

Up!

DECEMBER 2023

WINTER



Making the world a better place
one page at a time

Contents

Up Front!	The Team	1
	Feeding Folk	
Up Sticks!	Kjersti Wik Farrier	2
	Eat, drink and be merry - Scandinavian style	
Word Up!	Poetry Corner	5, 9, 14
	Your poems on the theme of Winter	18, 23 & 28
Light Up!	George Unthank	6
	(S)tar Barrel In Dale	
Lift Up!	Rachel Hamer	10
	Creating community	
Look Up!	Steve Lowe	15
	Frosted Feathers	
Plant Up!	National Garden Scheme	19
	Shining Through the Darkest Months	
Up North!	Jennifer C Wilson	21
	Baby, it's cold outside!	
Read Up!	P Blackburn, J Tucker, A Calamity & A Heppell	24
	All the best writers	
Coming Up!	'Til Next Month	33
	The young ones	





Up Front!

Welcome to our Winter issue - and what a bumper issue it's turned out to be.

We continue to be delighted and inspired by all the great stuff that's happening in our communities. We write this having just delivered the princely sum of £671.10 (plus several bags of groceries) to the BAY Foodbank. This amazing amount was the result of our latest Feeding Folk event - a Christmas extravaganza - in which people came along to be entertained by artists who gave their time for free. At a time when we're all feeling the pinch, such generosity blows our minds. A huge thanks to everyone who came along and gave (or watched online and donated direct to the Foodbank). You can find the link to the event [here](#) if you'd like to watch and donate yourselves.

So what else have we got in store for you this month? Well, in addition to our usual array of articles and interviews, we have four winter-themed stories from prize-winning local authors for you to enjoy.

So pop on the kettle, grab a mince pie or two, and settle in for the ride.

Bridget & Harry x

Front cover photo: Rachel Hamer (p. 10).

Up Sticks!

KJERSTI WIK FARRIER

Celebrating Christmas the Norwegian way

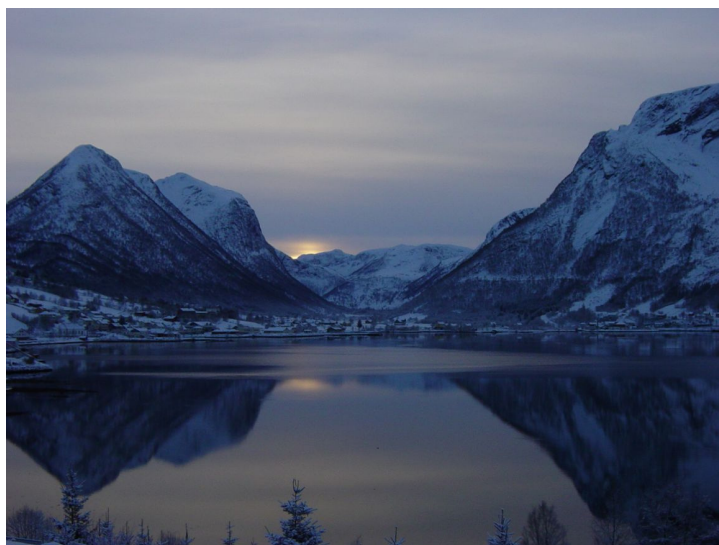
When I visited Iceland in late October to early November I realised that something as simple as the sound of winter tyres against tarmac made me long for home. And it wasn't just me, both my teenage daughters and I were moved by a feeling of nostalgia, all of us exclaiming: "Wow... that sound...". I haven't been to Norway at wintertime for many, many years, primarily because I always go home by car now, because I want to bring my dog. And I don't like the idea of driving through the UK, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and finally Norway - in the winter, you just don't know which weather conditions you might encounter on the 3 day journey at that time of the year. The nostalgia we felt on Iceland wasn't just about the sound of tyres, obviously, it was about so many things - the blue sky, the sunshine, the cold and crisp air, seeing our breath, and ooooooh - my nostrils are flaring just thinking of it - the scent streaming out of the bakeries that we passed and the one that we eventually just had to visit. And a bakery in Scandinavia cannot be compared to a bakery in the UK. Oh, maybe the fishy smell was a familiar scent too...! Though I am certain that I have never encountered the sulphuric smell you get in the air in Iceland, in my homeland.

The last time I visited Norway was in 2022, at Easter, which is my favourite time of the year in Norway. The air is still clean and crisp, winter is slowly letting go of the landscape, there is still snow on the peaks and hills, and sometimes also in the lowlands, the sun sits a bit higher for more of



the day, and it radiates so much more warmth. But as this article is about the winter, we'll stick to that. I love each season for all they have to offer. And when the

cold weather comes sweeping over the land, I love pulling on my woolly jumper and hat - which I find hard letting go of when the first daffodils make their appearance in the spring. Speaking of woolly jumpers ... the most common expression I hear from people when I say that I am from Norway, is "Oh, it's very cold there, isn't it?". It's all relative though. In degrees Celsius, yes, it can get a lot colder in Norway than in the UK. However, does it "feel" colder? No, not necessarily so. More often than not, the cold in Norway is a dry cold. It doesn't creep into your bones like it does in the UK. Give me sunshine and -20°C any day in Norway over a damp day at



Up Sticks!

KJERSTI WIK FARRIER

+6°C in the UK. My dog would agree! A layer of thermals, a woolly jumper and a coat and you're ready for a full day outdoors. And in contrast, we do also get very HOT summers in Norway. I was in Tenerife in June 2022, and it was only 19-23°C. At the same time, in Bodø in northern-Norway it was 35°C! Bah humbug, I say...

I am originally from Stavanger and remember white Christmases when growing up, but in my late teenage years and early twenties, rain became more and more frequent. When I returned to live in Norway in 2014 though, we had two consecutive winters with snow starting to fall on the evening of Christmas Eve, just when we opened our presents, and in the first year my parents gave us skis. Oh, how happy was the morning of Christmas Day when we could strap on our skis right outside our front door! It was truly magical for young and old. I must add that I have been cross-country skiing from my house in North Tyneside too, but not till January/February time. It is quite different to go skiing at Christmas. In Norway, we say that all babies are born with skis on their feet. Children getting to



school by skiing is not uncommon, especially in the smaller towns, where there are fewer big roads and where the terrain doesn't need to be cleared of snow and ice. The UK might come to a standstill at the first sight of snow – like every year! Fortunately this is not the case in Norway. And it is wonderful that nothing can stop outdoor activity – from young to old we embrace nature, and especially at wintertime. As soon as we have some spare time, we strap on our skis or snowboard and hit the hills, the slopes, and the 'Lysløypa'! The Lysløypa is a floodlit trail, which you'll find throughout the country, normally running through the woods – a favourite among cross-country skiers. Bliss!

As Christmas is drawing nearer, I start getting busy with Christmas activities; there are gifts to be planned and purchased, for my family and friends both here and in Norway, there is Christmas dinner to be ordered – I like tradition, and my favourite traditional Christmas dinner is 'Pinnekjøtt' – salted and dried lamb (mutton), which is steamed over sticks of birch wood, or just a heap of potatoes! I buy the lamb meat from ScandiKitchen in London. This year I very nearly missed it! But fortunately, I got my hands on a package, as someone seemingly had cancelled their order – Christmas was saved! On the first Sunday of Advent, I light the first Advent candle, and I like to surround it with decorations of fresh cones, pine needles and red berries – which I normally pick on the same day, on my morning dog walk – Christmas always happens so suddenly. I then hang up my Advent stars, put Christmas runners and cloths on the tables and dig out all of my 'Nisser' – gnomes. I think I can safely say that Norwegians have a great love for Nisser – I reckon it is the number one decoration at Christmas. Songs, folktales and myths are filled with them, alongside the Trolls, of course. Then we must do some baking! My children and I love baking, especially for Christmas. The tradition calls for 7

Up Sticks!

KJERSTI WIK FARRIER

types of 'Småkaker' - cookies - a tradition which I think belongs to a time when families had 7 to 14 children, but we tend to stick to making lots of a few favourites.



