared into the night.

Uriel's eyes twinkled. "You think so, my sweet?"

"Yes. And you said it so beautifully. So powerfully."

"That's true," Hadass agreed, smiling her approval.

"Well, there's a lesson in that, my girls," Uriel said sternly, hammering the table lightly with a clenched fist to make a point. "A good actor can always persuade his audience. All you need is an air of conviction and a compelling personality. A freier will believe anything if the front is good enough."

"So it won't rain?" his daughter asked sadly.

"By and by it will," he comforted her, stretching out a stubby, hairy hand and enfolding both of hers. "But certainly not because I serenaded some capricious deity with verses lauding his favourites." He shook with silent laughter.

"I still think the prayer will be effective," the girl insisted stubbornly. "And soon."

"Would you like to bet?"

"I don't mind."

"I'll bet you ten pieces of gold." He tousled her hair and this time laughed aloud. "Egg yolks, I mean."

Perhaps he was rash to offer such a wager. In the pre-dawn darkness, the boom of celestial artillery crashed resoundingly over the Judean hills. A momentary hush followed, and then the red tiles of the Bitterbroit roof were battered by a sudden, fierce onslaught of hailstones.

Hadass trembled under the covers, clutching her husband's arm spasmodically.

"Uri, Uri, The angel Af-Bri. But a thousand times more Af than Bri."

Uriel opened his mouth, but said nothing. For one of the few times in his life, he was not certain. A gush of rain followed the downpour of hail, as if the titanic udders of heaven were voiding directly over the Bitterbroit homestead. It was a mercy the roof was not leaking, and he thought proudly, "Yes, when I build, I build for the ages." But beneath the satisfaction, a thread of worry still lingered.

At last, after what seemed like hours, the rain slackened. Relieved, Uriel patted his wife's rump comfortingly and turned over in bed, preparing to resume the sleep of the righteous.

"Abba, Abba, fire, fire!"

Rechab's bedroom window faced the chicken coop. It was she who spotted the tongues of flame licking at the roof of the egg layers' pen. Pulling on his trousers, Uriel was out in his yard before Rechab could draw breath for a second screech. In the light of the blaze, he saw in an instant what had happened. The barrage of hail had scythed through the twine securing the plastic tarpaulin to the short-falling sheet metal roof and the cinderblock frontage. The niagara of water that followed had reduced the tarp to a sodden mass and ultimately flushed it through the unsealed opening. Now under water a quarter of a meter deep, the cable powering the fluorescents had obviously short-circuited, causing an electrical overload. But why had the fire broken out in the egg-layers' henhouse?

During his two-month recuperation in hospital from the second and third degree burns he had sustained, Uriel had enough leisure to figure it out. The fuse protection system he had installed was simply too good. It had indeed shut down the juice from the original power supply to which it was connected, which saved the secondary structure. However, the ancient ungrounded fuses, dating back to the Great War, in the junction box of the old layers' pen, had been unequal to the task of containing the surge from the leads feeding the new subsystem. He had forgotten the weakest link in the chain. Hence the build-up of heat and the subsequent fire.

On Rechab's first visit to his bedside, he could barely look her in the eye.

"Well, my child," he wheezed, recovering from a minor case of smoke inhalation, "I suppose you've come to collect on your bet. Ten pieces of gold, if I remember correctly."

"Oh, Abba," she wailed, "It's all one piece of gold now. One ugly, thin, dirt-filled puddle of gold shaped like South America. And we can't stop people from chipping it away."

He patted her hand but said nothing. He was lucky to be alive, and grateful that the Most High had taken the gold as a forfeit and not his life. For he had been a fool, undeserving of survival, to rush headlong into the burning building to salvage the trays of cracked eggs. Not just any cracked eggs, of course, but those he had emptied of their organic matter and filled with edge-milled disks of yellow metal, golden Chernovetz rubles minted from Ural bullion and stamped with Lenin's sharp-bearded profile in faraway Soviet Russia. Just one more instance of the worker's and peasant's habit of providence.

