

# Winners of the WiO Young Oxfordshire Writers competition



We think you will enjoy reading the winning works, printed in full here.

The entries were judged by the dedicated team of Lorna Fergusson (co-ordinator), Frank Egerton, Dennis Hamley, Cherry Mosteshar and Philip Pullman. And a tribute to Claire-Marie Griggs, who had agreed to be a competition judge, but very sadly died in June 2017.

## Prizewinners

Sarah Jones: *First* – £350

Alexander Schickell: *The Man* – £350

Coral Dalitz, poem: *The life that grew me up* – £100

Lindsey Cohick: *One for Sorrow* – £100

Gabriel Schenk: *Home* – £100

## Other winners

Emily Allison: *The conservator*

Ashlee Beazley: *Shrinking*

Christy Callawy-Gale: *When Sally forgot all her Latin*

Emily Carrington-Freeman: *Peacock feathers and brocade*

Arabella Currie, poem: *Libraries on ice*

Tony Diver: *Sorry Giles that's not the Oxford I know*

Kate Hack: *Blue outpatients is your right*

Jake Kendall: *Life makes liars and frauds of us all*

Tess Little: *The dangers of a limited panopticism*

Jessica McGeachin: *Islands*

Emma Mobbs: *The wonder shop*

Shakira Morar: *Haida*

Eilise Norris: *Pinned*

Stacey Pattinson, poem: *My city*

Kristina Paxton: *The disappearance of Rosa Luxemburg*

Meg Phipps: *The tea bar*

Alex Walker: *The Eldritch King*

Lucy Walters/Jonas: *Juncture*

Tiffany Williams: *Homestay*

Jessica Woodward: *Exposed*

## The Man

by Alexander Shickell

He wandered through Port Meadow, listening to the chirping of crickets and the swish of his steps through the long grass. In the distance, he could see the gently rising smoke of a barbeque, and his stomach produced a rumble of anticipation which felt somehow familiar. Crossing a small bridge, he stopped briefly to look over the side while a houseboat chugged under. He had a sudden urge to hop down and be taken wherever it was going - but a warm nuzzle against his hand distracted him, and he was reminded of the presence of his dog and of their shared hunger. Tearing himself from his reverie, he stole one last glance at the wake of ripples now spreading across the water, and was taken aback by the face which stared back at him.

It seemed like he had been walking forever, but the source of the torturing smell of grilled meat did not seem to be getting any closer. Fleeting, muffled sounds of conversation drifted around him, in tandem with what he thought were his footsteps, but may have been someone else's. The crickets chirped more loudly now, persistently, like an alarm clock - no, not an alarm clock, his alarm clock, or at least, the sound that woke him up each morning.

The morning rush on the High Street was beginning, and the pedestrian crossing by Catte Street was announcing itself to the world, beeping for those

waiting on either side, and at the man sleeping on a cardboard box in the entrance of the adjacent coffee shop. The man closed his eyes and rolled onto his back. Like all those who do not wish to be torn from a dream whose contents are so much more digestible than the reality which lurks beyond, he clung to its remnants, to the long grass of the increasingly nondescript meadow. The long-forgotten houseboat must be emitting a dreadfully loud sound.

Or perhaps it was a bus horn. His eyes jerked open, but he shut them again, and opened them more slowly - adjusting not so much to reality as to the mercifully warm rays of Spring sunshine peeking past the spire of Saint Mary's Church.

After all, there wasn't much to 'adjust' to - no duvet to crawl out from, no curtains to lazily draw back - his eyelids represented the only barrier between him and the outside world, and now that they were open, he could see the leash curled round his hand, and the gentle rise and fall of the mound of fur it rested on, as well as the still pungent kebab box presumably placed by his head by a benevolent drunken reveller.

When he'd first jumped on that train from London, he now realised, he'd already gone off the rails. At first, he'd joked that, sleeping rough, it was at least impossible for him to get up on the wrong side of the bed. But that joke had worn about as thin as he had.

