

Commended

Under The Silver Tree Writing Competition 2023

No More Scratching At The Page

By Deborah Huff-Horwood

Every morning it's the same, until the fourth day of writing when it's not. On Thursday the words erupt. Lina lets loose her heart.

The deck with its black cat and grapevines, the garden with its lizards and birds – none of it she sees. Doors opening and closing down the hallway, lambs bleating in the paddocks and a crow's dark caw – none of it she hears.

Bliss rises amidst the bloodletting. She's revealing what's underneath.

Once it's done, she's a quivering mess with only minutes to save the file, date it, paginate, add her name. How to print, momentarily escapes her. Rational thought is a distant carriage of her train. Where did that story come from? She lets loose a single sob.

A face full of warm water helps, as does brushing her hair with long strokes. Her eyes search herself out: now naked, exposed. Was that voice really her own?

Lina wavers in the doorway, cloaks herself in a bed throw, then slips down the hall to where the others are assembled, sliding into the last seat.

Vanessa's voice is lilting, lovely. 'Let's centre ourselves, now we're all here.'

Hands link around the circle. Eyes close. For now, she is safe.

There's a flowing-through, a connectedness, she can feel it, holding hands. In this circle of writers Lina is a bead of their necklace, a rock of their Stonehenge; she's one of the ants bearing a grasshopper, a domino in the chain. She's a—

Squeeze. And there it is – expected but still surprising – someone's fingers pressing into hers. She can't recall whose hands she is holding, not that it matters. Plumply warm; possibly Jillian. Pass it on she must, but right now the pulse is hers and she needs it, oh god how she needs it. Is it rainbows or whiteness, this moment? Expanded after a minute of stillness, she sends the pressure onwards, contributing to the resonance. *You're every bit as important as everyone else, it says. Without you we're incomplete.* She can't wipe away the tears.

Eventually comes the sing-song sigh from their leader. Hands disengage. Lina swipes at her eyes then wraps herself in a hug. It's a form of containment, she knows; a double walling against hurt, but she's on her own. She's a book lost from the library. A seed fallen from its flower. Please no-one try to find her.

‘So, how was the morning for you?’ Vanessa asks. Lina flicks her gaze from the floor. Their leader’s look is kind, soft hair framing her face. Their eyes meet briefly, spanning oceans. ‘How did the writing go? Who would like to start?’

There’s a pause as always. Lina’s heart rate quickens until someone – Joan – begins. The ex-teacher explains her writing process, talks about the energy she’d felt and that she’d an easier day today. Heads nod, listening only, for that’s the routine. Joan finishes with a laugh, and attention returns again to Vanessa. If only they could keep doing that for hours.

‘Thank you, Joan. Who would like to go next?’

There isn’t time to get anxious. A man starts talking in interminable detail about his poor night’s sleep with little about its effect on his writing. Lina sees the mildest narrowing of Vanessa’s eyes, the infinitesimal compression of her lips. It’s a relief when he finally stops, despite the fact he’s delayed Lina’s guillotine. Eyes dart to the leader, wondering whether she’ll address this.

‘Thank you, Frank.’ Vanessa takes in the room, considering her words. She’s clearly found a gentle way when she says, with precision, ‘Who’d like to be next? Talk to us about *how your writing went*.’ Subtle. Gracious. Apt.

Lina’s hands form fists, until Franny adjusts her bulk.

‘So, I had a difficult time this morning,’ Franny says, with a sigh. ‘I couldn’t get into it. I had a thousand thoughts distracting me. So I went for a walk, which seemed to clear my head.’

Lina closes her eyes as Franny describes the grove of trees she'd wandered through; how she'd focused on her senses, heightening her awareness of the texture of the bark under her hand, the scent of sweet pine, the sound of her footfall on the carpet of dried needles. 'When I came back,' says Franny, as Lina blinks and refocuses, 'I made myself a cup of tea and had another go. What I've written isn't much, but hey-ho,' – she shrugs – 'it's okay. Every day is different!'

Lina is in two places at once. She'd passed beneath those trees yesterday, drunk deeply the heady woodland scent, gone searching for a parrot she could hear chiming in the branches. Whenever that sound rang out it sparked delight, though she never set eyes on its creator. She thanks Franny with a gentle smile.

With every person who speaks, she is granted more precious minutes of anonymity. Lina admires the way Vanessa listens: it's as if the earth spins round Frances; like Sylvia herself is the stars, moon and sun. Her stomach tightens, the group feels compassionate but her time is coming. She has probably a song length of time left to remain invisible. None of them know her. With today's writing they all will.