**Marvin Rabinovich says "I'm very pleased that my short story was considered worthy by the judges as Runner-Up in The Write Factor Short Story competition. That is how a writer measures his or her success – one acceptance at a time. Providence is the latest of my work to appear in print (or in this case, pixels), joining earlier efforts which have been well received over the years in such disparate places as Australia, Japan, Israel, England, Canada, and the USA."**

# FAMILY FORTUNES

THE WRITE FACTOR INAUGURAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2010

## COMMENDATION

UNMUSICAL BUMPS by Andrew Campbell-Kearsey

The noise of the steam from the iron makes it difficult to follow the play on the radio. I usually enjoy the menial task of pressing a scrunched up shirt from the bottom of the laundry pile and transforming it into an article of clothing that a gentleman's outfitters would be proud to display in their window. But today I am not creating my finest work - it must be nerves. Fortunately, the jacket will cover most of the creases. I can't recall the last time I polished shoes but I will make the effort today. I remember the rigmarole as a child: my father had a complete array of brushes and cloths. A strict order of application was always necessary. Now it's easier. You sponge the polish on and wait for it to dry. He would call it immoral - as all short cuts were in his eyes.

I had difficulty sleeping last night; too many things to think about. I haven't exactly worked out a speech, but do I know the gist of what I want to say when I get there this evening.

I need something to occupy my mind this afternoon before I set off. I relax into Doris Day extolling the virtues of the Deadwood Stage in 'surround-sound'. That was the term given to me by the man in the shop. He explained the technological developments in sound transmission and aural enjoyment. My preoccupation was that there would be no unsightly wires and that the volume could be turned up to practically deafening levels. This has been achieved.

I used to sing along with my mother as she ironed. I would make my own stagecoach out of the laundry basket. That, of course, was when music had been technically allowed in our home. Even at the age of three or four I knew that her voice was not terribly strong and that she could not hit the high notes. That didn't matter. It was an activity that we did together, without my father knowing. The record player was turned off just before he was expected home. Fortunately, he was a man of regular habits and we were never caught out. I can't recall exactly when the strict 'No Music' rule came into our home. I do remember, at my sixth birthday party, my mother clapping so that we could play a kind of unmusical bumps. When she stopped applauding we had to sit down abruptly on the floor.

It's no good. I am unable to concentrate on the movie. I'll start the drive. It's not a terribly long journey. I reckon it will take just over an hour, but it's not a route I've driven for over twenty-five years. I have

successfully avoided any reason to visit that particular suburb. Perhaps, subconsciously, I always knew that I would set out far too early. This would inevitably lead to spending time in the area where I grew up.

I park the car by the familiar parade of shops. How on earth do some of these shops keep going? Who buys wool and knitting patterns these days? The post office has gone. There is some sort of deli with a startling range of olives. The same bench is there, dedicated to Ethel Snodgrass's dog. I can't work out why I ever thought that so hysterically funny. The paving stones, which had wheel-width sized grooves in them, where I would park my Chopper, were still there but filled in with rubbish and moss. I don't want to be spotted by anyone. There will be enough of that later. I put my collar up and put on a woolly hat I have in my pocket. Combined with my shifty loitering I now resemble somebody who should be claiming royalties from screenings of Crimewatch.

I pass my old primary school. The local authority has invested in an impressive sign. There is now an Asian headteacher and a female caretaker. Unfortunately, the funding has not extended to replacing the 'temporary' classroom huts that I can see through the fence. I remember them well. Would a forensic team be able to track down any of my DNA? Was there any trace of me? I was far too well behaved to leave any graffiti, scared of the disproportionate punishment from home rather than a strong inner moral code. Naturally, it all seems smaller than in my memory. I wonder if the same would be true for my parents. I know that they are both alive from the announcement. Maybe they've shrunk. It seems to happen with age. Perhaps my mother has been ravaged by osteoporosis. Hopefully my father will have been cut down to size.

