

UKAway 2007

Limnisa Centre

Methana

Greece

JULY 7th – 14th 2007
REPORT ON THE FIRST AWAY-FROM-
HOME WRITERS' EVENT ORGANISED
BY UKAUTHORS.COM

Gold Dust A Gold Dust special



Elfstone



Mary Owen



Laurie Owen



Debbie Singer



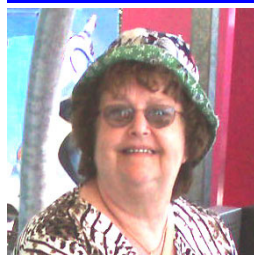
Wendy Pettifer



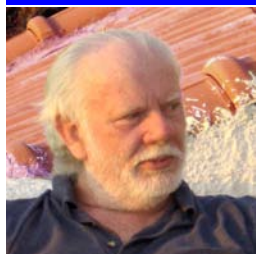
Jeff Dray



Sharon Adams



Valerie McKinley



David Gardiner

ABOUT THE PEOPLE

Elfstone is a regular poet on UKAuthors.com and elsewhere

Mary Owen was one of our non-writers who came for the holiday

Laurie Owen has written a novel (not yet published) + poetry

Debbie Singer writes poetry and has attended a short story course

Wendy Pettifer is making the transition from non-fiction to fiction

Jeff Dray writes humorous pieces and is a UKAuthors regular

Sharon Adams is a non-writer as yet who accompanied her mother:

Valerie McKinley, an experienced UKAuthors poet

David Gardiner has one novel and one short story collection in print

This is the story of our visit to the Limnisa Centre on the Peloponnese coast of Greece. The centre is run by Mariel, who is Dutch, and her English husband Phillip, helped by Carla and Jack, who were less conspicuous. This was an adventure for us all, we didn't know what the Centre would be like, how we would get on with one another or whether it would meet our expectations. In the event, I think most of our expectations were exceeded, and we came home wanting to do something very similar again next year!

Due to a misunderstanding about the accommodation we ended up with four air-conditioned bedrooms and two non-AC kitchen diners, about 1 kilometre from the main Centre where we had our meals, swam in the sea, and generally spent most of our time. Most people had to share a

bedroom, and two of us slept outdoors on the verandas under the stars (and a mosquito net), which was fine. We found ways to fit into the available space.

Elfstone was a bit unfortunate on the first night, sleeping in the non-AC kitchen without a mosquito net she provided a tasty meal for the little 'uns – Jeff Dray didn't do much better.

Our location was well off the tourist track and very peaceful and beautiful. Our hostess was charming and thus instantly forgiven for any shortcomings.

The Centre was a three-terraced Mediterranean style building built into the side of a hill sloping down to the sea. We could sit on the various balconies or under a shaded pergola at beach level to write or hold our workshops. One balcony was equipped as a dining area for meals.



Home – 1 K from the Centre



Top part of the Centre



Elfstone's mossie bites



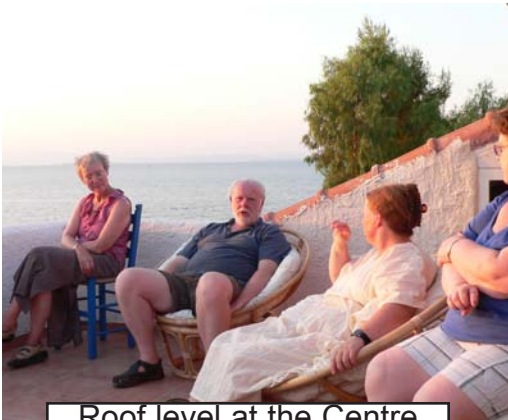
Garden leading down to the sea



Not to be outdone – Jeff Dray



Cooling off in the sea



Roof level at the Centre



Quiet time



Walking down to the Centre

The 1 kilometre walk between where we slept and where we did everything else gave us all a little daily exercise, and we also swam and snorkelled in the usually mirror-flat sea outside the Centre. If the planned cabins had existed this would have been a perfect setting.



Visibility underwater was the best I've ever come across, but there wasn't a great deal of life to see or to photograph.



Young Turkish Wrasse (I think)

A young Moray eel with a yellow body and dark speckling was spotted on several occasions but nobody managed to get a photograph. Mostly, we saw small fish and pretty patterns of light on the rocks –



Mariel had a beautiful dog (bitch, technically) named Hera, who wanted to play with everyone all the time. Elfstone wanted to take her home, but we talked her out of it.



The day at the Limnisa Centre revolved around writing, the workshops that we organised for ourselves to give feedback on what we were writing, and **eating**, though not necessarily in that order. The food was excellent and very “healthy” with lots of Greek salads and fresh vegetables. It ranged from traditional Greek dishes like mousaka to pasta dishes and (on one occasion) a fine chicken curry.



This was Jeff's rather excellent cream-sponge-and-fruit birthday cake, which was delicious if not exactly slimming. We also found time to sample the fare at a couple of the local tavernas, both in our local village and in Methana itself (below),

which was a taxi-ride away. I had hoped to combine the outing with a visit to the one and only Internet cafe, but (you've guessed it) it was shut. The town of Methana was well worth a look though. It was so sleepy and laid back it brought to mind the little town in Co. Donegal where I lived for the first decade or so of my life. There can't be many places like that left in the world, particularly in Europe.

Such was the backdrop against which our holiday was spent – long, very hot days, plenty of room to spread out and do our own thing, excellent food, and the company of fellow writers who understood the point of what we were doing and supported us in our individual efforts.

The group dynamics worked almost perfectly, nobody got up anybody else's nose that I know of, and we made good friends and expressed fervent hopes when it was over that we could do it again somewhere else next year, and come back here later when the planned beach cabins have been built. There is more to tell, but let's move on to the writing that we produced, and the gains in skills and confidence that we all experienced.



WRITING AT LIMNISA

Most of us came to write something or to improve our writing, although two people (Sharon and Mary) were there for the holiday aspect rather than any desire to join in the workshops. That was fine, they sat in when they felt like it and did other things when they didn't. I think we managed to interest both of them in the creative process and no doubt they will dip their toes them-

selves when they are ready.