In Norway Christmas Eve - Julaften - is the BIG day. It's the day we have our main Christmas dinner, it'll be cooking pretty much all day long. During the day we'll be enjoying

Christmas films, playing board games, reading books, and drinking 'Gløgg'! Gløgg is a warm drink with typical Christmas spices, you can buy bottles of it which you can mix with red wine, spirits or just water - it's similar to Mulled Wine. With our Christmas dinner we often have a small glass of

Akevitt' - Aquavit - again a spiced, herbal drink, but it has a strong potato spirit base. And I must not forget the dessert! A very traditional dessert on Christmas Eve is cold rice pudding. We cook the rice on 'little Christmas Eve', we eat any extra rice like porridge, warm with butter, sugar and cinnamon. The pudding is then left to cool till the following day when we blend in freshly whipped cream and a bit of vanilla sugar. The dish can be served in different ways. When I grew up, my mum would serve it with a jug of thickened blackcurrant squash, I have always served it with cloudberry jam (from IKEA!). The most important element to the dessert, though, is one blanched almond - put in when no one is looking and stirred in till it is hidden. Whoever finds the almond, wins a marzipan pig! By the time we have announced the winner of the pig, it is likely to be gone 6pm, and if there are any young children in the family, they will be beyond desperate by now for dinner to be over and done with - I know the feeling, both as a child and as a mother, with very impatient children - because as soon as the table is cleared, we can sit down and start unwrapping all the presents under the tree!

Merry Christmas & God jul. Remember to share a little festive cheer with the Nisser - hint: they love rice porridge - and your worldly goods might just be safe in 2024!



Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

California Christmas Tree

He had a few egnogs and decided that
our palm tree outside needed
to be decorated
two ladders balanced on top
of
each other
a very worried mother
looked onwards with relegation
she knew the explanation
a strict religious upbringing
made him worship Christmas
but he'll be damned if we didn't have
the only fronds that twinkled.

Sheena Proudlock

Winter Morning

Whirling snow outside
as new-born bodies retrace
evolution, feel
ancient kinship with creatures
that live in the dark,
untroubled by ice, by cold.

We are bears, beetles,
burrowed deep. Nothing harms us.

Donald Adamson

Requiem

The monks of Buckfast Abbey rise
from a CD player, plain as serge,
pure as slant sunlight over evensong.
Our breath clouds, incense-pale,
in the stone-cold winter church.
Kyrie eleison

I fidget on the hard pew.
A whiff of Gold Leaf from the sleeve
of your Sunday suit as you quiet me.
Christe eleison

There is a scab on my knee begging
to be picked, but your hand
is still on mine.
Kyrie eleison

You bear away the days
when ours were the prayers
of the one true faith,
into the mist and the rain

Susan E Butler

Sprout love

Slice, peel, halve, repeat.
Rescue floor rollers from cat,
toss green orbs in pan.

Sandra Noel

Light Up!

GEORGE UNTHANK

The writer of *Tar Barrel In Dale*, fast becoming a staple New Year carol, tells us about its origins ...

When I moved up from Middlesbrough to Newcastle in 1972 I had been influenced by the 60s folk revival from my days on Teesside. I had friends who introduced me to the vibrant folk song and traditional scene on Tyneside. Around Christmas time and New Year, an outing organised by the local folk club included hiring a bus, or charabanc, which took us up to see the Tar Barrels procession in Allendale, 37 miles west from Newcastle, up the Tyne valley, then through the Allen Valley.

Although I had heard of the tradition before, that didn't prepare me for the most spectacular reality of what I was going to experience. When we arrived we would find a space in the back of a crowded pub and sing until we could hear the sound of the brass band and the crowds of people that came out to stand around the enormous bonfire that was stacked high in the centre of the



Allendale Town Tar Bar'l
[cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Mick Borroff - geograph.org.uk/p/649541](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/649541)



www.visithexham.net/events

square. The band gathered by the church, followed by a procession of local farmers and workers dressed in the fanciest costumes - characters from Chinese mandarins to Elvis Presley, all carrying wooden half barrels on their heads!

As New Year drew near, the band would strike up and the barrels would be lit and burst into flames on the heads of guisers (mummers). The fiery procession made its way through the gathering crowd and marched from one end of the village and then returned back to the bonfire. Come midnight they threw the flaming barrels on to the bonfire. The cold and darkness of the night would be transformed into a magical scene to the sound of Auld Lang Syne as everybody linked together to sing along, basking in the heat of the roaring bonfire, toasting and kissing. Laughter and red glowing ashes floated through the snowflake-filled air.

The guisers amongst the crowd would eventually make their way to go first footing, visiting neighbours' houses and farms around the area to bring good luck and cheer. We would then pile into the charabanc to go back through the starlit night to our own first footing.

Having had many New Year gatherings with family and friends in the back of the King's Head in Allendale, I realised I didn't have a New Year's

Light Up!

GEORGE UNTHANK

song which reflected the warmth and pleasure of being in such good company of singers, some of whom had travelled long distances to sing together, celebrating the ritual of bringing in the New Year.

One particular New Year, the snow was very deep and there was some doubt whether it would be possible to light the bonfire or even get home. The lights went out due to a power cut and the pub plunged into darkness, but undaunted we continued singing and the candles came out. Fortunately the beer still flowed! Approaching midnight, the band played and the barrels were lit and we waited as large flakes of snow floated down until the barrels were thrown on the bonfire, smouldering and catching fire in the snow. That was my inspiration to write the song - fire in snow - so that other people would know and feel the power of singing together. I worked on the song for a while, but didn't sing it until that following New Year when I sang it in the back room of the King's Head in Allendale. To my great surprise people quickly joined in the chorus, which made me wonder if I had actually written it!

My daughter Rachel was teaching children in schools around Northumberland and actually taught the landlord of the King's Head's daughter the song and she joined in to sing with us the following New Year.

Although the song was written about the tradition in Allendale it also reflects my own childhood memories, when as small boy I was

allowed to stay up late to let in the New Year. This involved me going outside with my Dad into the street just before midnight with a piece of coal. We were not the only ones out first footing - nearly every household in the streets around Middlesbrough had someone waiting outside to hear the church bells chime, marking midnight when the ships on the river Tees would sound their horns or buzzers. I would then have to knock on the door and when it opened I would say 'the Old Year out, the New Year in, please won't you let the lucky bird in'. I would then give my mother the coal and she would give me a coin, a slice of Christmas cake with Wensleydale cheese and a drink, and I would wish them a Happy New Year. This is a North Yorkshire tradition and the rhyme which goes back in my family for at least 4 generations.



When I first sang the song as a solo in Allendale, I was surrounded by great harmony singers, but when my daughters Rachel and Becky sang Tar Barrel on the BBC Radcliffe and Maconie Folk Show ... well their harmonies were so beautiful, beyond any arrangement that I could have come up with! The response from the radio audience to their singing was amazing - one listener had to stop his car as he was so emotional. We have taught the song at

Light Up!

GEORGE UNTHANK

the Unthinks singing weekends in the winter workshops and people all over the world sing it at New Year. Lots of choirs have asked for the notation of the music and harmonies but I can't write music let alone harmonies! It is lovely for me to think that people are sharing the song and singing together - something my family have passed on in a north east tradition.



Visit: the-unthinks.com

I recently read in the Guardian that researchers had proved that singing was beneficial for our mental wellbeing, which bears out what any choir or singing group would tell you. But that is not just for people who are lucky enough to have natural ability, it is for everyone. You may never get selected to be on 'The Voice' or make the charts, but if you find a way to sing regularly with others you can find your own voice.

As well as being a well-loved and respected folk singer/songwriter, George is also a skilled and exhibited visual artist ...

My artwork has a lot to do with my own identity

and relationship with the north east and how the past, the present and future are ever present.