I turn the corner. The church is at the end of the road. I can see people heading into the adjacent hall. As I draw nearer I can see that they are all carrying tins and Tupperware containers. I thought about bringing a present or at least a card. I feel guilty turning up out of the blue empty handed. But what am I celebrating? I hold back. The large banner outside the church hall announces the farewell supper to my father and to wish him well in his forthcoming retirement. My mother does not even merit a mention, although she has tirelessly supported his calling. The start time is not for another quarter of an hour, yet my father has managed to impress upon, not just his family, but his entire congregation, the righteousness of punctuality. I will slip in once the speeches have begun.

I avoid eye contact with any of the congregation. I find a seat in the back row. These blue stackable plastic chairs are a welcome improvement, yet thirty years too late for my back. It was one of my unenviable tasks: 'in the service of the Lord' to erect and then collapse wooden chairs for prayer meetings and Bible studies. I would always be chastised for never putting enough of them out. My teenage excuse was that empty chairs looked depressing. My father always attributed it to my workshy attitude to life.

I don't recognise the man from the eulogies. Apparently, we are here to honour a saint, not the petty and vindictive man who is my father. In an orderly fashion, speaker after speaker rises to pay tribute to his plethora of admirable qualities. I'm not a big fan of science fiction but maybe here is an example of parallel universes. I spent my formative

nineteen years growing up in the same house, yet do not recognise this paragon. All I can see of him is the back of his head, which nods from time to time. He remains facing forward, no doubt lapping up the unctuous praise from his disciples. Occasionally I can pick out my mother's profile as she turns to gaze adoringly at her husband.

Eventually, we reach the climax of the proceedings. My father is invited to speak to his gathered flock. There is a heightened sense of collective anticipation as he takes the few steps to the front of the hall. He is accustomed to looking down on his followers from a raised lectern in the church next door. The only sounds as he clears his throat are from the kitchen: the tea urn bubbling, the unpeeling of clingfilm and the prising open of Tupperware lids. He leads everybody in prayer. As he raises his head after his final Amen, his voice seems momentarily bereft of its usual authority and certainty. Is this due to the emotion of the occasion or has he caught a glimpse of me? His ministry is coming to an end. I delight in the knowledge that he will no longer impact upon the lives of so many. The thought that his opinions and moral guidance will not be so highly sought must be choking him.

At the end of my father's address, there is a standing ovation for the old fraud. If I do not follow suit I will stand out. As he proceeds down the aisle, with my mother in his wake, I seem to be invisible to him.

Then, just as he passes by, he reaches out his hand. I feel the power of his fingers on my shoulder. An observer might mistakenly interpret this action as brotherly or, more appropriately, paternal love. He leads me to the familiar small storage room at the back of the hall, which houses the chairs and trestle tables.

Deprived of an audience, except for his only child, he drops his guard. He closes the door behind us and faces me with a menacing expression.

"You can't be here."

"Why not?"

"We told everybody that you were dead. It was easier that way."

"But lying is a sin, isn't it? Or have they changed the rules since I last came here? It's one of the Ten Commandments - the Eighth isn't it?"

"Don't quote the Bible at me! Your mother couldn't bear the shame that you brought on our family."

"What shame? I told you I was gay and you threw me out of the house."

"You made your decision to turn away from your faith and upbringing. You chose to live a life of filth."

"But as a father, don't you want me to be happy?"

"How can you be happy, living that sort of life? We offered to pray with you, to heal you."

At this point my mother enters the room. I hear my birth name, spoken for the first time in a quarter of a century. I go by a different name now. It was part of my reinvention. She instinctively walks towards me but my father bars her way.

"Wasn't it enough that you killed your twin sister? There's not a day goes by that I don't wish that you had died in her place. She would never have disgraced us. You had to bring shame on us and then come back today and denigrate my whole life's achievements. Well I won't let you. Get out!"

