

Commissioned Writer in Residence

2018-2020

UWE Bristol | **Grand Challenge**



Introduction

Started in 2018-2019, this project has offered one student per year an opportunity to become a commissioned writer in residence. The position was created in conjunction with the UWE Bristol Grand Challenge, on the theme of homelessness in Bristol. The remit for student was to produce a series of creative pieces to raise awareness on this issue. Further to this, the student was asked to use the UWE Libraries collection of resources as inspiration, in order to produce a minimum of two or three pieces on the theme of homelessness. Harriet Castor-Jefferies and Kim Sherwood, respectively programme leader and senior lecturer for the BA (Hons) Creative and Professional Writing provided their expert support and advice at the different stages of the project.

Our Commissioned Writers in Residence were:

2018-2019: Sophie Pearn from BA (Hons) Creative and Professional Writing

2019-2020: Alexis Clement from BA (Hons) Creative and Professional Writing

Contents

Homeless - Woman by Sophie Pearn	4
Elderly Man by Sophie Pearn	5
Soldier by Sophie Pearn	6
Identity by Sophie Pearn	8
The Tale of Two Men by Alexis Clement	9
Acorn to Oak by Alexis Clement	19

UWE Bristol | **Grand Challenge**



Sophie Pearn

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2018-19

Homeless - Woman

187 cars passed by today.

I kept count.

I've found ways to entertain myself on the streets.

Strangers eyes dart in any direction but mine.

A faceless ghost to the naked eye.

A grim shadow cowering in a doorway.

I awake homeless, already a burden to society.

Sophie Pearn

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2018-19

Elderly Man

It's almost dark.

Time for me to begin the four-mile walk to the nearest shelter.

Anxious muscle memory is an indicator of the question I ask myself every day.

Will they have a bed for me tonight?

The outcome of my evening undecided.

I drag my feet in the direction of hope.

Sophie Pearn

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2018-19

Soldier

I feel lost and disconnected.
Overlooked and disrespected.
I gave the government my life.
Wearing uniform I left my wife.
I said I'm fighting for our country.
I'll be home, I'll write monthly.
Four world tours and I was back.
A lost leg, no job and lots of Prozac.
The PTSD led me to drink.
I'd try anything just to fall asleep.
My beautiful wife had enough.
She left in the night, took all her stuff.
The home we shared wasn't ours.
Within a month I laid under the stars.
I pleaded for help but it never came.
So I beg for food which tastes of shame.
A donated false leg helps me to get along.

Alone at night, I question where it all went wrong.

I wish people could see the soldier in me.

And open their arms with empathy.

I miss the days of feeling proud.

Now I am invisible to a crowd.

I fought for you, please fight for me.

It's hard not giving up on humanity.

Sophie Pearn

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2018-19

Identity

Living on the pavements of civilisation has

Stripped me of identity

Alexis Clement

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2019-20

The Tale of Two Men

The distant flat sea crawled steadily in. Soon it would be butting up to the seafront wall, opposite from where James sits.

Great, the tide's coming in.

He leans his head against the wood of the shop doorway. Boutiques and surf shops line the promenade, now abandoned until spring.

James sits a while with his eyes closed, tired from a lack of sleep. He feels a wave of his blonde hair escape from under his hood, it tickles his freckled nose. Brushing it back, he opens his eyes and looks out at the last of the season's holidaymakers. Families ambling back to their warm B and B's and caravan parks, ready for the evening's drinking and 'club-nite' entertainment; most of them are either poaching chips from paper parcels, or slurping on piled-high ice-creams, their bellies spilling over their elasticated waistbands.

It's gonna be dark soon.

Tugging open his rucksack he pulls out a savings can he's been carrying with him since he left home. He shakes it vigorously; the spacious, boisterous clang of metal against metal. When he'd prised the can open using a borrowed tin opener, he had been grateful to find he'd saved £63.37p over the months in spare change.

Right, what can I get with this?

His pocket vibrates.

Oh no, bet that's Evie. Damn, what m'l gonna say?

He pulls out an old Nokia, battered and covered in stickers. Evie put them there last week. Unicorns and holographic stars.

Mrs Vine of 'Vine's News and Booze' stands with her arms folded. Her foot taps, and with hostile lips, she tuts at the young man.

PC Richard Hershel turns the corner onto the promenade and see's Mrs Vine.

Oh God, there she is.

Mrs Vine shifts her weight from foot to foot and huffs as she spots the policeman.

'Look, there he is.' She shoos her hand dismissively in James' direction.

PC Hershel frowns, bringing his bushy eyebrows closer to his ruddy cheeks, his mouth stretches out into a thin line. 'Hello Mrs Vine. Is this the man you rang us about?