Some of the participants offered technical advice at the workshops and everyone supplied the equally important input of the general reader.

Starting with the short stories, the two that follow were written from scratch at Limnisa and tidied-up in group discussion in the workshops..

THE RED SEA ANGELFISH

by Debbie Singer

All she could hear was the sound of her own breathing. Shallow, rhythmic breaths that seemed to be coming from someone else just above her in the water, about to pounce. She felt scared to break the surface in case she found she was too far from the boat to swim back. Even though she was a competent swimmer there was something about the immensity of the sea that frightened her. Beneath the surface she felt claustrophobic, above it apprehensive.

Alison tried to use the rhythm of her breathing to calm herself down. "In, out, in, out," she told herself. She forced herself to start taking notice of what she could see beneath her; the rippling sun was making a honeycomb pattern on the coral. Despite the briefings at the beginning of the boat trip, she could not identify the small knots of yellow with writhing edges like a florid mushroom opening and closing in slow motion.

Alison found herself encircled in a ring of tiny fish, fluorescent blue, just below the surface. Below them she spotted a long thin green fish with a yellow horizontal stripe along its belly and further away she could see a couple of fatter ones with vertical threads through their translucent shapes. But there was no sign of the Red Sea Angelfish.

Shrunken into their sheets, each elderly face looked hopefully towards her as she

passed, in the vain hope that she had come to visit them.

"Am I glad to see you," her mother's voice boomed out across the ward.

Alison pivoted towards her, flowers and fruit juice hiding her lack of reciprocal enthusiasm.

"Mum, how are you?"

"I'm in hospital."

"I'd just got into work when I got the message. I was early because I'd an important case to prepare."

"I must say it's taken you a long time to get here. I was worried sick that there'd been an accident on the M1."

"I came as soon as I could, Mum, you know that."

"Well, now you're here, I need you to buy me some things. I need two night-dresses, you know the kind I like, not too long so my legs don't get caught up, and wide enough so I can breathe alright. And none of those bright colours you seem to favour. That blouse you gave me at Christmas, I don't know what you were thinking of, you should know by now I can't wear that shade of pink. I'm sure the Oxfam shop was very grateful for it."

Alison busied herself arranging the flowers in a vase on the bedside locker.

"Oh, nurse," her mother called over to a young Filipino woman hurrying past. "You must meet my daughter. She's come all the way from London to see me, came as soon as she heard even though she had

to miss an important court case."

The nurse smiled briefly, shaking Alison's hand before sailing on up the ward.

"Would you like some orange juice?" asked Alison, picking up the carton she had brought with her.

"Well, if that's all there is. But you know the acid's not good for my stomach. And not too much, my lunch will be coming soon and I'll get a drink with that. I don't want to have to use that horrible commode more often than necessary, it's so undignified."

It was only when her mask started filling with water that Alison realised how long it was since she had last put her head above the surface. Her nose was filling with water and she was starting to splutter so she came up choking slightly, pulling her mask off as she did so and letting go of the mouthpiece.

Blinking salt water out of her eyes she scanned the sea in each direction. The deep blue stretched to the horizon where the paler blue of the sky took over. She had no idea where the boat should have been but in any case it wasn't there. She spun around in a panic, sure that if she just kept looking it would appear. Her heart started pounding loud enough for the fish to hear and she began splashing her arms creating a windmill effect, her legs flailing under the water uselessly. She had no idea where the shore was except that it was much too far to swim. Her breaths came faster and faster and her mind felt as though a sea mist had descended on it. Eventually she was forced to acknowledge that the boat had gone.

But how could they have left without me and how long before they realise and come back, Alison wondered. She remembered it being a bit chaotic on the boat, and getting irritated with two young Italian women who insisted on getting matching sets of snorkels and flippers, as if anyone was going to notice. But she had

noticed the crew counting everyone into the water, although they might have missed the young men who were showing off by jumping in as she stepped tentatively down the steep vertical ladder. Usually the crew blew a loud whistle when time was up and everyone headed towards the boat like a team of synchronised swimmers. Even with her face down in the water she knew she could hear the whistle as she had done so on each of the three previous snorkelling sessions today.

Now she visualised the boat heading back to the harbour at Hurghada. When they had stopped for the fourth time, she almost hadn't gone into the sea feeling she'd seen plenty of fish already. But then she'd thought she still hadn't seen the Red Sea Angelfish that everyone had been rav-



ing about and this would be her last chance of a holiday for some time, given the problems with her mother, so she had decided to go for it.

And it had not been apparent at the time what significance that decision would have.

"Goodness, look at those boys swim," said Alison's mother.

Since they'd been in Torremolinos, her mother had taken to having her siesta on the beach, a modern-day mummy wrapped head to toe in beach towels.

Alison was expected to read her Puffin book quietly under the sun umbrella. Within five minutes she was bored.

The raft didn't look too far away across the shimmer of water.

Putting down her book, Alison waded out into the sea. Using the clean breaststroke she had learnt at school, she kept her eye on the raft ahead. There were times when it seemed to be getting further away rather than nearer. But eventually it began getting bigger and bigger until at last the wooden platform filled her entire view and the rungs of the vertical metal ladder felt rough beneath her feet.

Looking back she could see the whole distance she had covered all by herself, like one of the explorers in her junior encyclopaedia. Shading her eyes she scanned the beach to find her mother to wave to. But although she thought she could see their bright pink umbrella, it was too far for her to make out individuals.

There were boys jumping off the edge of the raft and young women lying on their backs, fingers spread out, sunbathing. There was a bit of space next to one of them so Alison lay down there, bending one knee upwards in imitation of them. She wished her mother would let her have a bikini too, instead of making her wear her black regulation costume even on holiday.

