

Spark

Young Writers



READ ON

WRITING
WEST
MIDLANDS

Issue 23 October 2021

We so nearly missed this. Spark Young Writers' Magazine, and all of the many young writers' events in the region, are always focused on what we can write today, what we can make now. It took the end of the EU Read On Project for us to ever look back — and it seems we picked the perfect time.

For in its eight year history, Spark Young Writers' Magazine has now published more than 500 pieces. Counting the submissions that were accepted for this issue, it's actually 535. So many young writers have earned publication for so many topics, concerns and, deliciously often, a lot of laughs.

It's humour that's earned "Another Bite" by Ari Nicholl the editor's choice for this new issue. Humour and a strong possibility that you will identify with its main character's escapade.

To mark the 500 milestone, we've also republished five favourites from the archives. Think about that, though: five out of 500. One percent. I'd say you should try trying to pick one percent out of all of these, but actually you can. The entire history of Spark Young Writers' Magazine is online and you can read the lot.

I love that we've somehow unexpectedly built this archive. I love that when you read all of the issues, you can see writers who earned a place time and again — and then how you can also see how their writing develops over time, too.

So I also love and relish and beam that I have been involved from the start. I don't always get to edit the magazine, but you can bet your life I always get to read it.

William Gallagher, Editor

Spark Young Writers Magazine is a publication of Writing West Midlands. We support creative writers and creative writing across the region. More information about us can be found on our website: www.writingwestmidlands.org.

This magazine features writing from children and young people aged 8 - 20 who live in the West Midlands of the UK. It is also available to read online at www.writeonmagazine.org.

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Another Bite

Ari Nicholl

When I was a boy, I had a favourite treat called chocolate concrete, I absolutely, truly, truly loved it. Normally I have that big fat bit around the edge, as fat as a panda, but sadly we only have chocolate concrete on birthdays.

But one night, the night before my sister's second birthday, I thought mmm, yum, mmm, yummy chocolate concrete tomorrow. Now you may be thinking that I was also thinking about the actual birthday, but no I was not. I was only thinking about the yummy, scrummy chocolate cake!

So that night I went to sleep, then I suddenly woke up again and thought, chocolate concrete again.

Me thinking about eating the final crumbs of the chocolate concrete would not let me go to sleep, so I had to just have a quick peek.

I pulled the duvet covers, then put them back where they were, just in case my mum or dad came in. I tiptoed through the corridor and remembered the creaky, screechy and unsafe floorboard, I tried not to tread on it, but I heard a little squeak,

I stood as still as a statue, listened very carefully and tiptoed past.

I quietly slid down the stairs, into the kitchen. I opened the cupboard door and saw that big fat bit that was always, surely saved for me. It smelt as good as a chocolate factory, yummy, crummy, yummy.

Clatter, clang, clutter, I put the plate on the table, mmmm, I couldn't resist just having a little lick of the truly scrumptious cake, I thought just one bit, but I had another bit then another and another, until when I was about to get one more bit, I looked down at the plate but all of the cake had gone!

Oh no, I had eaten the whole birthday cake, then, I had an idea. I licked the crumbs, now the plate was clean as crystal, so I put it gently back in the cupboard, so no one would see it.

I joyfully went back upstairs, past the creaky floorboard and into bed, with a happy belly full of chocolate.

In the morning I woke up, got out of bed, went downstairs and had breakfast. Then my dad came in and said: "Don't forget to get the cake ready for your sister's birthday."

I replied, full of guilt and full of chocolate "Oh...oh...sure."

"Hmmm, you normally jump at the sound of chocolate concrete," he said.

Then my dad looked closely at the table and he saw some brown crumbly crumbs and, picking them up, he asked like a detective: "This isn't chocolate cake is it?"

I replied nervously. "Urh... I don't know."

"I don't believe you, your sister will be so upset! Go and get a wet wipe and clean it up!" he said furiously.

I went upstairs and got a cloth, but boy oh boy that chocolate concrete was worth the telling off...

Do you think this will happen again?

Making Waves

Laurie Archer

My soul is so quiet you could
lift me out of the water
and drop me back in and I would
not make a splash and
by the time I had caught my
breath everyone will have forgotten
that I ever swam here in the first place.

At the Museum

Iona Mandal

I dwell within the chambers of a euphemism,
an almost-palindrome, six-lettered
warehouse of plunder.
The only somewhat native artefact,
the blood-stained soil of an unholy civilisation,
which came in time,
of a million human thoughts.

Each automatic door, almost as if,
a gust of ancient wind,
passing through the glass.
A threshold to revelation
of sugar-coated pillage
from splendid lands,
showing the world,
within a few ephemeral hours.