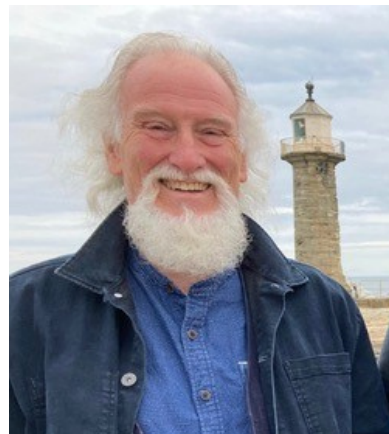
To quote the Dennis Kilgallon Gallery:

"George creates work to trigger responses found when listening to music, songs and stories of other times, fragments of which resonate within timeless truths about the human condition re-imagined. Using charcoal, raw ochre pigment from disused mines and industrial materials evokes the memory of the people and communities who have left traces in the landscape and culture, which may otherwise be forgotten. The same artists' materials were used on the walls of prehistoric caves which echoes the songs and stories of other lost cultures."

Finally, we asked George for his ideal Christmas dinner guests, alive or dead ...

My guests for Christmas dinner would be my family, Mahatma Gandhi, Father Christmas and the artist Paul Klee.

Gandhi because one of my grandsons, Arthur, likes to play with words and calls me Gandhi, so he will then get to know who Gandhi really was, inspiring movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.



Father Christmas because I love the true Christmas spirit, without commercialism.

And artist Paul Klee to add a bit of colour!

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

A Christmas card

frantic sleet burbles
against windows, tapdances
across fast-stiffening puddles

warm indoors, I pour
fresh coffee, select
a Renaissance Bethlehem:
adoring mother, chubby child,
elegant shepherds amid
Roman masonry, Tuscan vistas

and then another, thinking of friends

the morning passes

outdoors
cat ice crackles
in midwinter sun

Mandy Macdonald

White Owl in Winter Mid-Night

Full moon. Mysterious silence.
In this frosty night
the large silver coin shines
in the magical mid-night sky.
The stars shimmer in their galactic dance.

Crispy-white owl sits
on the log of an old fallen tree.
My heart rings its bell nine times.
Through his wizard eyes I see
the spirits of my ancestral tribe.

In this magnificent winter night,
calling white owl is my celestial guide.
I gather from him my wisdom,
power and strength.
Nine silver bells sing their song.

Covered with a thin veil
of full-moon light, I chat and chant.
I cast spells for fortune and love.
In mid-night, time stops in the moment
of beginning and end at ones.

Petrouchka Alexieva

Winter

Early snow sticks to reluctant hills.
The air is fierce and cold, like a shark circling.

A family of blue tits chat as they harvest
red berries from denuded branches.

Snow cover hushes urban sounds
only bird banter breaks grainy white silence.

Rona Fitzgerald

Lift Up!

RACHEL HAMER

Meet the woman working to encourage creativity and confidence in others

More and more people are hanging wreaths on their front doors leading up to Christmas (and indeed into the New Year) - tell us how you got started making wreaths.

My mam used to work up in Alnwick Gardens and took part in wreath making sessions herself. After thinking how gorgeous it is to make your own wreath, and with workshops becoming more and more expensive, we developed a way of making them more affordable. We started sessions up in Alnwick then restarted them in 2018 at Arts Centre Washington as a way to give back to communities at Christmas time. We kept costs down by foraging all the greenery ourselves and still do to this day through local forests, neighbours' gardens and even the car park at the Arts Centre!

It has just grown from there with more and more



people wanting to make wreaths and me finding it hard to say no! With our wreaths being more affordable we have families and more young people making them for loved ones or families



also making them for a loved one who is no longer with us to decorate a grave.

As well as foraging for all our greenery we also collect

beautiful things from car boot sales and charity shops to use for decorations including dried hydrangeas, poppy heads, feathers, pinecones and oranges. My mam also sprays leaves gold and silver to add a bit of magic. We also get given Christmas decorations that are no longer used, and it is lovely to see them being given a new life in someone's wreath.

Bringing greenery into our homes in the winter has been a tradition for centuries that has evolved over the years into Christmas trees and wreaths. It is lovely to see how many people want to continue the tradition and create their own wreath.

It is a family affair with my mam, dad, boyfriend, aunty and uncle picking greenery this year, my mam and boyfriend supporting in sessions too. My mam says this is her payback as I volunteered when she worked in Alnwick Gardens from being 13 years old, volunteering every weekend and school holidays. Now she is retired this is her turn to help me. We make a great double act and she loves seeing what people create just as much as me.

Lift Up!

RACHEL HAMER

We have only just finished this year's wreath making sessions and my mam is thinking about next year ...

It's one thing to make a wreath yourself, but something completely different running a workshop. What is it you enjoy about working with people?

Well this year we will have worked with 280 people to make their own wreaths which has broken our record I think! We have delivered workshops this year with all ages, with young people's groups, those with dementia and their carers and in beautiful places such as Arts Centre Washington, 17Nineteen and The Art Room. The biggest session we do is always the first Saturday of December at Arts Centre Washington where we had 127 people in one day! For those huge sessions my lovely boyfriend supports too. We have seen familiar faces who have been making with us for years as we have become part of their Christmas traditions as well as new participants who were already



asking when they can book for next year!

I love watching people's confidence grow. When people come in often they feel like

their wreath will be terrible often I hear 'I am just not creative' or 'my wreath is going to look terrible' but we tell them to trust the process and have fun and in the end they are all so proud of what they have created. Every single one of the wreaths made in our sessions are unique and there are never two the same and that is what I love to see, people's creativity. We don't often get a chance to be creative and have fun, so it is wonderful to be able to share that with people.



We understand you also work with young people. What do you particularly enjoy about working with younger folk?

I work part time at Sunderland Culture as Young People and Communities Producer as well as freelance work with different cultural organisations like Helix Arts and of course workshops like wreath making!

At Sunderland Culture I work on several projects, one of which just recently won an award called Celebrate Different. Celebrate Different are a group of young people aged 13-25 who organise their own events and exhibitions on issues important to them. I enjoy their creativity and their passion, you never know where a project will end up, which is very exciting. I have worked with them over many years, so I get to see them develop their confidence and grow. I also work on another project called Speak Up with the National Theatre and Sunderland Empire which is

Lift Up!

RACHEL HAMER

in partnership with schools, listening to what young people care about.

I also work with a group called Creative Age which is for those living with dementia and their carers. This year they created pieces out of ceramics and glass and made jewellery to be sold at a craft fair and in the shop at Arts Centre Washington, with the proceeds going back into the group. To-date they have raised £1150 in sales.

I love working with people of all ages and across my different roles I get to support people to bring out their creativity, increasing their confidence along the way too.

As well as all of this, you somehow find time to be part of the She Shanties! Tell us about that.

Folk music has always been a huge part of my life, being brought up as a folkie baby often being found in the corner of a pub with coats over me whilst a session was happening. I feel very lucky to have been brought up in that community, singing and learning so much from my dad who is a fantastic folk singer. I perform solo too but it is special to get to sing with my She Shanties crew. My mam used to teach Esther and Eilish, two members of the shanties, in primary school and later reconnected as family friends at folk festivals. When they decided they wanted to form a group to sing shanties they invited me to be part of it, I said yes immediately! 12 years of fun, friendship, songs and a bottle of rum or two along the way and I am so thankful I can be a part of this fantastic community of women.

We have performed at folk festival across the UK



and Europe and performed in beautiful churches, lighthouses and even a few boats. It is special to sing together and communal singing is good for the soul.

What's your favourite type of Christmas? Will you be sitting down to a full Christmas dinner with all the trimmings, or do you have something else in store this year?

I love Christmas. I love the traditions, the decorating of the tree, the feasting, the friends, family and snuggling up at home. We will be hosting family this year for a full Christmas dinner featuring my boyfriend's now famous Yorkshire puddings. New Year is always busy at our house with family and friends traveling from all over the UK to join us to bring in the new year.

One of my favourite traditions is on Christmas Eve for as long as I can remember I have watched the Muppets Christmas Carol which is my favourite Christmas film. Dickens's story puts heart, kindness and generosity at the forefront of Christmas. Although I do love giving gifts it is only one part of Christmas as it is a time for being thankful for our family and friends and showing that we care. We are also trying to be more conscious in our shopping as we are striving to buy all our gifts this year from independent makers, artists, and charity shops.