After a couple of minutes she was bored again and decided it was time to swim back and let her mother know that she had swum as far as the big boys. It didn't seem so far this time and, as she neared the beach, she could pick out their pink umbrella much more clearly and a heap of towels which must be her mother. But as she got nearer she could see two separate towels with nobody underneath them. She hoped her mother hadn't wandered off to the public toilets just when she had something important to tell her.

As she pulled herself up to standing in the shallows, she spotted her mother, walking towards her at an unusually fast

pace. She could feel her voice before she could make out the words, "...where have you been...worried sick about you...searching the beach...wandering off like that..."

"Mum, Mum," Alison was hopping on the shoreline, "guess how far I swam?"

"I don't care if you swam to the horizon. Don't ever do that again, young lady. Now hurry up and get dressed. If you can't be trusted to amuse yourself on the beach, you'll have to come back to the hotel with me. The bingo session's starting in ten minutes."

"But, Mum..."

"Hurry up or I'll miss it."

Alison realised that there was no reason why the boat should return for her. She was travelling alone in Egypt so nobody would notice her absence. She remembered a story she had read in the newspaper recently about a climber who had got stuck near the top of a mountain in the Himalayas. He had phoned his wife in England from his mobile and she had organised his rescue. But being stuck in the middle of the Red Sea with nothing but a mask and flippers, she couldn't work out how to raise the alarm. And if she had had a mobile, she wondered who she would phone. Her mother, stuck in hospital, totally absorbed in herself, would not have the first clue how to raise the Egyptian coast-guard.

With a start she remembered that there was someone who knew she was on the boat. She could see him in her mind's eye, an Englishman who had asked to borrow her Arabic phrase book at the beginning of the boat trip. She imagined him looking for her to return it, finding her missing and telling the crew. Then she imagined him forgetting or not bothering to do so, and just pocketing the book. He would saunter off the boat with all the other tourists without a further thought for her. She tried to remember whether he had seemed the

honest efficient type; trusting a man with a phrase book was quite different to trusting him with her life, she now realised.

"You can't put me in a home. Nobody in our family has ever gone into a home. Your grandmother lived with us until she died at 94. You'll just have to move up here and look after me."

"But Mum you know how important my job is to me, how could I just leave that?"

"More important than your old mother?"

"No, of course not, but..."

"After all the trouble I took bringing you up, and there weren't many mothers doing that all by themselves in those days, sitting up all night when you were ill..."

"I was never ill."

"No, but if you had been."

"Mum, I've been visiting you every month for years even though I only get put downs in return. Nothing I can do is ever good enough for you. And you know I've got my life in London."

"What life? It's not as if you've got a husband or children of your own to look after."

She didn't think about what dying itself would be like, whether it would be by hypothermia, dehydration or drowning. She just thought of not being there anymore and found it very hard to contemplate. She found herself worrying about who would collect her cat from the cattery on Monday or cancel her organic vegetable box due to be delivered to her doorstep.

She re-positioned her mask and snorkel and went back to marvelling at what was beneath her, seemingly on display just for her enjoyment. A yellow flash caught her eye; it was the Red Sea Angelfish she had been hoping to see all day.

She followed the Angelfish, keeping above it as it seemed to perch vertically over the coral hoovering up its contents. It was almost as long as her forearm, far big-

ger than any other fish she had seen that day. She noticed that the bright blue of her swimming costume matched the colour of the fish; even the bright yellow flash prominent across the fish's body was mirrored by the yellow stripe around her own waist. Like a private detective following her prey, she kept it in her sights, trying to mimic its darting movements with her own body.

Reluctantly she came up to clear the water accumulating in her mask, automatically scanning the horizon as she did so. Then she lowered her face back into the water. She spotted the Angelfish again, whether it was the same fish or a new one, she couldn't tell. Focusing on it, she tried to create a photograph in her mind of its exact likeness. She kept her eyes trained on its yellow stripe, her feet kicking only slightly to help her maintain her position above it, her arms waving in gentle arcs like angels' wings, her breathing rhythmic and even.

Debbie Singer July 2007



TIDYING UP

by David Gardiner

This was not the first of Simon's relationships that had broken up. In fact, he reminded himself sadly, it was the third. He really should be getting the hang of it by now. The signs were always the same. The long silences, her unexplained need to be alone for hours at a time, the irritated insistence that everything was all right, and finally the note on folded A4, his name scribbled on the side facing up. Then the disappearance of the second toothbrush from the bathroom, the empty hanging-rail in the wardrobe, his distress at discovering that he had taken two mugs from the cupboard to make himself a cup of coffee.

He had learned a little about the break-up process in the years that had passed since his student days. Specifically he had learned that any attempt to make it all right again was doomed. Intimate relationships, at least for Simon, came with a finite lease. Attempts to extend that lease just added to the pain for both parties.

Simon was a practical man, even where his own emotions were concerned, and he knew that the first thing he needed to do was to remove her physical traces from the flat. Lamps and folding chairs and the framed reproductions of abstract paintings that they had bought because they were to her taste were remorselessly sold, given away or left in the appropriate skips at the local recycling plant. Now that she was no longer around he was beginning to realise just how untidy she had been. Two black bags filled with her clutter were left out for the bin-men. It took a few days to restore order, but Simon had taken some time off work for the holiday that they were supposed to have together, the one when they would talk things through and make a new start.

The final item haunted by her ghost was the big clumsy corner desk, too modern for this Victorian room, a magnet for clutter and dust, and a total impediment to

his attempts to make the room orderly and harmonious. Too heavy and bulky for him to move any distance by himself, he came to an agreement with a local second-hand furniture shop that they would take it away and give him in exchange a small and (in Simon's opinion) tasteful reproduction Victorian writing desk with a single drawer as a straight swap for his Ikea monstrosity. Its arrival and the removal of the one he hated seemed to bring peace to his humble apartment. The new desk fitted perfectly between the door and the corner of the room, and his plain hardwood chair slid neatly beneath it and matched its period simplicity.

On impulse, and not having a great deal to do, he turned it upside down to see if any cleaning or maintenance was required to its underside. That was how he discovered the letter.