Rocks as old as the universe,
chipped frescoes, revarnished vases,
rows of porcelain and bronze figurines
now embalmed in single treasure rooms
masking the grit and grime of rapine.

I question at times
the misrepresentation denoted
within false acceptance.
Stolen heritage replacing bare lands
built from oppression.
Memories of human thoughts,
trapped in each footfall,
in rooms of the past,
their enormity making one forget
of all that it is worth.

The echoes of an infantile rhyme
may leave your lips with disgrace:
Finders keepers, losers weepers.
To which we retort -
Weep as you lose the pillars
that uphold your nation.
weep as the marble, gives way to weathering,
because nothing or almost nothing.
really ever belonged here in the first place

Worlds from Home

Jay Krishnamoorthy

On the first day of lockdown
It was very boring
And I was left to wonder
If I would ever go pouring
Into the golden sunshine

As days gave way to weeks
The days of lockdown
Were no longer boring
And tedious but an opportunity
For all of us to spend
More time with family
That were currently living
In our household with us

That is why you should appreciate
The opportunity that you have
To spend more time with your
family.

Silence

Roshni Quddus

You ask me why I'm silent.

Why when injustice sings, my lips sew closer together. Why when the truth is so easy, fabrications fly out of my very hands.

But tell me, if I speak are you willing to listen? If I reveal the truth to you, are you willing to believe it? Will you lend me an ear... or will you question my integrity?

Will you ask what I was wearing or why I spoke the words I spoke? Why I didn't scream; why I didn't fight?

The less I meet your standards, the less I am a victim, and the less I am worthy of your time.

So when I am silent, tell me, is it no different from when I speak?

The Funeral

Jeya Sandhar

I stared at my reflection, the pallid mask enveloping my face, a mournful expression tormenting the display that covered my pursed lips. Tracing my skin, I searched for the bruises, the evidence to justify his death.

But they were gone.

Instead replaced by a flawless covering that merged beneath white. So perfectly white it made me wonder if it ever happened, his hand tightly coiled around my neck, slightly lifting me off the floor.

Although the deep mauve marks were gone, I still felt the pain engrave into my neck, imagined it forcing its way into my system, becoming one with my broken body.

Dipping my fingers into the swirling water beneath me, I pulled at my eyelids, slightly smearing the crimson eyeshadow that was meticulously placed along the edge.

One, two, three drops...that was enough. I'd been returning here every hour, refilling my 'tears', replenishing the facade that kept me sane. Kept me... mundane.

A numbness hastily spread across my body. I felt the water drip to my chin. Could these tears be real?

Flicking my eyes to my wrist, I read the time from the patterned watch. The watch he gifted me last year. It was always five minutes fast, he wouldn't let me arrive late, never let me stay out for too long. Always watching... waiting for me to return.

What felt like five hours in this bathroom was only two minutes, but that was already too long.

If he were still here I would've been called down, a drunk voice echoing off walls, beckoning me to stand pressed against him so he could present me. Show me off to his colleagues... But it was always less painful when they stayed... he was more violent drunk.

I dreaded the time they had to leave, repeatedly trying to keep them here as long as possible.

Everyone was waiting for me downstairs, for my speech about *mi amor*. I shuffled my feet forwards, white knuckles returning to their usual peach as I removed them from the edge of the sink.

My hands brushed down the black lace, a chipped nail catching on the fabric just before my hips. He would've scolded me for that: 'You're ruining this beautiful dress I bought for you. You must take more care darling, don't want to hurt yourself with those nails now.'

And I always agreed muttering sorry before trimming the nail. I never went against him, always wanting to please him.

One step at a time, I descended the stairs. I could see two sides of him waiting there, one with his hand outstretched ready to beat me, the other crouched and crying begging for forgiveness.

Right until the very end I never knew which was the real him, the one who whispered '*Te quiero*' against my ear or the one that flung me against the floor, choking me before beating against my hips.

I always wished it was the first but I know he could never be rid of the second.

Darkness

Isabel Garcia Arnold

I sat up suddenly. It was the middle of the night and I'd had another nightmare. I was having them regularly now, and they needed to stop, quickly. I was so caught up in reassuring myself the dream wasn't real that I didn't realise I was swimming in a pool of my own sweat.

A sudden noise from the hallway snapped me back to my senses. Something was out there, hiding in the gloom of the night. I froze listening for any sign of movement. An unexpected wave of cold washed over me as I felt for my slippers at the side of my bed.

I couldn't find them in the eerie darkness; I was going to have to go barefoot.

As quietly as possible, I crept out of bed. I could only just make out the silhouette of my hand in front of my face and I gulped down the terrifying thought of who, or what could be lurking in the dark corners of the house.