Again!

'Obviously! I've been trying to get one of you lot out here since yesterday. Look at him, saying he's homeless and there he is chatting on a bleeding mobile phone. If he was that skint, he couldn't afford a phone, now could he?'

John tucks his thumbs into his kit belt, elbows out. He squints his eyes at the man in the doorway. 'Well, it doesn't look top of the range Mrs Vine, it's tiny.' His look lingers a second longer. 'He's only a lad, isn't he?'

'So? He's been begging out here since yesterday, keeps shaking an old tin, making a bloody racket! I told him to move, but as you can see, still there! I've had enough! People are scared to walk up to the shop, seeing him there. Doesn't make us look very good, does it?'

'Oh, has he been intimidating people?'

'No, but...'

'Has he been verbally abusive to anyone?'

'Well, no, but...'

'Okay, so has he been acting inappropriately in any way at all?'

Mrs Vine looks down and kicks the curb. 'No.'

'And how old do you think he is?'

'Dunno, in his twenties maybe.' Her temper ignites once more. 'He should be out there working, get himself a bleedin' job! There's nothing wrong with him, the scrounging little sod. Except maybe the drugs!'

'Oh, so he's been doing drugs over there?'

'Well, not that I've seen, but, you know, they're all on summut aren't they?'

Richard looks over to James. 'Not all of 'them' Mrs Vine, no.' He pulls in her gaze and holds it. 'Right, thank you for bringing this 'situation' to our attention, I'll take it from here.' John turns on his worn, but polished black boots and walks towards James.

'Oh, right! Like that is it? - Just get him gone!' Turning her back on the two men, Mrs Vine scurries towards the warmth of her shop. 'Bleedin Nora, it's freezing out here.' The jarring sound of an electronic alarm signals that someone has entered the shop. It reverberates against the sounds of arcade games and the whirring of candy-floss machines.

As Richard walks over the discarded cigarette butts and puddles of booze trailing out of thrown cans, his boots stick to the concrete. As he gets closer, he begins to hear James talking; he detects a northern accent.

'I know Evie, I miss you too, but I can't come and see you right now. I've got too much work on.'

I wish.

'They've got me working like a dog on this site, carrying bricks, mixing concrete, moving tons of gravel from one place to the other!' James picks at his sleeve. 'Yeah, the lads are really sound.' His head drops, he catches it with his palm. 'Yeah, we all hang out after work and that, ya know, go for a pint...or two!'

Hate lying to her.

John hangs back; close enough to hear what the boy's saying, far enough away not to interrupt.

'Anyway, enough about me, what's going on wiv you? How's school? Has that idiot Sarah-Jane stopped hassling you about Mum, now that you're wiv our Nan?' He laughs. 'What? You're mates again? God, you girls are mental!'

Richards radio noisily crackles into action. James turns to see the policeman.
Shit!

'Evie, sorry...Evie. I'm gonna have t'call you back. The Foreman's calling me. We're just finishing up for the day, then gonna head ft'pub.'

Where am I gonna go now? This Rosser's bound to move me on.

'Yep, I promise...after the pub.'

That stupid cow from the shop grassed me up I bet.

'Alright then, speak to you later. Bye. Love you too. Bye.'

John fiddles with the radio until it's only just audible. He walks closer to James.

God, he looks just like my Sam, same green eyes.

'Alright son?'

The boy puts his phone into his hoody pocket. 'Yeah. But I aint your son!'

Hate that.

'No, but you could be. I've a lad about your age. How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'Okay. And what you doing out here? Haven't you got anywhere else you can go?'

'Do you think I'd be sat here freezing my ass off if I did?'

'No, I suppose not. Sorry. It's just that I couldn't help but overhear your conversation; I heard you mention that someone was staying with your Nan.'

'Yeah, my sister.'

Nosey bastard.

'Right, and you can't stay there with her?'

Who does this idiot think he is?

'No.'

'I can hear you're not from round here, where you from?'

'Leigh, Lancashire. It's just by Wigan.'

'Oh right, I've been up to Wigan. They used to have some good Northern Soul nights up there when I was a young'un.'

'Yeah, I think my grandad used to go them.'

Richard leans back, as if he'd been physically hit with the words. 'Ooph! Don't hold back will ya?'

'Anyway, everything like that's all closed up now.'

'Not much going on up there then?'

'Nah, that's why I'm down here...plus I didn't want anyone I knew t'see me, well...like this.'

'Right.'

I hate having to do this.

'Well, you're going to have to move on I'm afraid.'

Where's he gonna go? Poor lad.

Knew it!

'Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm a vagrant, aren't I. Vagrancy's a crime int-it? That why you gotta move me on? Some stupid law made back in some stupid place in time. Learnt about it in school.'