It had escaped from the back of the drawer and become trapped in the woodwork that supported the runners. He carefully removed it and noted that there was an address on the envelope, written in a small neat female script, but it had not been sealed. There was no way to tell how long it had been imprisoned in the woodwork but the envelope looked reasonably new.

Simon's imagination began to take up the story. This was a letter that somebody had written and placed in a drawer, probably with no intention of ever sending it. The words of an old Moody Blues pop song came to mind: "Letters I've written, never meaning to send".

He felt slightly uncomfortable about reading it but he knew from the outset that he wasn't going to be able to resist the temptation.

It was written in the same neat handwriting as the address on the envelope.

My Dearest Michael,

I feel a deep shame at writing this letter. I was unreasonable and unappreciative and I said a lot of things that I didn't mean. I tried to blame you for things that weren't your fault. Almost the moment I left I knew that it had been a mistake. But for all these weeks my pride has stopped me from getting in touch again and asking for your forgiveness. What we had was too precious to throw away like this. I don't want to be on my own. I don't want the life that I have now. I want you to forgive me and I want to give the relationship a second chance. And I promise that I will never do anything as stupid and impulsive as this again.

Nothing has changed, Michael. I still love you and I still want to make a life with you. I'm not pretending that everything is perfect but there is nothing that we can't talk through and put right.

You will never know how hard it has been for me to swallow my pride like this and write to you. Please forgive me and tell me that everything is all right again.

*With all my love,
Your very silly
Sylvia.*

Simon's heart was unaccountably racing as he folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. If only one of his own run-away lovers had sent him a letter like that, just once in his life. If only. This Michael was an incredibly lucky man.

What should he do? Sylvia had written the letter but she hadn't posted it. In the end, her stubborn pride had won out. That had been her decision. Was it his place to interfere? Was he some kind of god overseeing other people's lives? Why did he feel this urge to get involved?

The reason was really very simple, he decided. Because if the positions were reversed he would want to know about the letter. Michael had a right to know about it. It might change his entire life. It might bring

hope where none had existed before. It might take away guilt that had no basis in reason. He felt a brotherhood with Michael, whoever or wherever he might be. He folded the letter and put it back in its envelope. Michael's full name and address were on it: If he still lived there it was only a bus ride away. Maybe this was meant to happen, Simon mused as he pulled on his overcoat. That Fate should direct a letter of this kind into his hands, of all the people in this teeming city who might have found it, seemed to border on the supernatural.

The address was an upper floor flat in an old-fashioned red-brick apartment block on the outskirts of town. A hundred years ago when it was built it would have provided chic suburban accommodation for middle-ranking Civil Servants and successful merchants and artisans; now it was a crumbling anachronism by the side of a dual carriageway, with flaking paint and graffiti in the stairwell, a black wheelie-bin that had lost its lid partially obstructing the front entrance, and piles of uncollected junk-mail in the foyer announcing to the world that the apartments were rented, not owner-occupied. It would no longer be anybody's first choice of somewhere to live within commuting distance of Central London.

Simon ascended to the second floor and identified the door of the apartment named on the envelope. He knocked smartly and waited.

After a few moments the door opened a crack and a single eye looked suspiciously out. "Yes?" enquired its owner.

"Sorry to disturb you," Simon chirped out brightly, "would you be Michael Cunningham?"

The eye replied with a question of its own. "Are you police?"

"No, nothing like that. Simon is the name. I just want to talk to you."

"I'm listening."

Simon paused. He didn't really want to converse through a crack in a door-

way. He lowered his voice. "Did you have a girlfriend named Sylvia who left you?"

Mention of her name brought the desired result. The door closed momentarily while the chain was released and then opened fully to reveal a neat, casually-dressed man a few years younger than Simon, with a thin, fine-boned face and sandy blond hair. "Come in," he said quietly.

The room was tidy, with furniture chosen to match its period. Antique musical instruments such as guitars, trumpets and banjos had been hung like pictures around the room, and a well-cared upright piano occupied most of the wall opposite the front door. Simon's eye immediately noticed an unaccountable blank piece of wall beneath a window. He decided to show off. "That was where her little desk used to be, wasn't it?"

Michael started visibly. "Who are you?" he asked very quietly, "what do you want from me?"

"Nothing. I don't want a thing. In fact, I think I can give you something. May I sit down?"

Michael motioned him into one of the two soft chairs and took the other one himself. Simon was beginning to enjoy his unfamiliar role of Man of Mystery. Michael looked tense. "How do you know all these things?" he asked with a hint of awe.

"I'll answer all your questions in a minute, I promise. But first I would like to ask one of my own." Michael had little choice. "It's a very simple question, and I only ask it because I've been in your position myself and I'm curious. I just want to ask you why you think she left. I want to hear your side of the story."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "Sylvia's with you now, isn't she? She's talked to you about me. How else could you know these things?"

"I assure you, she isn't. Please trust me, Michael. Tell me your story. I'll tell you mine in return if you want me to."

"Okay. You win. Where am I supposed to start?" Simon shrugged. "Well, we knew each other at school, weren't particularly friends then, but we went to the same University, and we paired up because we didn't know anybody else. It was the first time either of us had been away from home. We were a great team. Really close. Did everything together. Holidays. Jobs abroad. You know. Then after we graduated we rented this place together. We were going to buy a place. Maybe get married. Maybe children. I don't know... God, why am I telling you all this?"

"Maybe because you can recognise a kindred soul when you see one."

Michael's eyes widened. "She's left you as well. That's it, isn't it?"

That was a question that Simon hadn't expected. He hesitated for too long. "She has, hasn't she? Just like me. One minute you're the only one that matters in the whole world and you're building a life together... then, wallop! Suddenly she doesn't want any of it, does she? No reason. No explanation. She just wants to go. And it makes no difference what you say or what you do. She did it to you, didn't she, and now you want to know why. Well, I don't know why... who did you say you were? Simon. I'm sorry but I can't help you. Maybe there isn't a why. Maybe these things just last a certain length of time and then... I don't know. How should I know? I'm sorry, I can't help you."