Lift Up!

RACHEL HAMER

Finally, if you had a magic wand for a New Year wish, what would it be?

That is a difficult question to answer but something that has been on my mind a lot recently. In numerous projects we have been talking about what the world needs, and I have come to the conclusion that the answer is more kindness. There is so much hate and distrust in the world and if we took a little more time to understand each other and to make decisions based on kindness, I think our communities and the world would be better place.

Christmas is about kindness and to quote the Muppets Christmas Carol...



*In all the places you find love
It feels like Christmas*

*And it is the season of the spirit
The message, if we hear it
Is make it last all year*

I hope you all have a lush festive season filled with love and kindness and maybe you'll consider making your own wreath next year.

You can find out more about Rachel's music and other creative activities here:

<https://www.therachelhamerband.com/home>

<https://sheshanties.com>

<https://sunderlandculture.org.uk>



Words of Wisdom from Kermit the Frog

Life's like a movie. Write your own ending.

I've got a dream too, but it's about singing and dancing and making people happy. That's the kind of dream that gets better the more people you share it with.

Just because you haven't found your talent yet, doesn't mean you don't have one.

It's nice to be important, but it's important to be nice.

Never worry about failure. It's gonna happen. But that's OK: Go ahead, take chances... and you might just find that what feels like failure isn't failure at all, it's what inspires you to dream even bigger.

Forget the map, roll down the windows, and whenever you can, pull over and have a picnic with a pig.

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

First snow

The first dusting comes, despite the forecast, enough to record tracks of a trio of roebuck that bound between black shrink-wrapped hay bales above the webbedglass of the canal. There's such joy in their movements, oblivious to what's going on outside their small worlds but they're no safer than the rest of us. Under a blue winter sky with a sun that thaws nothing, it's easy to forget this morning's cacophonies, rewind to September when respite from catastrophes lasted more than cessations for aid to get through. There was little hope on Question Time last night. But look. The roebuck have hurdled the boundary wall, their white rumps bucking, looking like children who can't contain their giddy half realities of innocence, despite what might be going on at home. I head on to the moor, eke out joy where I can. The dogs are off their leads, hurtling through laced bracken, smiles too wide to dam their lolling tongues.

Mark Connors



Bohemian

Russet leaves cling loosely to the vestiges of summer,
Hiding winters crested eccentrics, loquacious on high,
Flighty travellers devouring the fruits of the city,
Torn limb from limb, rowan, rose and haws are assailed,
By garrulous and carefree migrants,
Proto-punk birds that really rock,
Bohemian Waxwings thrill the garrulous watchers below.

Steve Lowe

Look Up!

STEVE LOWE

Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see ...

Some say winter is lifeless, but it is anything but! Many species of birds that bickered and squabbled all spring and summer, during their breeding seasons, now gather together in enormous numbers, to create spectacular experiences.

One of the best is when starlings fill the skies with the incredible ballets of their murmurations. It's thought that this sky-dance - or murmuration - could be a means of confusing predators gathering to take advantage of what looks like easy pickings. It's likely to be jostling for the best roosting position, or perhaps the reason why the birds gather is to share information about where best to go foraging the following day.

I adore starlings, perhaps best known for squabbling behaviour at bird feeders. They remind me of teenagers. I always have loved them and distinctly recall the noisy gatherings in Newcastle city centre on my way home from the match as they came into the warmer city to roost, swapping the fields where they hunted soil invertebrates for the cosy perches around Grey's Monument. Something we no longer see.

Up close, this dark-looking bird is really colourful with a plumage that is almost artistic. Its breeding plumage is iridescent green, blue and purple and it is spotted with silver in the winter. They often nested in the eaves of our houses where their clever song demonstrated their oral versatility. They are master mimics, reproducing other birds, and many other sounds, including machines! Perhaps the beat boxers of the avian world?



Photo by Thomas Lowe

Starlings are found across the country but avoid the extreme uplands. Their numbers increase dramatically during the winter months, when birds also arrive from northern Europe. Some larger roosts can number over a million birds, so it may be a surprise to many that the species is on the UK Red List due to a sharp breeding population decline since the 1960s. However, a murmuration is a mesmerising event and worth seeking out.

The winter is also a time when many birds from the Arctic make the coasts their winter home and my own Northumberland Coast is a great example. For instance, I gazed upwards at Lindisfarne Nature Reserve last weekend as thousands of Light-Bellied Brent Geese swirled overhead, saturating the sky to a dark inky-black. Coming all the way from Svalbard, Holy Island is their winter holiday home where they gather in their thousands. Elegant birds with a distinctive dark chocolate body and pale chests, they parade around, their gentle honking sounds form a winter memory that is hard to beat.

They are joined by huge numbers of wading birds and wildfowl, all enjoying the sticky mud for food - leggy bar-tailed godwits, mournful curlew, excitable redshank are probing for food, amongst flocks of whistling wigeon, mergansers and, of course, the year-round flotillas of eider ducks, keeping close together for shelter in the high winds or squally rain.

Look Up!

STEVE LOWE

Hats and gloves, warm clothing, a flask and a biccie (or Christmas cake) – perfect!

Or you can dispense with the warm clothing by watching the antics of birds in your own garden nature reserve from the comfort of your armchair. Turn off the TV (repeats mostly, Die Hard or a Bond movie) and settle down for the show.

Prime the garden with a bit of bird food (not bread as they can't digest this properly) and a swimming pool (saucer of water) and see what occurs.

No doubt a blackbird will wander in and flick aside the leaves and debris in search of food such as a juicy worm, or scour beneath the feeder for crumbs from above (they find feeders too hard). Chirpy sparrows will whizz about in domesticated flurries (male and female already making home). Dunnocks and wrens will hop around the hedge bottom, furtling about almost sneakily. No doubt a pigeon or dove may drop in to boss around until a herring gull shows who rules this particular roost as it gobbles up the stale mince pie (or one of my home made ones, which might make it harder to take off).

King (or Queen) of the garden is the gorgeous robin though. Despite being thought of as friendly birds and often referred to as 'a gardener's friend', robins are actually quite aggressive and highly territorial. They are quick to chase off other robins, and are known to attack taxidermy robins or even just tufts of red feathers.



Robins are considered a British winter icon, so popular they were voted our first-ever national bird in 2015. Although they can be spotted in gardens throughout the year, they can also be heard year-round. Unlike other songbirds, which tend to just sing in spring and early summer to attract a mate, robins use their voices all the time to warn intruders to keep away from their territory.

However, the bird you see in the winter may have a European accent! Many, if not most, of our winter visitors are migrants. Their migration is, in fact, far more complicated than simply a shift southward, as there seems to be a great deal of individual variation in how far they go and where they spend winter.

Males are far more likely to remain in the north than females, for some very good reasons. In spring, the male's main role is to find and defend a territory, whilst the female will create and lay the eggs. This requires a lot of good nutrition and food energy, so females go where they are sure of good food supplies in winter. Of course, they have to use up food energy to migrate back north. But migrating and laying eggs are easier for well-nourished birds.

Winter can be fatal for robins because on cold nights these tiny birds can lose as much as 10% of their body weight, and they need to feed well

Look Up!

STEVE LOWE

every day to survive. So obviously, garden feeding stations can be a vital lifeline for many birds during winter.

Once in a while, we get a waxwing winter. 2023 is predicted to be one as continental temperatures plummet and these spectacular birds irrupt - Wow! What a word - what a sight!

These Scandinavian berry-munchers arrive in their hundreds, or sometimes there's virtually none. Waxwings love red berries, and this can often bring them to unlikely places where ornamental trees and shrubs like rowan and cotoneaster have been planted, such as supermarket car parks, retail parks and town centres. This means they can be a handy but unexpected surprise while doing some Christmas shopping. My first ever sighting was outside a public loo in Newcastle! They often look similar to starling flocks but there is no confusing them once you get a proper look. Getting even one in my garden would be quite something!



Photo by Thomas Lowe

As a "lazy" gardener, I am heartened to know that I have the perfect excuse whenever my neighbours "observe" on its unkempt nature - my garden is bird-friendly.