## First

by Sarah Jones

James is one in a crowd, part of a line, dressed in the same choral uniform as the student in front and the student behind. His father attended the College before him and his father before him and so on back as far as anyone can remember. James's son (and he'll have a son, of course) will attend the College and he'll get a first class degree, like James will, and like his father did, and his father before him. Then there is a permitted period of five years post-graduation for horizons to be broadened, pre-getting-a-real-job.

James has an essay due in three hours, and so does his tutorial partner, although she has almost certainly progressed much further than James - he is sure of it - and she is almost certain to get a first because the tutor likes her better. James can tell. Each step on the

spiral staircase James is climbing is 30cm tall. His legs are beginning to burn. His brain is beginning to rot with the altitude.

James is determined to get that first. He hasn't been to sleep yet, but neither has anyone else. It's May morning, and there are a thousand people out in the street who haven't been to sleep. They've all been in the clubs, in the cellars, in their bedrooms, doing anything but sleeping. They've all been lubricating, and they don't have essays due, but James does. James can feel his heart beating 30 beats faster per every 30cm higher.

There's a tradition James has heard of, though he isn't part of it. People jump off the bridge into the river when the bells start tolling. They're not supposed to anymore, it's too dangerous. It was fine in the old days - people were hardier then - but now it's out of bounds. This Oxford is not that Oxford. Except for James. His Oxford is his father's Oxford, his grandfather's Oxford, and so on with no room for adaptation. No room for error. James can see the end of the tunnel now.

Silly jumpers, James thinks, to think they can outdo the Old Boys. They don't know what they are doing. Their first is not a first, not like it used to be. Oxford doesn't care for people jumping off bridges anymore - it cares only for continuation and improvement. Do the same and do it better.

James got a third in his last essay. He didn't show it to his father. He borrowed his tute partner's instead and showed him that. She got a first, you see. James didn't.

James assembles with the other choristers. His father had not been a Choral Scholar. His father had jumped off Magdalen bridge on May morning, but things are different now. Things are softer. A first then is not a first now.

You're not allowed to jump off Magdalen Bridge anymore. It's not hard enough. You're not hard enough. James's dad never stood on Magdalen Tower though. He never jumped from such a height.

# The Place That Grew Me Up

by Coral Dalitz

I am from the terracotta kitchen smell  
of bubbling cheese and  
sound of hissing water boiling pasta  
I am from scrappy streets  
in the ambling drunken  
lull between Cowley and town.  
I am from books and reading, strung out of characters  
I'd rather be than here.

I am from the sunset out the window,  
closing on the space between scapyard  
and flat, burning the last trace of the day.  
I am from crumbling buildings,  
medieval, gothic, late severe  
in a thousand different unmarked shades of old.  
I am from the stream of water through my hair at  
night  
so hot it frizzles and leaves my shoulders red.

I am from that place, half way up the staircase  
where I read my books as darkness slowly  
strains its way inside.  
I am from the thin path through  
the crowds of stumbling students who,  
even drunk, talk politics, philosophy and love.  
I am from the constant sound of radio, jazzing with  
life, left on for the burglars  
or babbling through the night long after my eyes are  
shut.

I am from the house with red Victorian bricks and  
an extension tagged on the end where some  
foresightful fellow  
thought the best place for a skylight was directly  
above the bathtub.  
I am from the street which curves away  
into the world, whose chimneys in the sun can  
sometimes  
catch me off-guard, reel me back as though I never  
saw them here before.  
I am from theatre tickets pinned on corkboard walls  
and too many cups of tea at midnight when  
I've made my way through night time air and quiet  
calm and cobbles, back home.

# Home

by Gabriel Schenk

Madhiya was almost at her favourite spot in the cemetery when she froze. A dark green tent had sprouted in the corner, behind the graves. It had not been there last week.

For the past year this had been her secret place, away from family and school. She visited every Thursday when she was supposed to be at hockey, to sit against the back wall and read. She liked to read the books by the people who were buried here: *The Wind in the Willows*, *Cities in Flight*, *War in Heaven*. The dead didn't shout at her or call her names. They told her stories. But now someone else had moved in.

The path curved away, looping back to the church. Madhiya stepped off it, onto the grass and ivy, ducking under a tree branch. If she could work out who had put the tent here, she'd know what to do.