'Well...'

'Someone thought it was a good idea to make people, who had nowhere to go, criminals. Talk about kicking someone when they're down!'

Can't argue with that.

'There's places that can help you know.'

Maybe only one, but...

'Especially at your age.'

Yeah right. Got loads of help back home.

'I can radio through to base and find out where the closest place is.' In fact, why don't we take a little walk? We can go get a cup of tea at the station while I do a bit of research.'

'What you think I'm gonna trust you? Just walk freely into the Police Station. And then what? You do me for begging? Or just being homeless? I've heard you lot do that. Very community spirited! Thought you guys were meant to protect and serve!'

'C'mon lad. I'm just trying to help. Old Mrs Vine there is probably going to give you a much harder time than me if you hang around here any longer.'

Knew it was 'er.

'Really, I just want to help. I'm sorry about her. I don't know what gets into some people. Look, I'm sure we can find you somewhere, even if it's just for a few nights til we get you sorted.'

Some dodgy hostel I bet. I'm not sleeping in a room full of weirdos, never know what they might do.

'It's nice and warm at the station, with as much tea or coffee as you want.'

I bet he's hungry.

'I'll try to find you some grub as well.'

Maybe...

I am bloody starving.

'Please lad.

Now, come on. Let's try and get you dealt with. What's your name?'

'James.'

'Well, come on James. I've got to move you on either way, so you may as well come with me.'

He don't seem that bad I suppose.

'Look at it this way, as soon as you set up camp somewhere else, the likes of Mrs Vine will probably be straight on the blower anyway.'

Bloody idiots.

'C'mon, give us yer hand.' John reaches out.

James leans over to pick up his rucksack and plunks the savings can back into it, John notes his slight frame.

Just like my Sam.

James' hand reaches John's.

'Yeah, good riddance...off you go, and don't come back!' Mrs Vine is standing with another PC his radio tilted up to his mouth. They're both watching Richard and James.

James's grip slips from Richard's.

Shit!

'James! Stop! Come back!'

James runs down the promenade, his spare change clattering in the can that he brought from home.

Alexis Clement

Commissioned Writer in Residence, 2019-20

Acorn to Oak

They say, that 'From tiny acorns do mighty oaks grow',

The cycle of life in continuous flow.

But where the acorn lands, is mostly pure chance,

It's the beginning of its origins, the start of its dance.

If it falls on fresh meadow, or woodland floor,

It's cushioned by fortune, a full pot to procure.

But consider the oak aside man's made path,

That chooses an acorn's future, of contentment or wrath.

The placement of branches predicting its valiance,

A seasonal squall, creating its unbalance.

It's a spirited potluck of evens and odds,

A thoughtless game in the hands of the gods.

You were once an acorn. Where did you land?

On soft moss and clover, captured in love's hand?

Or maybe you fell into a tangled hedgerow,

Complicated and complex, jarred by the vicious blow.
There's a nip in the air that surrounds us in swells,
The constant cruel battering helps build our tough shells.

We cling to our branch until we're ready to fall,
Hoping that somewhere, we hear Mother Nature's kind call.
Some are assured that they will land on soft soil,
But others are tormented with deep-rooted toil.
Relentlessly lashed by a dark, looming cloud,
Wrapped and encased in a thick heavy shroud.

So, what happens, when acorns fall onto paths made of concrete,
Where it's hard, unforgiving. Are they deemed obsolete?
Drenched and heavy, laden with sorrow,
Their first course of action, to stonewall their tomorrow.
They may be left to be attacked by a parasite,
Smothered by worms and shunned by the sunlight.
Or clamped into a creature's restrictive sharp claws,
The pressure squeezing its already raw flaws.
Kicked absent-mindedly to where the path meets the earth,
Carelessly discarded, the object of cruel mirth.

There are cracks in the concrete, an eternal drop,
Some cavernous and dank, they're defenceless to stop.

Some stay here, stagnant, powerless to grow,
Unable to act in everyone else's show.
These cracks are our paths, the lot we've been given,
They're maps of our journeys, no plan or provision
A swirling compass, some homeward bound
Although for some, that home isn't found.

Some find a method of tapping roots through the dark,
Purposely dreaming and assembling their bark.
They rise through the concrete, they search for an exit,
Some might get lost, but some they might find it.
We aren't all granted a start full of ease,
But all deserve to hear laughter and breeze through the trees.

So, don't discard those acorns, don't think they're done,
Sit and consider the distance they've come.
They're tough and they're sturdy, they've done well to compete,
Never underestimate an acorn, that falls onto concrete.

UWE Bristol | **Grand Challenge**