Dead leaves left under trees and shrubs are ideal spots for birds to forage for insects as weather gets colder. Untrimmed hedges also provide cover as birds need shelter from harsh conditions. I don't prune back dead vegetation like ivy, or plant stalks too much, as these also provide both valuable winter cover and nesting material for birds in the spring, as well as places for insects to hide. Berry bushes or trees are great (notice how birds start with red and graduate down to yellows), so the privet is also left to flower (for late bees) and fruit. Rotten logs adorn the base of the hedge, gradually releasing their nutrients back into the ground.

Of course, I provide "artificial" food as well, quality seed (from Laverock Farm in my case, others are available) as I don't find some of the shop bought stuff to be very good. I also use porridge oats to soak up any fats before scattering them on the grass, thereby preventing a fatberg at the same time (good tip this one). Bruised and battered apples are also provided, unless crumble is in the offing!

Yes, winter is the toughest time of year, but even at this, the darkest, coldest and least promising time of year, life goes on. We can make it easier but also take the opportunity to enjoy by observing, experiencing and appreciating the treasures of the avian world.

Don't forget to send in your observations to recording schemes though as trends in birds are good indicators of environmental change.



An experienced wildlife professional, Steve currently works freelance with Northumberland Rivers Trust as well as undertaking work with volunteers on local heritage and archaeology projects.

His hope is to leave the world a better place.

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

And suddenly the boat has a sail

pinned-perfect at the top of the mast;
the tip of a winter moon curving
back to the base of the post
and night-orange backdrop
flooding in the colour of newborn.

It doesn't matter the lens misses the moment;
we'll remember the feeling anyway.

Sandra Noel

N is for Nude

underneath
her navy merino coat
her snug bobble hat
her cosy woollen scarf
her fur-lined gloves
her soft suede boots
her Fair-Isle socks
her opaque black tights
her roomy jeans
her pink cashmere sweater
her crisp white shirt
her lacy thermal vest
her cotton-rich knickers
her no-nonsense bra
she was
completely
naked

Mandy Macdonald

Get Your Big Coat

The sea is wild
salty sprays
and
moonlit miles
this is the best time to feel the cold
lashing over the dark water
it chills to the center
of a well deserved winter
ice and isolated
so quiet inside
but
noisy on the air.

Sheena Proudlock

Ice Dance

She hobbles along the
slip-slide icy path,
its whoopsie-daisy of a
winter's dance done daily.
Two sticks brandished in defiance
of weather's slap-stick script,
a panto writ for fragile folk to stage.
One last close call almost-skid,
but upright she remains.
Across the finish line she glides,
triumphant, dignity retained.

Gerda Pickin

Plant Up!

NATIONAL GARDEN SCHEME

The National Garden Scheme gives visitors unique access to over 3,500 exceptional private gardens in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands, and raises impressive amounts of money for nursing and health charities through admissions, teas and cake. We were delighted when they gave us permission to reproduce the following interview:

Shining through the darkest months: Winter can be beautiful in the garden

With the blossoms and blooms of spring and summer all but forgotten and many gardens closed to the public, you could be forgiven for thinking that as we retreat inside from the cold that the gardening year is over. But, far from being a time of rest, winter can be a really productive and beautiful time in the garden. We caught up with Sarah Pajwani, garden owner of St Timothee in Berkshire, to find out more about winter in her garden.

What are the main jobs to do in the garden during the winter months?

I think of winter as the perfect time of year to get ahead with so many jobs. The pressure is off because nothing is urgent and we have the luxury of time to choose the jobs we fancy.

Bulb planting is the only really pressing job which, for me, often drifts into December. Because I like to leave as many perennials standing throughout the winter, it can be tricky to add bulbs to established borders so some cutting back is needed first – and that usually reveals a host of weeds to also clear as well as self-sown seedlings to pot up. These three jobs;



gently cutting back and editing, weeding and potting up seedlings, form the bulk of what I do throughout the winter working around the borders and finishing with a mulch of home-made compost.

It's also the time of year when we've embarked on any major projects such as digging out a new border or adding a pond. This year, we've no new borders planned but we are taking out two overgrown hedges completely. We've tried to renovate them but it's not worked well so I'll be replanting with bare root plants which it's the perfect time of year to use – they're a bit cheaper and it gives them time to settle and get off to a flying start come spring. It's also a great time to plant bare root roses and peonies, both tough, high-impact plants that can give a tremendous boost to more difficult areas.

And then probably my final job for winter is to check over the trees and think about any pruning. We have lots of old apple trees which do need regular pruning to restrict their size.

What do you like best about winter in your garden?

I love the peace and quietness of winter. The overall structure of the garden is laid bare and so it's a great time to see how that works and to have the chance to think and dream up new plans and ideas for the future without the flowery distractions of summer.

Plant Up!

NATIONAL GARDEN SCHEME

What do you like least about winter in your garden?

Definitely the short days! There's a lot less time when you can get outside.

Is there any weather that drives you inside during the winter?

I don't garden in any weather. I'm quite happy to wrap up and get outside in the cold, but if it's pouring with rain, it's no fun at all for me and I do garden for the pleasure of it.

What plants provide the most impact in the winter?

I would have to say deciduous trees. I think they epitomise what winter is all about when everything is stripped back and bare and yet can still be incredibly beautiful.

How can you add colour to your garden in winter?

I think the most impactful way to add colour in winter comes from using shrubs with coloured stems so in my garden, it's the dogwoods with stems of all colours from yellow to orange to red.

Where do you find inspiration for your garden?

I would say anywhere and everywhere. Visiting other gardens and reading garden magazines, but most influences I am largely unconscious of. I do actively look at what plants are growing wild around me when I'm out walking the dog and I like the challenge and process of solving a problem be it what to plant in a tricky piece of soil or how best to look after and care for a plant. When I'm weeding, I'm always thinking and having ideas.



What inspired you to open for the National Garden Scheme?

I feel very lucky to have the garden I do and so it's a great way for me to be able to give something back. It's lovely when people say that they've enjoyed the garden and the fact that the money raised goes to such important charities gives me the confidence to keep opening

What do you like best about opening your garden?

It's a wonderful chance for me to meet other interested gardeners and chat about plants. Not many of my friends are keen gardeners so it's great to meet some like-minded people.

Also, since opening for the National Garden Scheme I've also joined Twitter and discovered a fantastic community of fellow gardeners who like me love to share experiences and photos and are always happy to give advice. It's been a great way to see what's happening in other gardens right across the year. *[You can follow Sarah on Twitter @Spajwani]*

To find out more:

Join Sarah for The Winter Garden, 'Talk and Walk' on January 15, 2020 to find out more about what makes the garden at St Timothee shine through the darkest months.

All photos courtesy of Marianne Majerus

Up North!

JENNIFER C WILSON

Think it's cold here in the UK? Join Up!'s resident marine biologist in the Arctic Circle ...

We're in our 'winter' article, and to me, the highlight of what can otherwise be a cold, dark and grim season is, of course: Christmas! And what's one of the finest Christmas traditions? The cracker joke ...

So ... "Why don't polar bears eat penguins?"

Now, we all know the REAL answer is "because they can't get the wrappers off", but a far more entertaining answer is "because they live in different hemispheres and there is no scientific reason why the two species would ever meet naturally in the wild."



See. Definitely more entertaining.

And it leads nicely into the subject of winter seas; some of the most beautiful and productive of our oceans.