I'm stunned at his anger and at first can't process this wild accusation. There is silence, apart from the sound of my mother sobbing in the corner. One of the church elders tries to enter the room, concerned about my father's raised voice. He is told that everything is all right and that we are almost finished. The door closes again. How can we ever be all right?

"But she only lived for a few hours. She just wasn't strong enough. Surely you both understand? It wasn't my fault."

My mother manages to stand and address me: "I think it's best that you leave."

"But, Mum. Please..."

"Go. This is your father's day. Please don't spoil it for him."

My father looks on, allowing his wife to do his work for him. He puts his arm around my mother's shoulder and leads her out of the room. She turns to me and says softly: "Let yourself out the side door. We don't want anybody to see you here."

My father could not have scripted it better.

I'm outside the hall, sitting on the wall, shocked at what has been said and the intensity of their feelings after all this time. I suppose I expected there to be some primitive parental drive that might have overcome their prejudices. I imagined my mother hugging me and my father telling me it was good to see me. But it wasn't to be that way.

I hoped that my mother had said all that for my father's benefit and that she would find some excuse to come outside, run after me and initiate another meeting. I wait for ten minutes but she doesn't come out. It's a warm evening and windows are open. I hear people chatting and laughing. Occasionally I catch my father's voice. I give my mother five more minutes.

She doesn't come.

**Andrew Campbell-Kearsey says, "I wrote the story a couple of years ago. It came from nowhere. I am not even distantly related to anyone in the clergy! I used to be a primary school headteacher, but now I write full time. I have had a few competition wins but far more near misses. I have a story published every month in a local magazine called the 'Kemp Town Rag'. Some of my stories have appeared in anthologies but my partner can't give up his day job quite yet. I am enjoying experimenting with flash fiction at the moment. I love the economy. I have a website where all my stories are published ([www.andrewck.co.uk/](http://www.andrewck.co.uk/)).**



## TOP TEN BOOKS 2010

Here, in no particular order, are the ten favourite books read during 2010 as voted by The Write Factor team

1. *The Lacuna* – Barbara Kingsolver
2. *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* – Ivan Turgenev
3. *The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart* – Glenn Taylor
4. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* – Angela Carter
5. *The Wild Places* – Robert Macfarlane
6. *Seeing Things* – Seamus Heaney
7. *The Road* – Cormac McCarthy
8. *Collected Poems* – Philip Larkin
9. *Some Experiences for an Irish R.M* – Somerville & Ross
10. *The Water Theatre* – Lindsay Clarke

# ACCOMMODATING THE DEAD

A SHORT STORY BY THE WRITE FACTOR SHORT STORY COMPETITION JUDGE  
ALYSON HALLETT

The first significant thing they saw as they headed out of Bridgwater was a rainbow. Glowering in the sky, a bright arc of colour.

Hope turned the radio on and opened her window. A cool January breeze flooded the car and countered the stuffy heat that was clearing the windscreen. She glanced at her mother and realised, with some reluctance, that she felt nervous.

She indicated left and headed for Durlleigh reservoir; tyres somersaulting over wet tarmac, brash as a circus master's whip. In the distance she saw the Quantock hills, their great pine-covered bodies dark against the brooding sky. Hope used to walk there every weekend with her father when she was young. The two of them heading further and further into the forest, crossing streams, never saying much unless they saw something important. A buzzard perhaps, or an adder.

Her mother never went with them. There were always cakes to be baked or she'd be tired or there was a sick neighbour who needed a visit.

Hope pulled into the car park. She had no idea what this afternoon was going to be like because there was no 'like' to compare it with. She and her mother had never done this before, gone out into the countryside together. Hope wished there was an ice-cream van or a tea and greasy fried-egg-in-a-white-roll van with a couple of grubby plastic chairs in front - but there wasn't.

She veered into a space and killed the engine.

"My favourite bird," her mother said, pointing to a cormorant. They watched it back-wing the air before skidding onto the lake. Body slung so low in the water it looked as if the bigger part of it was drowning. It swam around for a while then ducked beneath the surface.