A red backpack lay on the ground, next to a rusted bicycle and an umbrella. The entrance was covered by a sheet of blue tarpaulin. The fabric quivered in the wind, or maybe someone was moving around inside. Madhiya crept forward, to get a better view. She couldn't turn back; she felt that she might run forever if she didn't confront this intrusion. She'd lose the only place she could hide. A twig snapped under her foot.

Now there was only one row of graves between her and the tent: a dozen rectangles and crosses, blanketed in ivy. The tent squatted indifferently. The fabric was worn and ripped in a few places, as if it belonged to a tramp. She ought to tell someone about it.

A siren wailed in the distance, and Madhiya thought of the police coming here, packing up the tent, and arresting the person inside. They'd come in the night with bright torches and trample over the graves. Would Kenneth Grahame object? How about Henry Quaterman, or Florence Wish? There was a list of the thirty-four most notable people buried here, near the entrance of the cemetery, but Madhiya had learnt some of the other names as well... such strange names. She was sure that Bertha Stainer would have been teased as well, even if she wasn't the only Pakistani girl in her class.

Madhiya stepped back onto the path, no longer caring if she made a noise.

I'll leave you alone, she decided. If you do the same for me.

She settled in a spot in the opposite corner of the cemetery, and took out her battered paperback. She'd been so happy to find it in Oxfam last week: another one of her authors' books, to read here, in their final place of rest. She glanced back at the tent, then to James Blish's grave, then back to her book. The title was printed in big yellow and blue letters: *So Close to Home*.

A wood pigeon cooed above her, deep and rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

## One for Sorrow

by Lindsey Cohick

I met Martie on a Tuesday night. We struck up a conversation in a cramped, centuries-old pub. Over the course of a few pints, I learned several things: she was an Oxford local studying at the public university, she had a contagiously bubbly personality, and, like me, she loved museums.

"Have you been to the Pitt Rivers yet?" she asked.

I hadn't, though I'd arrived from the U.S. to start graduate school at Oxford almost six months ago.

"Oh, let's go! You'll absolutely love it," she gushed as she tapped Accept on my Facebook friend request.

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Oxford was a fanciful, liminal place. The walls were steeped in history; old magic ran through the city like veins through a living thing. Thousands of people floated through its streets every day, many of them never to return again. Tourists, students, visiting academics. They were flickering, fleeting dots, there one minute and gone the next, with no evidence of where they'd come from or where they were going: Narnia, Wonderland, Middle Earth, or somewhere else entirely.

\*

The next time Martie and I hung out, the day was sunny and crisp. A magpie hopped onto the pavement in front of us. The beautiful black-and-white birds weren't common back home. I said as much, and asked, "Isn't there a rhyme about magpies?"

"One for sorrow, two for joy? That one?"

That was the one.

"My family has a tradition of greeting lone magpies," Martie said. "We say, 'Good morning, Mr. Magpie. How's your lady wife?' Implying the existence

of a second magpie wards off the bad luck of seeing just one."

Laughing, I waved at the bird. "Good morning, Mr. Magpie."

The magpie looked at us, and then flew away.

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The term barreled on in a flurry of seminars and essays. I went to Martie's house for her birthday. There were five of us altogether, and we ended up at a bar in Cowley, dancing between strobe lights to top-40 music. When it was time to leave, Martie and I stumbled into a cab. Leaning her head on my shoulder, she said, "Promise me we'll hang out again soon," her breath sour-sweet with prosecco.

Deadlines and exams swirled around in my head. Time spiraling down the drain. I said, "Of course."

I wondered how lonely must it be, living in a transitory place. Making friends who were there one minute, gone the next.

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Exams passed by in a blur of stress-eating and sleepless nights. Before I knew it, I was going back to the States for the summer. As I sat at the bus stop outside Christ Church, I checked my phone and saw a weeks-old message from Martie. It had slipped my mind in all the end-of-term chaos. Are you free soon? it said.

A magpie hopped onto the pavement next to me, and I waved. "Morning, Mr. Magpie."

The magpie looked at me, and then flew away, beating its wings over the spires.



*Our 'Welcome to WiO' evening was given at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.*