The fact that I get to share cute photos of polar

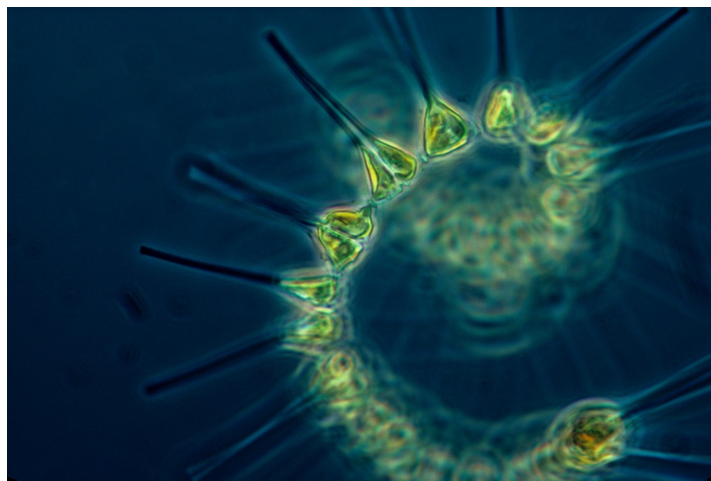
bear cubs, and fluffy penguin chicks, is by-the-by.

When I say winter seas, clearly, our north and south polar regions still experience seasonality

to an extent, but on the whole, there's definitely a winter vibe whenever you happen to visit.

Take the Arctic, with two main seasons: an icy, nine-month winter, and a 'summer' of only three months. Spring and autumn can be counted in a handful of weeks.

Despite this chilly environment though, thanks to ocean currents, and the availability of nutrients, the waters are teeming with microscopic life. Phytoplankton, generating food through photosynthesis, form the base of an intricate food chain, that stretches all the way up to the largest ocean dwellers: the baleen whales.



Phytoplankton aren't just the bottom of the Arctic food web though; they form the basis of every food chain in our seas. Did you enjoy a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel for lunch? Or might you be tucking into a jacket potato topped with tuna later? Even your Friday-night fish and chips. None might be possible without a healthy, diverse phytoplankton community. Plus, they're stunning!

Oh, and in a turn of events which makes it look as though I know what I'm doing, we can reference the diurnal vertical migration of some species, moving from the photic zone (where the light is), to the ocean depths. The ocean depths, where, transported along by seabed currents,

Up North!

JENNIFER C WILSON

you could almost say they were 'bobbing along, on the bottom of the beautiful briny sea...'

Let's head back to the shore for a bit though, and back to those polar bears, well away from the penguins (with or without wrappers). These aquatic mammals are probably the most iconic of the Arctic species, especially since the discussion around climate change and global warming has entered the public consciousness. This isn't going to turn into a lecture on how we can all make small changes that contribute to big differences though (although we can, and we should). This is going to turn into a celebration of the stunning life that lives in earth's coldest climes.



Polar bears, Arctic foxes, Arctic hares, killer whales, puffins; the species community around the north pole features perhaps some of the most aesthetically-pleasing on the planet. Not to mention the almost mythical narwhal, and the lemming.

Another one which perhaps doesn't spring to mind when you think of Arctic species though, is the caribou, a member of the deer species. Well, they're called caribou in North America. In Europe, they are, of course... Reindeer! Nicely



looping us right back to where we started, and my favourite time of the year.

Because perhaps we need to forget

our flora and fauna, and cast our mind for a moment to the most famous resident of the Arctic, living right at the North Pole itself. But I'm not childish enough to reference Father Christmas in a sensible article, am I? Yes, yes, I am. After all, last month, my entire inspiration was centred around a cartoon fox.

And this is another significant reason why we need to act as best we can to help in the battle against climate change. Because if the ice-caps melt away to nothing, what will happen to Santa, his reindeer, and the elves? We need to do everything we can to stop those vital toy-making facilities from being lost to the icy waters, before it's too late. Because heaven knows what all those extra plastics, paints and other materials would do to the phytoplankton community. We have no evidence of what Santa's pollution control measures are like - there could be ANYTHING in the old pipes up there...

If we end up saving some polar bears by default, then all the better.

Because the more we can save, the more chance there is of somebody introducing a polar bear to a penguin, and we'll finally see what happens. Sadly, they're unlikely to hit it off: after all, they're polar opposites!

*As well as being a full-time marine biologist,
Jennifer also writes historical fiction.*

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/jenniferwilsonwriter/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/inkjunkie1984/>

Blog: <https://jenniferwilsonwriter.wordpress.com/>

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

Winter Solstice at Cairnholy Chambered Cairn

Once we'd have known the words
when the sun's red O
moves in a shrunken arc.

Words to speed the earth's warming,
words to start afresh,
clear away dross and dust.

It's harder now to rid ourselves
of claggy layers
and accumulations

but the stones stand aligned
with a cleft in the hills
where the mind's ear can sense

a whirr of wings
like geese, a new season
rushing skyward.

Donald Adamson

The Underside of Frost

Only after the coldest night, the most raw,
come the star-like shapes, ethereal,
ready in a moment's sunshine to dissolve
and chase gravity down the attic window.

So few times we see the underside of them,
can examine for a moment the white,
bright, still, transparent patterns of water,
catch them solid in a glance, see their gentle
forms dance.

Ali Rowland



Next month's theme is: YOUTH

Feel free to interpret the theme as you see fit
and send up to 3 poems to:
admin@positivelyup.co.uk

Full submission details can be found on our
website: [https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-
submissions](https://positivelyup.co.uk/poetry-submissions)

Read Up!

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

By Penny Blackburn

Guthrum huddles in the lee of the field wall and draws his cloak about him as tightly as he can. It is one of those braw winter days made harsher by the wind's sharp teeth. Although barely twenty, he reads the weather expertly and the weak sunlight doesn't fool him; he scents the tang of more snow coming. He remembers such days from back home, across the wild sea to the north, where winters cut bone-deep and the sun disappeared for weeks.

But there had been warmth, too. The family hearth. A pile of soft sheepskins, not a rough woollen cloak. His belly gurgles at the memory of his mother's broad cooking pot. He set a snare for rabbits but caught nothing. He ate the last of his jerky two days ago. He needs to find shelter – his feet are like stones and his fingers useless – but his eyes struggle to see anything solid in the white covering over the fields that makes the trees and landmarks disappear.

Now flakes come whirling from the sky and the dizziness of it reminds him of the boat, the pitch and fall of crossing the ocean. Those first few days in port, still feeling the roll of it beneath him, his mind as disorientated as his body in this new land.

Kendra opens the door a crack, trying to stop the flurries of snow coming in. "Hound!" she calls, "Come now." But there is no answer, bar the clacking tongue of the wind. She has kept busy all day, making the chicken coop sound and getting the goats milked and settled in the small, stone barn. She has baked loaves and cut turnips for



broth, all the while missing the dog nosing at her skirts or begging for scraps. He comes and goes at all hours, but he won't stay out much after nightfall and as the dusk turns into darkness the worry frets away at her.

She fries up some bacon scraps, to tempt him back. But the scent of it doesn't bring him and she has no appetite for it herself. Could she go out to look for him? No. Even a youth would be fool to be out in this weather, and Kendra is long past youth. The mutt must shift for himself, and as she lights the lantern, she prays he has found somewhere warm to shelter.

Guthrum tells himself he will move on in a minute. His mind drifts again, thinking how he left the seaport after a few weeks and came inland. How farmland called him with a gentle voice, one he could hear above the crash of the waves. No point to go back, his family no longer alive. He remembers his mother's songs and something like singing settles at the edge of his hearing.

But no, his exhausted mind plays tricks. It is not singing, but something in pain, something close. He staggers to his feet and sees a shape, almost buried, further along the wall. He brushes the snow away and finds a dog, which whimpers again as Guthrum touches a long scratch running across its chest and belly. He scoops it into his cloak and hugs it fiercely, feels its heartbeat weak against his own.

Read Up!

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

By Penny Blackburn

Kendra is darning, although her mind wanders. She would not have thought to miss the hound so much. After Ealfric passed, she thought she was used to loneliness, to silence in her home. Alone, every day she struggles to keep the smallholding running. The dog came from nowhere around a year ago, unexpected company. She must suppose it has gone back where it came from. She does not like to think what else might have befallen it.

She is startled by a knock upon the door. "Who is it?" she calls, but there is no answer. Her heart pounds as she pulls it open, freezes as she sees a stranger. Worse – a Norseman. Her head fills with tales of raids and murders, although she knows that was all long ago and the Norse are no longer such strangers in the land. As she sets to slam the door, she sees the hound. Sees how he cradles it, wrapped within his cloak.