The path around the lake was muddy. Hope knew it was a reservoir and not a lake but the 'R' word didn't sit well in her mind. Reservoir was all function: it conjured up pumps and pipes and taps. Lakes were grander, exotic even. They were hidden depths and Canada and mysteries waiting to be explored.

"How's university going?" Frances said.

"Fine." Hope said.

"How are your friends?"

“Fine.”

“And your house?”

“It’s great.”

Frances’s questions were like skimming stones, successful because they bounced on the surface.

Hope remembered when she first met Louise’s mother. The coo and the preen, the way they liked to prise each other open and share secrets. How weird, Hope had thought. But then she met Jesse’s mother and Isla’s mother: a whole stream of mothers and daughters who were warm and interested in each other and weird because of this.

Hope’s mother had always been brief, abbreviated even. When they weren’t talking, which was most of the time, she attended empty space with something close to devotion. This made Hope furious when she was younger. Now, for the most part, she was indifferent. Her real life was firmly planted on the other side of the country and visits home were something to be tolerated rather than enjoyed. It wasn’t sad. It was just the way things were.

“Tell me about your course,” Frances said.

Hope glanced at her mother. “Why?”

“I want to know.”

“I passed the ecology exams before Christmas and I’ve started a project on a lake in Chile.”

Her mother dug her hands deeper into the pockets of her coat.

“What’s wrong with the lakes around here?” she said.

“There’s nothing wrong with them it’s just that we look at things all over the world.”

“Why’s that then?”

Hope wasn’t sure how her mother managed to be so difficult. It was her skill, her art. She could take the simplest thing and complicate it beyond abstraction. Hope took a deep breath and counselled herself to be patient. She didn’t want to argue.

“The world’s like a village these days - using the internet means we can get information about the remotest places.”

“I grew up in a village.”

“I know.”

“My village was small. How can the world be a village when it’s so big?”

“It’s a big village, a global village if you like.”

Frances made a face. That’s what she did when she didn’t like something. She didn’t say “I don’t like that,” instead she concocted an expression that would say it for her. “What’s so special about this other lake?”

“It’s vanished,” Hope said. “There’s nothing but a dry crater left behind and no-one knows where it’s gone. Scientists think an earthquake cracked the earth and drained the water away. As if a plug had been pulled out.”

“A disappearing lake,” Frances said.

“Yes.”

The sun shed its coat of cloud and threw a brief extravagance of light across the water. Hope shaded her eyes.

“Where did you say it was?”

“In the Magallanes province of Chile. If I’m lucky I’ll get to go on a site visit this summer.”

Frances stopped walking. “You’re going to look at something that’s no longer there?” she said.

Another cormorant appeared. Hope pointed to the bird and the two of them watched it alight on the remnants of an old jetty. It craned its neck to the sky and spread its wings out wide. Crucified itself in the cold January air.

“I had five miscarriages,” Frances said.

“What?”

“Five miscarriages. All of them boys. That’s why there’s such a big gap between you and your sister.”

Hope shook her head. She understood the words her mother had spoken but didn’t know what to do with them. She couldn’t take them in because no internal space met their requirements. Not yet at least.

“Five miscarriages?”

“Yes.”

“After Lindy and before me?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know they were boys?”

“That’s what the doctor said. He said I couldn’t carry boys.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m so sorry mum. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you.”

“Shall we carry on walking?” Frances said. “I’m getting cold standing still.”

Hope put one foot in front of the other and followed her mother. The word span in her mind: miscarriage. Miscarriage of justice... Carriages in the old streets of London .... If they were only a few months old were they babies or was there another word she didn’t know? Foetus wasn’t right, it was too small and impersonal. These were her mother’s sons and they were all dead. No coffin, no headstone, no hymns sung over their ivory heads.

Jesus. What a thing to live with.

Hope looked at the ground. It was solid and muddy and somehow comforting.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Frances shrugged. “I don’t like to talk about it,” she said.

The cormorant uncrucified itself and flew away.