Simon could see that his host was almost in tears and went over to comfort him. He put his arm around Michael's shoulder. "That isn't it," he told him gently. "Well, not exactly. Or maybe it is... I don't know. There isn't just one Sylvia, you know. There are hundreds and hundreds of them. And they find people like us. They have some kind of radar. And people like you and I are never going to understand them." Michael was sobbing now, and his own tears weren't far away.

Michael wiped his eyes and with

obvious embarrassment managed to compose himself. "I'm sorry. I thought I was over all that. I feel like a total bloody fool now."

"Don't be silly. You're not a fool. I'm not a fool. You don't just turn a switch somewhere and it's all right again."

Simon hesitated. "Maybe we could go out somewhere. Have a drink or something. Sit in the park maybe. I'm free for the rest of the week as it happens."

Michael brightened. "Really? That's a coincidence..."

"Yeah. I know. Normally you and Sylvia would have been doing something together. Right?"

"Right. Yes. Exactly!"

"Come on Michael. Let's go out. Let's paint the town red. Is that what they call it?"

"That's what they call it. I could take my guitar, couldn't I? I could do a bit of jamming somewhere."

"Of course you could. Bob Marley got it right, didn't he? No woman no cry."

Michael smiled and got to his feet. As inconspicuously as he could Simon put his hand in his pocket and screwed the letter into a ball. He could chuck it in the lidless wheelie-bin at the bottom of the stairs as they passed by.

POETRY AT LIMNISA

One Cousin Ago

In the days before the trouble,
in the days of post-war earnestness,
doolally lacewing Laura
was just a girl,
sweet and kind as barleysugar,
with no more madness in her
than in any of the other
half-formed skinny smuts of people
that in her tender shelter loved to
play.

'Delicate in touch and conversation,
with a way of always knowing not to
hurt.

Ever on the edge of things
but never getting cut, or so it
seemed to me.

Sex, I thought, the beast that
changed her
to a silly hollow doll,
but now I know with all my heart
that sex was just the lever

Laurie Owen

pulled by mum and dad
to throw their bolshy daughter
to an English Stalingrad.

The lacquered bouffon hair-do,
the mini, and the tinny little laugh
were just a suit of armour
against the cutting quibbles
of her far-off fuck-off
adamantine
ma and pa.

Now she's locked
for good and bad
inside her whitewalled cave,
her heart all thrown about,
her mind too mad to save.
The tinny laugh still rings out loud.
No daughter yet,
a daughter cut,
still trying to become one,
in minidress, fishnet tights,
with a heart still soft for someone.

Parallel Lines

Laurie Owen

1

Run my beauties, all my wives,
'summer sped beneath the trees,
unbroken yet by men on racks,
dogs, or the old romantic lie,
borne on breath from lane to lane to
lane.

Run past shops until the dead
burst from their crumbling clay
to really die in sunstruck dust at last.
Proclaim the death of all the toxic
virtues.

Gorge on cake and apricots.
Run, dance, laugh out loud.
Drink dry the well of wine.
Run on.

2

The story reached us
as a whisper.
A schoolroom and a fire.

A room of blazing girls, and
god's own army stayed from rescue
by some scholar mullah's law.

Saint Joan and all the lovely
widowed witches,
come to their aid.

Give them your hands.
Haul them from the slaughter.
Sit them burning down beside you.
Bed their blackened bodies in the
sky.

Tell their story loud and wild and
angry.
Never ever stop from asking why.

[In Saudi Arabia, on 11th March 2002, the
'morality police' stopped schoolgirls from leaving
a blazing school because they were not wearing
'correct' Islamic dress. 15 girls died and over 50
were injured.]

Daydream for Polyphemus

Laurie Owen

I thought I saw,
between two hills,
the head of Polyphemus,
sitting, me, not him, alone
on a high white balcony.

I'll journey through the stars
on his broad shoulder,
and catch and play
with asteroids and fire.
I'll draw you up,
look at you,
and hold you,
and side by side
we'll clip the world's barbed wire.



Landscape With Polyphemus by Nicolas Poussin (Polyphemus, the figure on top of the mountain, was a Cyclops blinded by Ulysses)

In Methana Laurie Owen

In Methana Laurie Owen

You, Eumenides, imps of rancour,
tell blind old Telemachus make us
see.
Or is he deaf as well as blind?
Are these divining rods his fingers?
They're cold, old, feel dead to me.

They say
in all of bottled Greece,
there's not one Aphrodite,
not one one-legged blacksmith,
just yachts and lazy yachtsmen,
charm, old guys and stones, and fits
of history.

But Greece is what you make it, you.
So raise a glass, my argonauts,
let's drink to stillness and the sea,
the thorns that kiss, the rocks that
crack,
the sky that chews out mountains.
Let's walk this acned olive land
as all the while the mammoth rocks
rain down
in beaten shards of grainy pink and
black,
coughed out by crimson cartoon
gods
in magma-blooded fountains.



Landscape with Blind Orion Seeking the Sun by
Nicolas Poussin

Kiss of Torment **Valerie McKinley**

Kiss of Torment **Valerie McKinley**

No mythical monster, you,
Beast who bleeds human blood
When squelched away with a slap,
Echidna herself would never
Claim you as her child.

You assail with stealth, your
approach silent

On the night air, homing in on warm
bodies.
Your sting as light as an ex-lover's
kiss
Only after departure does the
torment begin.

Notes From Greece – first Impressions Valerie McKinley

On terraced hillsides
olive and citrus groves
perch like a battle weary army
bivouacked from the heat of the day.

Closer in the bougainvillaeas'
red and white brilliance
seems at odds with the arid looking
soil they are rooted in.

Pomegranate and fig grow side by
side
the tamarisk seem to be the
Minarets of the cicadas
their incessant screeching
a paradox to the gentle lapping
and myriad blues of the Aegean.

Further out the neighbouring islands
sprawl over the sea like some
mythical creatures crouched low
along the horizon.