A shiver ran down my spine as I reached the end of my bedroom. I could always go back, right?

My soft, warm, safe bed was just a few metres away... but no. I had heard a noise and I was going to investigate. I don't know why I was more scared of the hallway, I suppose there is something far more daunting about cold, wooden floorboards than fluffy carpets; more chance of being heard. Or perhaps it was the thought of the "thing", if there truly was a "thing", skulking closer.

CREEEEAAAAAKK.

More sounds. Coming from the room at the end of the hallway. Uh oh, my little brother Benji's room. What if it was a kidnapper? Benji was only three, they could take him away without him realising what was happening.

I could run to Mum and Dad. But they would only tell me there was nothing there, moan at me to go back to sleep.

I decided against that idea and tiptoed towards my brother's room. The wind was howling outside like a beast, a large, fearsome, hairy beast... no, I needed to stop my imagination taking over. For the sake of Benji.

In our hallway there's a large cabinet full of all the trophies and medals we'd won as a family. One of the achievements I'm most proud of is the golden baton I was awarded for captaining the winning team in a relay tournament at school.

I opened the cabinet and grabbed the prized object. This would make an ideal weapon as it was heavy, long and perfect for whacking uninvited guests who were trying to attack my brother.

I tiptoed across the hallway and reached Benji's room. My breathing became shallow

as my sweaty fingers nervously grasped the handle of his closed door, and pulled it hesitantly towards me. Clenching my fists, I peered through...

...to see Benji sitting in the middle of the room scoffing a gigantic bar of chocolate.

"Chocy!" he giggled.

"Benji!" I hissed.

The Human Mechanism of Dancing

Sadeen Ahmad

her elegant feet spoke beautiful melodies of songs: with one belting out the lyrics.
a beautiful serenity that flowed like bending water.

no words spoken, just emotion pounding with every twirl and step.
encapsulating the tears and laughs that made this movement a flowing river.

those calloused, bruised feet now effortlessly twirling and pointing.
flashes of blue and pink fabric daring to twirl with the dancer.

the dancing now almost melting in the music,
like it was a swan gliding on its own: no restraining chains or words to hold it back.

a rhythm drawing all eyes in.
painting a picture of things too good to be true.

finishing with a never-ending, hypnotising twirl that could take away your breath.
ending with a standing ovation, conjoined with cries and hollers and of people
watching,
breathing,
feeling,
and living

for ballerina dancing.

If Nothing was a Crime

Fanni Doroti Polgar

They killed my daughter. Sofia was her name. Eleven was her age. This time last week was the day.

You must be wondering: who are 'they?'

They are the people who stand so high that mothers like myself have been effaced in their minds. Their necks are so fixed in the position of a lie that they can no longer move below their own line of sight.

They are the people whose already pristine place of power I cleaned in exchange for necessity. I sculpted my back into the arch of their insulated city-centre home rooftops in exchange for ignorance. I transformed myself into the ghost of overtime to feed my Sofia a scarce meal of hope every evening.

Still, they did not take notice of the fact that I have a name, let alone a child.

They are the people who killed my Sofia.

You must be asking: what was their relationship with her? Nothing. What was their motive for her murder? Nothing. What weapon did they use to kill her? Nothing.

There was nothing.

She had nothing.

They gave her nothing.

Her scream, to them, meant nothing.

So now, my world is nothing. There is nothing; for my Sofia now is what she always was through their impaired eyes:

Nothing,

nothing,

nothing.

From 2013: The Seven Dwarves (featuring Snow White)

Anand Singh-Nagra

Here we go again; another fairy tale. Another story filled with distressing damsels, arrogant princes and a mistreated mythological creature that is subject to cruel accusations. Please note that this is not the famous, family-friendly edition of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. This is the real story. The Seven Dwarves (featuring Snow White). Expect some shocking plot twists, and a different story entirely; the unabridged version. It should be quite new to all of you.

The idea of Snow White being killed by a group of misunderstood mythical dwarves has disturbed some of the readers, but it is the true story. I really should start now.

One day, a couple of years ago and in a land quite near to here, the mythical kingdom was ruled by a generous king and queen. The entire land was wealthy and prosperous, with business thriving, no disease and no criminals. But there was one grey cloud blocking some of the sun. That was the princess, Snow White; the teenage daughter of the monarchs.

But seriously, what kind of parent names their child Snow White? It's a bit of a joke really. Next thing you know there'll be someone called Rain Purple. Anyway, they had a moody daughter named Snow White. She was rebellious, frustrated and annoying. She was also spoilt, possibly her worst attribute. She never appreciated any of it. She always wanted more.