Hope and her mother continued to walk around the lake. A cold easterly wind rattled the trees and pressed itself against the bare, reddening skin of their cheeks. Hope wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck and looked at the sky. It was beginning to bulge with yellowish-grey clouds.

“Snow’s on the way,” Frances said.

When they got back to the car the relief of being out of the wind was immediate.

They buckled themselves in and Hope started the engine. She went to hook it into reverse but her mother stopped her.

Hope flinched.

“Are you alright?” Frances said.

Hope shuffled her hand out from beneath her mother’s and folded her arms. Everything felt wrong. The afternoon, the trees, even the car was wrong. The picture I’ve lived with all my life is not the picture I’m

really in, she thought. I'm the seventh not the second child and I'm only here because five others died before me.

"I was going to call them Julian," Frances said. "You would have been Julian too if you'd been a boy. But you weren't a boy, you were a girl."

Hope thought about this for a minute or two. Then, "Were you disappointed?"

"What do you mean?"

"That I wasn't a boy?"

"Of course not. I was scared," she hesitated, "of losing you. Always scared. That's why I called you Hope. You were my little miracle," Frances said.

Oh god, Hope thought. What a responsibility. What a huge fucking responsibility. The seconds pretended they were minutes and the minutes masqueraded as hours.

Eventually Frances said, "We'll help you with money. If you get the chance to go to Chile." She was trying to lighten things up but Hope wasn't listening anymore. She was leaving her body and floating out through the windscreen of the car, heading for the clear open space above the water's surface. It was safe and quiet out there and she didn't need to try and understand anything. For one brief moment, there was just that weightless feeling and a sense of belonging to the clouds and the surrounding trees.

Then she was back in her body and faced with a flood of old memories. Hadn't she always been convinced that the wind contained the voices of dead people? Hadn't she been able to talk to these people in a way that meant she never felt alone because they came with her wherever she went? My brothers, Hope thought. Her mother's depressions and stifling silences suddenly made sense.

Frances pulled a packet of Fox's glacier mints from her pocket and offered one to Hope. "Mint?" she said.

Hope took the mint, unwrapped it and popped it in her mouth.

"Let's go home," Frances said.

Hope reversed out of the space and pulled onto the road. She pressed the accelerator close to the floor, changed gears, went faster. The road was as black as the cormorants they'd seen at the lake.

"What are you doing?" Frances said.

Hope pressed her foot on the brakes as they were approaching a T-junction. "I'm turning right for Bridgwater," she said. A small gap in the traffic appeared and she seized it. The wheels screeched and the engine roared.

"Pull over," Frances said.

Hope flashed her a look.

"I said pull over!"

Hope veered towards the curb and this time she slammed her foot on the brakes. The car behind blasted its horn as it swerved around them. "Fuck you!" Hope said. "You're driving like a maniac," Frances said.

Hope wondered how many other mothers were carrying around hearts filled with heavy and silent memories.

"Why didn't you tell me before? I would have listened, I would have helped."

"I thought we'd forgotten about that. Can't we move on?"

"Please, mum."

Frances sighed. "What else do you want me to say?" she said.

"Something. Anything. Why today of all days?"

Frances thought for a moment or two. "What you said about the lake," she said. "Going to look at something that isn't there. I thought you'd understand. And I hoped..." she stopped speaking.

Hope turned towards her mother. Her eyes were so open Hope thought she might fall into them if she didn't look away. "You hoped what?"

"You'll think I'm stupid."

"Tell me anyway."

"Well, I was wondering if your global village included the dead as well as the living."

"The spirits of the dead?"

"Yes. Not just their buried bones, but the bit that stays alive when they die."

Hope stared at the road, the houses on either side of the road, the man with a Sainsbury's carrier bag walking towards them. And then something else. Snow. Silent and white, a host of small weightless bodies banking on the windscreen and alighting on the long, bare branches of wintering trees.

"Yes," she said, turning to look at her mother. Her voice was soft, wavering almost. "I think it would be good if we included them from now on."