It does not seem so long since he saw the lantern light glimmering across the dark fields. Now the dog is bathed and resting in front of the fire and Guthrum himself is warmed and fed, full of broth and bread and salted bacon. He thinks that Kendra does not see him slip small pieces of it to the dog.

He has used the few words that he has learned: has said "Thank you" over and over, because how will he ever say it enough? They have shared their names and he has mimed digging and harrowing so she will know what he is. She



has shaken her head to his gestured questions – no. No child, no family.

She brings a pile of skins, points at the hearth. "Hard," she says.

Guthrum points too, "Hard, warm." Then, back out of the window, "Hard, cold."

Kendra laughs. She nods, and something is settled.

Just after dawn she wakes and hears the stranger speaking in soft tones to the dog. He is a kind man, she thinks. Well mannered too. She recalls he bowed a moment over the food, despite seeming half-starved. Some woman in a far land raised him well, and Kendra thanks her for it.

She thinks how he might help her, might take on the harder tasks. Be company in a cold world. She knows she has naught but food and firespace to offer, but that could be enough.

Guthrum stretches, makes his way to the kitchen door. Outside, all is still. The blanket of snow over the terrain hides its ridges and furrows, but he senses the land beneath, the fertile soil and rich earth. Somewhere beneath the frozen exterior lie the seeds of next year's harvest: tiny and barely alive, but hardy and waiting to grow.

Read Up!

WINTER GREY

By James Tucker

For Sandy, who told me that ghosts aren't what many people think

Winter was definitely better as a child, Reginald had decided. If only because there wasn't nearly so far to fall if you slipped, and there would be someone there to comfort you for as long as the pain lasted, which was seldom long. He missed that.

He had seen too many winters by now. He would not have wished to die before Philippa, because then she would have been left on her own, for all she would likely make a better job of it; rather, he would have liked the years they had left to be divided equally between them, and go at the same time. But you had to play the hand you were dealt, no matter how you would wish otherwise.

Grey was too much the colour. He hadn't liked it on his seafaring days, when the sea matched the sky matched the ship paint in all but a few degrees, and he would stare on an epaulette just for the colour on the piping. Now it had followed him to shore and caught up; it was in his beard, his hair, the fading of his clothes and curtains, the bark of the trees, the slush on the path and the drawing in of the day all too early. It was in his eyes as well; the pages of the books he knew too well were starting to smear, and he could struggle to see when he played patience.

He let the cards slip and fall onto the table. The plate with pieces of bread and cheese still lay on the edge; he had not felt like cooking, nor eating,



nor washing up. Come to that, he hadn't fed the fire, and the coal scuttle was empty. The glow burned lower, and Jack Frost was painting windows early. Reginald was beginning to realise that he did not care so much if Jack Frost painted him as well. It was not as if his chair was comfortable, as that moving was too much effort. Reginald could just imagine what the Mate would say to him shirking his duties and letting standards slip; his mouth quirked slightly at the thought of him bellowing, 'Someone is here to see you, you lucky dog!'

Which didn't fit at all. It was Philippa who stood there, as straight and strong as she had ever been, but with tears in her eyes. 'Oh, my poor man,' she said, and bent to put her arms around him. 'How can you be in such a state when you are loved so much?' Her touch was warm, comfort itself. Reginald lost himself for a time. His beard was soaked by the time he croaked, 'I waited so long to join you.'

'I was never gone so far, and you're not joining me that way yet,' she told him gently. 'But this won't do, you know. We need the fire building up and a kettle on the go. This isn't a gothic novel. Not that I got you to read any.'

Joints creaked as she helped him to his feet; it was not her physical strength that did it. She

Read Up!

WINTER GREY

By James Tucker

smiled a little as he got into his coat, which she had always loved, and said how it and him had only gained character.

The gloves had to go on before he opened the door. The twilight grey had become black, with flakes of white dancing in the air, and the greatest danger was ice lurking below, like Black Middens. Reginald hung back, and he saw fear on Philippa's face.

'Ahoy there, shipmate!' Julian was grinning broadly, and wearing his dress uniform despite the cold. 'Fancy meeting you tonight!'

Reginald gulped, feeling the cold on the back of his throat. 'Aren't you...' He regretted the faux pas immediately.

Julian wasn't worried. 'Dead? Technically, I suppose. I can't carry things myself, but I can tell you this isn't nearly so bad as that time off Newfoundland. You remember how thick the ice was on the deck?'

'Not just the deck!' Reginald shook his head. 'The cabins, masts, rails, everything. We needed two shoulders just to get the door open, and chisels to clear the lines.'

'Pretty, though!' They had got to the coal hole by now, and Reginald was shovelling into the scuttle while Julian reminisced. 'Like one of them spa boxes! Shame we couldn't hang more lanterns around it at the time.'

'Or like a frosted cake.' Philippa was smiling. 'I

could never quite see your memories before. But still tell me them, too.'



Back in the little cottage, Reginald stoked the fire and lit the lamps, put the cheese to melt on the bread. 'It's not much, I'm afraid,' he told Julian.

'Not to worry mate.' Julian waved his hand. Somehow, the room and the table were now larger, there was another chair and a couple of mugs. 'Things aren't so limiting for us now. We can have a cosy night in, catch up, reminisce, or just relax in the warm.'

'Who you remember, you never need to lose,' Philippa told him.

'And what you can imagine, you can have,' said Julian.

'We will be here when you need us.' Philippa kissed him. 'But not all the time; we can't have you neglecting the, ahem, more solid people.'

The next morning, Reginald swept some of the dirt from the path outside. The ice was melting. It would get dark and cold again, but then warmer and lighter once again.

His neighbour, another widower, had opened his door as well, and was looking out. Reginald coughed. 'John?' he said. 'How about we get out to the pub this evening? We can tell each other stories.'

Word Up!

YOUR POEMS ON THE THEME OF WINTER

SOLSTICE HARVEST

Frantic birds mob feeders.
My wife retrieves from freezer
redcurrants, blackcurrants,
gooseberries, raspberries
gathered in summer.
Winter solstice harvest.
The world thaws,
melts on the tongue.

Greg Freeman

Put the Farnhill dawn on after W S Graham

The geese are out in force –
one chevron then another,
honking out their metred lines,
almost keeping their act together.
They seem to be heading east
where the sky is violet-peach
and traffic heads for Leeds.
The kingfisher flies in parallel
with the fenced bank of frosted fields,
where a rusting swing bridge
won't let anyone cross.
The ducks are not so disciplined.
They don't give a toss about anything.

Mark Connors

I am an Ice Baby

not the only one of course, born in that frigid, deadly January
of nineteen forty-seven,

below freezing for weeks and weeks, no sun for three months
and coal in short supply.

Hard snow lay up to the tops of Derbyshire dry-stone walls,
villages cut off and struggling.

I tried hard not to emerge into that frozen world. Stubborn,
a long breach birth. Bottom first.

But Ice Babies are tough and strong; still alive when the sun came back,
in late March. Somehow, I survived.

Tonnie Richmond

Read Up!

CALENDARS

By Alexi Calamity

I said it was all downhill from here. My neighbour asked what was, and I gestured vaguely at the snow and ice that he was trying to shovel away from outside his front door and replied, “the year.”

The joke – that we were only a few days into it – seemed to pass him by, or he chose not to acknowledge it, so I felt I should justify myself, framing my assertion more as a philosophical position than *bon mot*.

“After all the forced jollity of Christmas, I mean,” I added. “No more lights and decorations, just two or three months of winter, and all that comes with it – freezing pipes, rocketing heating bills, flu and falling over.”

I meant it too; with each passing year, I’ve found the prospect of tolerating another winter harder to face. He grunted noncommittally and kept shovelling.

Of course, I never go in for any Christmas frivolity these days. I suppose it’s alright for children, but I find it all offensively wasteful. A tree you only have up a few weeks, before trying to cram it into your brown bin to rot until collections restart? Dismal. And don’t get me started on advent calendars – just buy a bar of chocolate for half the price and mark the days in your diary!