But, what Snow White loved more than anything else was being the centre of attention. One day she hatched a cunning plan to cause chaos and fear across the city. She was going to kidnap herself. I know, the plot has many flaws, but the biggest of them has to be that it involved going into the Big Bad Wood. There was a reason they gave it such an ominous name. She even wrote a fake ransom note. What an annoying child. I, personally, have always hated princesses. The amount of effort people use to save them is ridiculous. Nobody understands that the whole scenario would be completely different if they weren't so foolish in the first place.

Anyway, she ran off into the heart of the dark, sinister forest. What would happen next would be the whole cause of this story. She was kidnapped by seven dwarves.

An hour or so later, Snow White opened her eyes. Her head was throbbing, and her vision was blurry. She felt like she was very off balance, until it occurred to her she was hanging upside down.

"Oi, she's awake!" a gruff voice said. It was all very confusing to Snow White, hanging upside down in a log cabin, surrounded by dwarves.

"Where am I?"

"Shut it. You are going to tell us the information we need to make money out of this escapade"

"Pardon, what?" asked Snow White, in a dazed fashion.

"I'm sorry. Where are my manners?" a dwarf murmured, before belching extremely loudly. "I am Grumpy. These are my brothers; Frustrated, Annoyed, Severely Miffed, Angry, Infuriated and My Blood is Boiling. Now back to business. We know who you are. You're that tike who lives in the palace aren't you? Yes? Okay. You are going to tell us the postcode for the palace and the location of the nearest post box."

What she told them was to untie her at once, that she was part of the royal family and that their etiquette was unacceptable. She went on and on, until they had no choice but to throw her off the edge of the nearest cliff. So, that's the end of her, which is good, because it was getting a bit boring, wasn't it.

But then the dwarves had a problem" what to do about the ransom. Eventually, after several hours, they hijacked the delivery boy's bicycle and sent the letter to the palace anyway, regardless of Snow White's current condition.

When the palace received the ransom, as they were a gullible king and queen, who had spent most of their lives sitting in an enchanted castle drinking tea, they immediately sent the ransom money, without realising the dwarves' plan.

Once they received the money, all seven dwarves decided to buy a van and drive to Las Vegas. When they got there they managed to make a fortune, as it is a known fact that dwarves are gifted poker players.

They lived happily ever after. I'm not so sure about the kingdom. But in my opinion, the dwarves had the courage to do something everybody secretly wanted to do: to get rid of Snow White.

From 2014: The Happening

Clodagh Delahunty-Forrest

David was awoken by his coughing and the smell of smoke. He heard rummaging in his room, he looked up expecting to see his mom but instead he saw that his bedroom had changed and to his horror it was a ghostly figure of a boy that was making the noise. David was terrified, he froze and his heart filled with fear. It was beating so fast he thought it might burst. The figure was trying to open a door that had not been there before, a chandelier hung from the ceiling giving the room a strange eerie glow. David screamed but no sound came out, the boy seemed unaware of David's presence. A scratching, whimpering sound came from behind the door and the boy was frantically trying to open it. It seemed to go on forever but then he faded and David was alone.

Next morning David tried to tell his mom what had happened, she said it was because it was his first night in his new room and it was probably a dream. She would not believe David, thinking he was making it up because he had not wanted to move here. The boy came every night at 1.00am and his room always smelt of smoke, David was quite used to the ghost's antics now but the noise was unbearable. He was intrigued by what lay beyond the door.

One day David's curiosity got the better of him and he decided to investigate. David thought the boy looked Victorian so looked through all the old newspapers at the library. He was just going to give up when he stumbled across an article relating to a fire that happened in his new house on 5th May 1889. He learned that a family and their pet dog had all been killed when a fire had broken out due to a candle. It mentioned that a boy called Albert had been trapped in his bedroom and that his dog had died outside his door trying to get in. The fire broke out at 1.00am; David decided to help Albert by looking for the key to the door that didn't exist.

Months passed, David and his mom were working in the garden. His spade hit something hard he looked down and saw a rusty old key; David picked the key up and hid it in his pocket. He said nothing to his mom as he had tested her patience over the last few months taking any key he could find. That night he placed the key where the boy always appeared. David waited in his bed patiently; smoke gave David the signal that Albert was in his room. Albert started searching around the room, he found the key and he rushed to the door to unlock it. Out sprang a tan dog with happy eyes glad to see his owner, suddenly they both disappeared and the smell of smoke was gone. That was the last time David saw Albert and his dog.