Inspiration ignites
in the unfamiliar heat
and part of me cannot wait
to take up my pen.

For now though
I am content to gaze in awe
at the beauty of this ancient land;
to soak up information, savour it,
store it away to enjoy in cooler
climes



Crossing

Standing on a ferry
watching the land slipping away
into the distance,
surfing the blue-white wake behind
us.

Leaning on the rail
with the air-dancing seagulls
bobbing and drifting
a generous crust-throw away.

Seeing the islands
silently shifting perspective;
stark silhouettes
cutting an edge into the sky.

Elfstone

Breathing the sea-air,
drawing the luminous breezes
into my tired lungs;
inhaling the enormous space.

Squinting at sun-shimmer;
diamonds wallowing in waves,
with their dazzling
bemusing my weary eyes.

Swimming in memories
swirling me back to another sea,
colder, sterner,
on the north west edge of my heart.

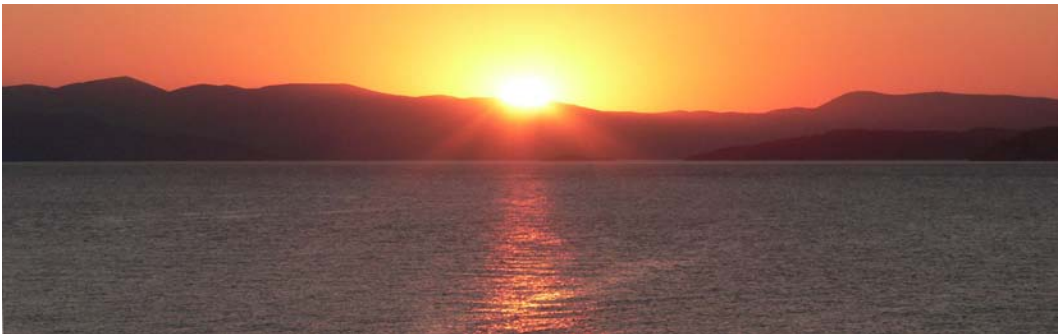
Sea Sound

Listen to these sounds
listen with opening ears
to the ancient seduction.
Listen as this wave-less sea,
discovering an unexpected shore,
remembers at the last
how to behave.

Startled by stone's solidity,
it offers a condescension,
an offhand acknowledgement
that land exists;
a lethargic lapping,

Elfstone

a lulling laziness
that falls onto rocks
in renewed disinterest.
This sea sighing, soft sloshing,
slap-slopping, slooshing,
sounds out the depth of me,
drawing me in,
drowsing my mind,
dreaming me into
a distant place.



And now for something completely different...

The Birth of the Starfish: A Modern Greek Myth Jeff Dray



It came to pass, in the time of the great king Minos, that a great argument erupted between the sea god Poseidon and Apollo.

Nobody can remember what they were arguing about but it ended up with Apollo teaching the men of Greece how to build toilets that flushed with water and carried their effluents into the sea. The men of Greece were eternally grateful to him for this great gift, up to now their wives had carried their waste away to bury it in remote corners of the many olive groves but this was backbreaking work.

Apollo warned the people that although Poseidon would have to tolerate their waste floating around his kingdom, he would draw the line at small squares of paper, so it was made a rule that it should be collected separately and taken away to be burnt.

The Greeks followed his commands for many a

long year and all was well but there came a day, when in the palace of Limnisa, wherein the Muses dwelt, there was a great feast and the assembled company consumed spicy foods and too much hummus.

The party ended and the revellers went home to their huts. They slept soundly waking only to use the toilets, and being somewhat loose of bowel many forgot Apollo's warning and dropped their paper into the bowl.

They did not work the next day and were resting in their olive groves when the sea boiled with the wrath of Poseidon, a great storm erupted and many fishing boats were dashed to pieces on the rocks.

Poseidon emerged from the torrent, on the tips of his trident hung many sheets of soggy toilet paper, each bearing the mark of a sinner's backside, like a finger print, for the entire world to see.

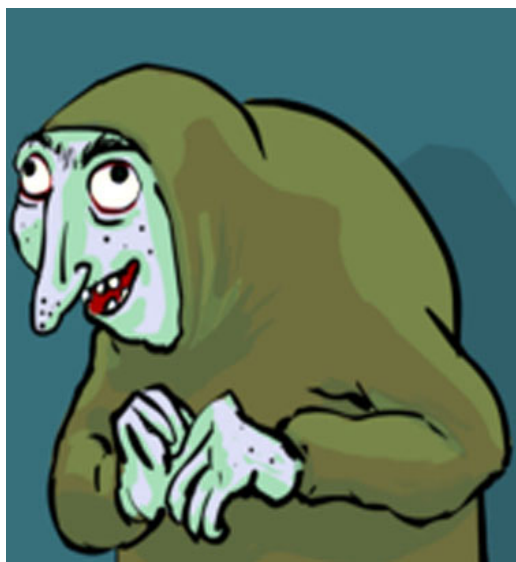
Apollo, seeing what had happened, commanded all the men and women of Limnisa to assemble on the rocky shore and to bare their behinds. Poseidon stood

in the waves, holding up each sheet of paper in turn and comparing the impressions upon them to the pucker pattern of each man and woman.

When he had identified each miscreant his wrath was overwhelming. In his fury he changed each of them into a starfish, condemning them to be chained to a rock near a sewer outlet, so that they would spend eternity filtering the body waste of the people of Greece, and those people have never dared to flush their paper to this day.



And now something a little bit different (but not much) ...
(extract from) Frankie Goes to Basingstoke Jeff Dray



"Igor, bring me my coat, I'm going out!" came the stern command from Herr Professor Viktor Frankenstein

Igor shuffled off to the hallway to fetch the turquoise anorak from the hook in the hallway.

"Master, I have your coat," he announced, even though he had taken only three steps to fulfil the order.