No-one else is forthcoming. The silence is a sickle. Her fingers feel out the tips of each opposing elbow, seeking the soft spot between the bones. 'I think I'm last,' she says, too loudly.

Faces angle in her direction.

Lina fixes her focus on a chair leg opposite. Folds herself forward, squashing her gut. There's rug fluff on her winter stockings, intolerable hammering in her heart.

She could vomit, so exhales hard.

'I, um... did something I've never done before. No more scratching at the page.' Her laughter is hollow. 'Somehow I let go of my edges today. The words just flowed; the story poured out without me controlling it. I'm only a three-finger typist but it's a blur, really, what happened; I hardly remember writing it. I didn't read a word of it, not even at the end, there wasn't time. And I didn't even hit *Save* till afterwards, I completely forgot, I was totally swept up. I hadn't even planned on what to write – it just began and then didn't stop.'

Her fingernails bloom pain into the palms of her hands. Her eyes drill the wood; any moment a whisp of smoke will rise. What's coming is the hardest bit. There's no rule to reveal all but she won't contain this, not anymore. She's lost a fight, though perhaps has now won.

'The really big thing for me though, is—' Lina closes her eyes to harness the strength of her spine. Gulps. A swift glance confirms Vanessa's earnest encouragement, 'is that this story was completely honest. And the truth it was telling came as quite a shock.'

She draws a shuddering breath. Could say more. Won't.

The silence is a blanket.

A ball of dust clings where the chair leg meets the floor. Lina understands clinging; it's been her way too, giving too many people too much of herself. She knows why now, has written that night into being. Vanessa will read it and know. But what matters far more is herself.

A glance shows Vanessa waiting in case there's more. There is.

'It's a breakthrough for me, finding this voice.'

Declaring her soul, and if she was alone she'd weep. She pulls a cushion in front of her. Nods, *done*.

Vanessa's voice is as soothing as warm custard, her comments so general that everyone in the group will find them useful. She's explaining about the technique of letting go, about not standing in the way of your writing, about allowing the story to tell itself. 'Writing in freefall allows whatever is beneath the surface to seep out, or to burble; to flow free – or to fly! Each of you is capable of discovering your hidden depths.' Vanessa's tender gaze settles upon her. 'Thank you, Lina.'

Each word, in measure, is a trinity.

Her blood returns to its pumping. Her colour resurfaces. There's been a shift inside, a lightening. She's as strong as that armchair, as these floorboards, just not ready to meet anyone else's eyes. Lina is who she is – and a writer.

A final group member shares their morning, someone who'd been as nervous as her perhaps. Lina feels the lack of cushions at her back, notices how she's grasping her thumbs like babies, cocooned. Realises she's not listening and

should. They close with another circle. Behind her eyelids swirl the colours of pride. There's the squeeze, which Lina passes on smoothly, and moments later they are done.

Vanessa rises from her armchair. 'Thank you everyone. We'll return at four-thirty for the readings. Have a lovely afternoon. How I wish I could join you in that sunshine!' With a dip of her head she is gone, to her suite and their waiting stories.

A bubble of chatter floats about the room. Sighs are released like feathers in an updraft. People move towards the kitchen. When she can bring herself to stand, she will go.

'Quite the morning, eh?' It's soft acknowledgment. Joan's Scotch accent matches the sweetness of her expression. 'Like a cup of tea before you disappear, pet?'

Lina could cry, but shakes her head. 'I need to walk.'

She's enfolded in a hug. 'Better out than in, love,' Joan whispers into her hair. 'I'll save you a seat beside me. You're a mighty brave lass, that's for sure.'

Lina darts to her room for her wallet and boots and is out the side entrance and crunching up the gravel driveway before she can change her mind and crawl back to bed. It's enough to make her stomach heave, the thought of a passage of her work being read aloud. Will Vanessa or won't she?

She must set the worry aside for now.

The wisteria is even more perfumed today; those bulbs beneath the elm an inch or two higher. Here's the cat, twisting itself between her feet, warm black from its sun snooze. Crisper air, a bigger sky awaits her on the street side of the camellia hedge and her feet turn right, toward town. A truck trundles by, a small plane buzzes the sky. Nothing moves fast. Lina ducks beneath willows, trailing fingers through the baby-leafed strings. Rhododendrons bright as fireworks light the grounds of a stately home. A birdbath that was dry yesterday cradles water from last night's rain.

Things today appear surer of themselves.

This morning: she'd laid herself wholly bare.

A fat-furred caterpillar is beavering across the footpath on tiny purposeful feet. Lina stops to ensure its safe arrival through the rose-covered picket fence. That caterpillar is safest, seeking cover.

But not her.

She strides on.