From 2016: The Perfect Cake

Maryam Alatmane

225 grams	And sometimes
of flour	it takes longer than those 15 minutes
and butter	you give it to cook
and sugar	Or I leave it too long
4 eggs	And I am left
And a teaspoon	With blackness
of baking powder	overtaking the sponge
	And a foul stench
I follow every single rule and regulation	That reaches my nostrils
Folding in the flour properly	And makes the fire alarm scream.
Without leaving lumps	
Making sure that there is no eggshell left	Maybe
None of those hard, jagged edges	Maybe it does not need to be
Just smooth	Flawless
And nice	Maybe
And perfect.	Maybe you learn
	From your mistakes
But my cake	Maybe
Never seems to turn out like yours	Maybe the next time
It is always sunk	It will be better
in the middle	
Or not risen as high as yours is.	But
	All the same

I follow the recipe for a
Perfect cake
Again and again and again
Praying
Hoping
Dreaming
That one day
Mine will turn out
Like yours.

From 2018: The Secret

Ina Ross

I crunch on my too-dry toast. Nan and Granddad are heavy sleepers so no need to worry about waking them. The morning sun spills into the once-dark kitchen. I'm usually still in bed when Nan gets up to feed the cats, but I couldn't sleep.

Nan's footsteps skip down the stairs. She's always so happy in the morning, unlike Granddad, who you should avoid at all costs before he's had his coffee. Opposites attract I suppose.

"Up early again, kitten? You ok?" she chirps as she strolls into the kitchen.

"Morning Nan, I fed the cats for you," I answer, trying to avoid the question and failing miserably. She can always tell when something's up. I haven't fed the cats since before Mum and Dad left.

They left when I was four. Nan told me they couldn't take care of me, that they were good people, but I've gone past the point of worrying about them anymore. I'm happy with Nan and Granddad – well, we'll see about that after today.

She clicks on the kettle then sits beside me. I fiddle nervously with my bracelet. She puts her arm around me and I snuggle into her, breathing in her scent just like when I was young.

"Got anything you want to talk about, kitten?" she says softly, petting my head.

Our shared love for cats is how I got the nickname. We would lie on the couch, curled up into each other, and chat about all the cats we'd own. She would pet my head and call me her 'favourite little kitten.'

I know I can talk to her about anything. I take a deep breath.

"I met someone, Nan," I murmur, eyes locked on the floor. No turning back now.

"Ah, and what's the lucky boy's name?" she replies, still rubbing my head. Just say it, I think to myself, it's now or never.

"Jess, Nan, her name is Jess," I whisper. She stops rubbing my head and gets up to make the coffee. She puts three mugs down onto the table and sits back down beside me. She exhales, and turns to me.

"Look at me, kitty," she says.

I turn to look at her, the nerves welling up inside me.

She smiles gently, putting them at ease. "That's what been bothering you? You were afraid to tell me you had a girlfriend? I love you no matter what, you know that right? When do we get to meet her?" She smiles through it all.

A wave of relief washes over me. She doesn't care. She still loves me. The happiness bubbles in my stomach. I throw my arms over her and squeeze her as tight as I can.

"I love you too, Nan," I cry, failing to hold the tears back. All the worry and fear finally subsides.

As we prepare for Granddad to come bounding downstairs, moaning and groaning about anything and everything, Nan hums a little song. I feel closer to her than ever before.

From 2019: Five a Day

Iona Mandal

What is it? Notoriously popular health standards?
For optimal health, we need a rainbow of nutrients and colours.
Every telly screen and magazine, plastered with moralising glow ups every day.

Red.
We eat our cascading pomegranate seeds as if they are jewels.
Yet, squirm at the sight of blood stains on bathroom linoleum.
We have learnt to worship gems, but not reality that it's healthy to bleed.

Orange and Yellow.
That oddly blended smoothie forced down the throat.
Yet, we have no time to pull the blinds to soak in the sunshine.
So we craftily convincing our taste buds, to make believe that goodness is often pain.
Yet, eyes blind to the beauty, we are bestowed with.

Green.
A heap at the corner of our plate.
The dwindling, ghastly foliage of times we live in.
We watch our gardens wilt, grow grey hairs without care.
Crooked vegetables removed from supermarket shelves.
Nature left to decay,
Eve no longer stealing the forbidden fruit.

Blue and, indigo
The awkwardly unnatural hues, running through our veins of food that is cold and blue yet treated as if royal.
And, last but not the least, White.
Of pills and tablets we do not need,

but substitute for the kaleidoscope of colours
we are too blind to see through.

So gulp down the rainbow of acid rain, famine and LED lights.
Variety and colour in every gulp
Eat your rainbow, as the adverts scream, believing in the food revolution!

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does with young people, please see
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