Hard times had befallen Professor Frankenstein. Instead of his well appointed Gothic castle in the Carpathian Mountains he was forced to spend his days in a fifth storey council flat in the less glamorous quarter of Basingstoke, just within diesel fume distance of the ring road. The local Tesco superstore was a rat run away and his researches were hampered by the

annoying habit of the good burghers of Basingstoke and Deane of having their mortal remains consigned to oblivion by means of the North Waltham Crematorium. Breaking into the undertaker's premises was a tricky business; because of the value of the stock the alarm systems and locks were usually fairly robust.

He had come down in the world, instead of his hand tailored suits and crisply starched white lab coats he was reduced to wearing discarded fleeces and jogging pants, scavenged from the bins behind Primark.

It hadn't always been this way but since the mob of angry villagers had marched on Castle Frankenstein two years ago, brandishing hoes, rakes, pitch forks and flaming torches, forcing him to leave hurriedly via the back door, he had never managed to get back in touch with his lawyers to arrange for the realisation of his assets. Indeed, he was not even certain that he had any remaining assets to realise.

Yet a desire still burned to prove that he could be the Modern Prometheus. From materials he had scavenged from bins and skips he had built a rudimentary laboratory on the roof of the tower block. By tapping into the lightning rods of the

building he could channel any storm energy into the cradle that would bring life into his creations. Sadly, this was Basingstoke, not the wild mountains of Rumania and really good storms were a bit of a rarity.

His last creation had gone off rather badly waiting for a spell of rough weather; the local environmental health officer had become suspicious of the smell and the large number of crows that constantly circled the top of the tower. There was only so much that you could blame on the drains.



He had revived dozens of rats and squirrels that he had caught in the

parks around the town, he knew that his principles were sound but it was one thing to use the power of the Southern Electricity key meter, quite another to harness enough power to breathe life into a full-sized human cadaver, assembled from the redundant body parts smuggled home from Igor's part time job as a mortuary assistant at the North Hampshire Hospital.

Igor had remained a good servant, his hideously deformed body and the promise of a new one bound him to the good professor through good times and bad. The problem came from the poor quality of the limbs bound for the incinerator. Apart from one joyous occasion when an incompetent surgeon had removed the wrong limb, all of them were so badly diseased that there was little he could do but scavenge small parts and at the end of the day he only needed two knee caps.

Oh for a really good head! Igor's brain desperately needed a new home, his rickets had got no better and pushing those heavy trolleys had made his twisted spine even more pronounced, the poor fellow could not look up above the level of the average belt buckle and this had got him into a lot of trouble with the young ladies of Basingstoke, who did not care for being stared at "Down There".

For our last workshop session at Limnisa we decided to write limericks with a Greek theme, and we read them out at our final evening meal, with Mariel and her friends for an audience. What follows is a selection .

Limericks at Limnisa ... some from Elfstone

There once was a hero of old
Who really was terribly bold;
He was hired to clean stables -
Right up to the gables.
He was up to his oxters ingold!

We once made a journey to
Greece; of a flat there we had a
week's lease
We felt that we ought,
(if we thought and we thought)
to find writing's Golden Fleece.

There once was a youthful Greek
god -A startlingly good looking bod,
But he whined and he gined
And he grumbled and spurned.
He was really a bit of a sod!

In Limnisa where we got together,
The heat was a bit of a bother.
We sweated and wilted,
Our thinking was stilted.
We all blamed the sweltering
weather!

... and from David

Diogenes oft would tirade
While in only a barrel arrayed
Of the folly of wealth
And importance of health
And wouldn't shut up until paid.

Aphrodite reclined on the grass
A decidedly elegant lass.
Wearing nothing at all
She impressed one and all
And the men knelt and worshipped
en mass.

When Socrates was but a youth
Roaming Athens in search of The
Truth
He met a young lass
Cried: "Platonic my ass!"
And plied her with gin and vermouth.

Euclid liked to draw lines
Measure angles and tangents and
sines
He wrote theorems and laws
Spoke of Nature and Cause
And loved casual sex and fine
wines.

The Form of the Good
Was well understood
Within Plato's Academy walls,
And Hippocrates' Oath
Motivated by sloth
Was: "I'm buggered if I'll do house
calls".

Athenians liked to harp back
To when Pericles led the Greek
pack.
All the ships ran on time
There was no tax on wine
And they all had a ball in the sack.

... and finally from Valerie –

A lad met a lass in Limnisa
And though he tried to dismiss her
He fancied his chances
But she spurned his advances
With a ruddy great clout round his
kisser!

In the Methanian mountains of
Greece
Lived an ancient man from the east
His frugal existence
And dogged persistence
Disappeared when he abruptly
deceased!

There came a young lady from
Crete
To Limnisa with corns on her feet
Though large, red and painful
Drew stares so disdainful
Scuttled home to Crete in defeat.!

Extracts from a longer work

Wendy Pettifer

I grew up in suffocating security in Boston, Lincolnshire: a nest of xenophobes ready to strike out difference. My dad ran the fire-station and we lived in a fireman's house next to the station. An idyllic childhood playing in amongst the engines at the back of the houses and the cornfield in the front with all the other white fire kids. I never met a Black person until I fled at 17. Today the locals attack Portuguese potato pickers who shelter in their community centre which was once the dockside brothel. The newspapers declare it may be the site of the next race riots. No multi-cultural tolerance there.

Alex was born and raised in Hackney - his parents from small island St.Vincent clubbing together with other islanders to buy a terraced house, borrowing money from Finsbury Park money lenders. He and his brother and sister were expected to achieve in post-war Britain - Alex, Anthony and Angela - all to be first in more than the alphabet. He played with all the other street kids - Greeks, Pakistanis and Jamaicans. Hard on the outside, soft on the inside.

We met in the early 80s. I lived with my 3 year old children in a flat in a terraced house next to a tower block. A single parent working full-time in love with my daughter - Midwich cuckoo blond-hair, sturdy frame and personality. Soft on the outside, hard on the inside. I enjoyed the sexual freedom of the time immured in community activity.