I started to expound upon my position, but spotting the gaudy light-up snowman sitting atop my neighbour’s porch reminded me that I’d have a challenge convincing him, so I wished him a good day and left him to his shovelling.



The path to the supermarket was thoroughly iced over and I nearly lost my footing at several points. I had put the errand off as long as I could, but the weather had outlasted my willingness to work through the more obscure items at the back of my pantry cupboard.

Selectively filling my basket, I noticed that their prices had risen again. Under cover of the shuffling of shelf positions to temporarily accommodate festive items, they had upped the cost of several of my preferred regular groceries. There was no fooling me, I knew the prices by heart and can sniff out value like a bloodhound. I was in at the wrong time of day for the real bargains, but on instinct I took a quick look at the marked-down miscellany. There was little of interest... other than a stack of chocolate advent calendars.

My initial sense of satisfaction that they had been eschewed before Christmas was overtaken by intrigue at them being reduced to fifty pence. This made them, per gram, better value than any equivalent chocolate in bar form.

I was torn.

I managed to mentally frame their purchase at a knockdown price as a validation, rather than abdication, of my principles. It was also driven by trying to claw back a few pence from the supermarket’s inflationary pricing and claim some victory over them too. I bought three.

Slipping my way home, tutting to myself at bins crammed full of festive detritus, clear-outs of the reckless rubbish of the celebratory period, I

Read Up!

CALENDARS

By Alexit Calamity

noticed a small tree (spruce? fir?) lying beside the bins.

That street had been collected. Evidently ignored by the refuse collectors for improper placement outside the receptacles, I was strangely moved by the plight of the plant. It still had the remnants of a cracked plastic pot round its roots, leaking soil into the gutter, and it was still mostly green.

There was still some life in it yet.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was a little embarrassed that such a blunt metaphor should elicit such emotion in me, but there it was. Despite having to brave the ice again, I felt compelled to act.

I had the foresight to take a new pot, the frame of my wheelie bag, and some tying cords, but it was still a rather perilous escapade, enhanced by that extra exciting frisson of it feeling like a robbery. I found myself laughing as I fell on my backside for the second time, expending such efforts in the rescue of an object I claimed to so strongly object to.

The tree spent a few days in the utility room getting a good watering, then, once temperatures had risen above zero, I dug it into the front garden. My neighbour, finally removing the illuminated snowman (well after Twelfth Night), asked if needed a hand. I said I had it under control but thanked him. He smiled and asked if I wanted to borrow any lights for it. I had no comeback for this, other than to politely decline. I had intended to eat the chocolate of the

calendars on whatever schedule I felt inclined to, but found myself sticking rigidly to a one-door-a-day policy. Something about seeing the winter tick away appealed to me.

Surprisingly, the tree continued to survive. It didn't grow much but remained green. I felt vindicated. I started referring to it by name – Hans Christian, naturally. It cheered me to see him surviving one day at a time.

I caved to the ludicrous notion that had been stuck in my mind since first mentioned and borrowed a small set of lights from my neighbour. The smirk he gave me... well, I took it with good grace, it was the least I could do.

Once I'd worked out the batteries and timer, it meant I could see Hans Christian all a-twinkle each morning and evening. I occasionally saw passers-by stop to point at him. They seemed cheered by the sight too. A beacon in the darkness.

Eventually, I reached the end of my third calendar; the last chocolate reindeer accompanying my early morning coffee. I looked out at Hans Christian – still surviving, still absurdly lit by the lights of my neighbour. The sky was brighter now, though. We'd even had the odd warm day amidst the cold and rain. Green shoots could be seen on vegetation. Today looked like being clear. Maybe spring was here.



Read Up!

THE INVENTION OF SNOW

By Alex Heppell

Mother was bored. Strange, odd, wonderful things happen when Mother is bored. Clouds only exist because she thought water should be able to fly. Rainbows began because of an idle moment at midday when she wanted some colour. Spring was given blossom trees because of a lazy day in April. Nothing is an accident; it was all invented to delight and intrigue in equal measure. That day, the creation began with Mother's simple words...

"Winter, your season needs more."

More. Simply more. More what? We had no idea where to begin, but we started thinking anyway. Autumn, Spring, Summer, and I, her eldest daughter Winter, sat discussing the possibilities. It was, of course, a great deal more difficult for my season for the simple reason we could not use plant life. I designed my time of year for my favourite of all pastimes – sleep. Everything must pause; some, to think, but mostly to rest. Always to let them rise again with new vigour, to charm our dear youngest: Spring. She loves colour; life. The very young are so joyfully excitable and warm. Not my style. Besides, after all the heat and excitement of the other seasons, you need me to cool your mind. I know I must seem frosty, but I give you time to reflect.

"What about weather?"

"Her own weather!?"

"You do have Sunshine, Summer my sweet"

"Every season does, Spring. That's not fair!"



"You don't complain when you borrow my Showers."

"Very true, Spring my dear, and Autumn has always shared the gentle billows of breeze with you. Don't be selfish, you all take turns and share. Winter will too, if

she can, I'm sure."

Mother was right, but honestly, I've always been much closer to Autumn and Spring. Autumn, I suppose, because she is nearer to my age and temperament. Spring because she breaths new life into us all.

"But Mother, I am so very cold, what weather would fit me? I am not for fractural light through water. I chill to the very heart."

Of course, my words would not put her off. I never expected them too. Mother is relentlessly resourceful and bubbling with hope. And as you know, with hope comes change.

"Water, that's it, Winter my girl. What can your calm hands make of that?"

She placed five raindrops on my cool palm and waited. I stared at the glassy beads and watched them freeze. I could make ice, but that's too easy; not what Mother wanted. Something new, then. How could I shift and shape it? I closed my hand and focused on the fracturing of these tiny crystals. Making them connect. Feeling each tiny pattern that grew against my skin. They grew. Then grew again. Then again like tiny intricate pathways mapping their minute worlds out against my hand. All at once, separate drops of

Read Up!

THE INVENTION OF SNOW

By Alex Heppell

water were now reaching out and connecting with one another. A woven lace of frozen water. A patchwork of each individual part's journey, scarcely visible even to the smallest creature. Only I'd know it was there, hidden inside. No longer harsh ice, but soft, like petals of winter.

I opened my fingers and blew the now feather-like chilled water at my sisters. They giggled and clapped as it melted against their skin.

"Excellent! I want it everywhere."

This had not been my plan. It took an extraordinary amount of energy for me to turn each particle into its own unique construction. Then bind them to make an odd white mass as pretty as the falling blossoms.

"Everywhere?" I asked, hoping my sisters would convince her otherwise. Alas, even Summer looked impressed by my concoction. Even my thoughtful, quiet Autumn begged.

"Please Winter, make more!"

So I did. I covered the earth with my complication of water and made it look brand new. A riot of cold simplicity. A clean slate. A fleeting new world, all for you creatures to use briefly. A magical court that melts away, feeding the earth as it leads to Spring. I dare to say I am rather proud of my invention.

Please consider how carefully sculpted this white plaything I grant you is. Please imagine how you can use it for joy with your own family. Please don't complain about the inconvenience, just pause and play. Just look for the wonder we hide in each element. Stand and gaze at the vastness of it all. Don't feel bad for taking time. Remember, I wanted you to rest anyway.



Coming Up!

All full up on mince pies and Christmas cake yet? Thought so - us too!

Joking aside, Christmas can be a very challenging time for so many of us these days. In amidst all of the partying and presents we would like to think that the best present anyone can receive, regardless of their circumstances, is kindness. With that in mind we would like to wish you all a very happy festive season, wherever you find yourself and whatever you may be doing.

We'll be back next month when the theme will be 'Youth'.

Until then, keep looking out for each other and, to quote a favourite TV staple from our own youths, regardless of your own spiritual beliefs, 'may your God go with you.'

Much love
Bridget & Harry (and Alfie) xx



Email: admin@positivelyup.co.uk
Website: www.positivelyup.co.uk

We are determined to keep Up! free for everyone, but we're always grateful for donations that will help us continue what we do.



[Buy us a coffee](#)