Billie went to a community nursery where Alex worked on a Job Creation programme. A big black man in his early twenties with a shaved head and Arran sweater. She could not wait to join her multi-coloured play-mates. One morning I dropped her at the nursery wearing a black leather big-zipped jacket belonging to the taxi driver still in my bed. Alex clocked my post-coital state of confusion. Was that first frisson about difference or desire?

I held my 34th birthday party in November in a basement full of people, sound, drugs and booze. I celebrated my ability to nurture my daughter towards beauty and independence on my own. The room was dark

and smoky. Andrew said:

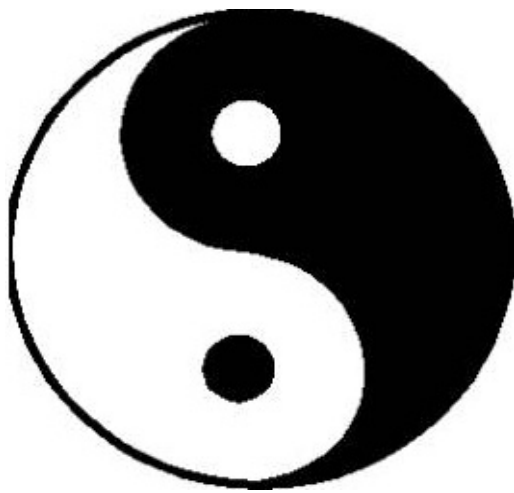
"Can I dance with you?"

"Of course" I replied.

And the lines and the colours as he wrapped his big, warm, soft arms around me and nuzzled the nape of my white neck. In the old photo the outline of his head blurs into the basement background - my face is sharp and alive and excited. I don't know when it started - only when it ended.

ITALY

Some time near the beginning we stayed in a farmhouse near Florence. Due to lack of money and family demands Alex's parents had only ever travelled with their 3 Alpha children between St. Vincent and England. He was nervous about visiting a strange country whose inhabitants had supported Mussolini. I was impatient with his reservations. As the departure date approached I began to feel ill: I developed a high temperature which became bronchitis which crushed my lungs and made me cough violently through the night. However the tick-



ets were booked and Billie was excited at the prospect of a sunny country side and friendly bambini.

The next day it was still snowing so we headed for warmth in the streets of Florence. Alex pushed Billie in her buggy. As soon as the narrow path from the farm met the road to the bus-stop we were followed by 3 women who crowded around us, keen to touch Alex and Billie to affirm their reality.

"Que bella bimba. E la vostra?" was the constant query.

"What are they saying?"

"Is Billie yours?"

"What kinda question is that?"

Alex glared belligerently at them as they whispered and tittered behind their hands. I distracted Billie by pointing out brightly-coloured posters for a New Year's Eve village party in the shelter.

"Can we go, can we go?" she chanted.

Alex glared at us "You must be joking. Are you mad? D'you think I can put up with this all night?"

He batted away another tremulous hand that reached up to try and touch his cropped head. I felt the tension between us battling around in my brain, making me cough.

There were no black people on the bus or in the city. 3 carabinieri straddled the pavement wearing biscuit-tin shaped hats and pistols in a bored sort of way.

"Il passeporte per favour" one of them asked Alex.

"Your passport" I obligingly translated.

"Whaat?"

"Your passport" I shrugged hopelessly fumbling in my bag to find mine. Alex reluctantly handed his over mumbling

"I hate this fucking country. Why did you bring me here? Tell them to fuck off"

After a lengthy scrutiny the passport was returned and my attempts to show mine ignored. Alex's rage was touchable

THE LETTER

Hello Billie

I haven't seen you for a long time. Here's \$50 to get yourself something nice as I know you'll be working hard at school. Now that you're older and we haven't seen each other for a long time, it would be great to catch up. I'll take you out for dinner - just the two of us. You choose the time and place - we can go anywhere you like.

I'll pick you up - my treat. Just call me on 07869412340.

Billie was surprised - it would be great to see Alex and she missed him. She was fed up with Mum never having any money to take her out or buy her nice clothes.

And she was sure Alex had a big flash car. All her mates would be so jealous. Sometimes her mum was very miserable these days. She folded the letter and put it carefully into the inside pocket of her rucksack - the \$50 in her purse. She locked the door and ran to the bus stop in a very good mood.

All the way to school and during morning Maths she wondered what to buy: dress,

shoes, jeans or top. She would go and buy them in the lunch hour. It was ages till the bell rang. Outside 7E she grabbed her best friend Ann.

"Wanna' come up the Angel? I'm going to buy some new clothes," she asked waving the \$50 around.

"Where'd you get that?"

"My mum gave it to me. She got a cheque fromer.....um Grandad to pay for a new window 'cos the one in my bedroom fell out."

"Wow, lucky you, c'mon then"

Ann did not notice the split second hesitation of the lie.

Billie bought some beige cut-offs and a tight fitted dark-blue top. It had a wide collar, a deep V which showed off the tops of her breasts and big buttons. She loved it. When she got home she stuffed the back into the back of her bottom drawer of her wardrobe. She settled down to do her homework but she could not concentrate. Did Alex still look the same? Should she ring him? Should she tell Mum about the letter?

She unfolded the letter and read it over and over again.

Why had he got in touch with her? Did this mean he wanted to see Mum? Had he sent her a letter too? She hadn't seen one in the post. Why hadn't he phoned?

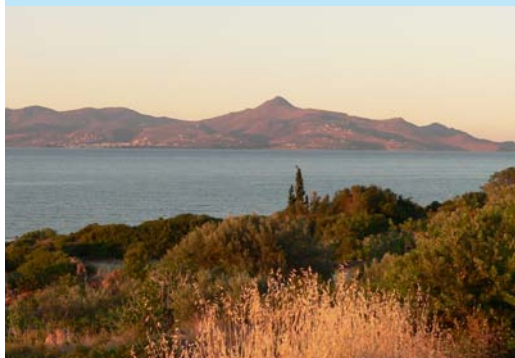
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LEAVING LIMNISA – All good things come to an end ...



With all the hard work finally at an end...



it's goodbye to Limnisa and back to Blighty for another year.



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