

First Story
National Writing Competition Longlist
Key Stage Five

The Wooden Ladle

Folasade Afualaka, Loxford School of Science and Technology

Diving into the pool of wonderment

Circling, surrounded by metal,

Lifting up a prize to share,

Tipping over the boundaries.

Shaped like a mallet,

Smooth to touch,

Robust when dropped:

Grip with grace.

No other place where I feel safer,

Dive, twist and delve,

Pouring, plopping, splashing,

Stirring, steaming: dreaming.

Heat cannot penetrate,

Long and plain in stature,

Welcomed in with open arms:

Stirring, steady.

Senses on the edge,

Familiarity absorbs you;

Fish to water,

Floating in tranquillity.

Why sit on a chair that cannot hold your weight;

Why enter a house that does not keep you company?

An entrapment:

Accept not against your will.

Crafted with character,

Chop, saw, shape,

Chips, dust and scent,

Solid, sealed, and serving a soup.

Flat 32b

Olivia Andrew, Drayton Manor High School

Deep in the heart of Lambeth, there is a dingy, dirty, derelict flat with nothing special about it. There is no florescent light fixture, no pretentious paintings adorning the wall – no there is nothing special about the flat in itself at all. But the struggles it's faced and the trials it's been through, with 4 whirlwind owners each making their own individual mark. From the outside all you see is a flat, on the inside all you see is a worn down apartment space; but when you learn to look between the lines, through the peeling wallpaper – that is when you see 32b for what it truly was.

1993

They crashed in, giggling and stumbling like toddlers – drunk off beer, drunk of love? A newly married couple, Jed and Emily, 27 and 23 (respectively) and coloured the flat with the chaos of trouble. They were loud, brash and deeply in love – caring little for material items and only about spending time with each other. The night of their arrival they slept on the floor, nestled between the curling laminate flooring and omnipresent dust without a care in the world. Jed clambered over the peeling skirting board early the next morning, seeking furniture to surprise his new wife with. Alas, 32b was decked in cheap, second hand furniture – a scrawny sofa here, a wobbly table there – tatty yet tasteful things to suit the couple's style. Giggling commenced again when 32b took a turn for the worst in Emily's new paint job – upon reflection, mustard coloured walls were the worst idea. But suddenly, Emily was ill all the time, knocking down all the carefully adorned knick knacks as she stumbled in the night. Eventually they announced that a baby was on its way! It was expected that soon, the rotten coloured walls would be replaced with bright blues, the trinkets removed for mobiles adorned with toys. However, this didn't take place, instead newspapers were scattered everywhere, their offensive pages showing new housing listings. Eventually, their stay came to an end, the mustard was white washed, ornaments robbed from the shelves and stuffed into cardboard boxes. They packed up their belongings and abandoned their life at Flat 32b.

1997

He sauntered into flat 32b, a tightly packed rucksack slung over his shoulder, his scuffed shoes padding on the dirty carpet. His name was Zachary, an ambitious artist whose vibrant artistic nature remained splattered on the walls of 32b long after he left. The residence had been stripped bare, with Jed and Emily extracting all life from within. Zachary did not fill the flat with flashy furniture or pretentious trinkets but instead imprinted his permanent impact upon the walls. Under Zachary's ownership, the flat underwent drastic changes. The bland white walls had been dashed with generous, haphazard paint splatters brandishing every surface. Furniture was replaced by half-finished canvases displaying the most beautiful, detailed artwork – some of which were overturned in artistic frustration. Every sink was crammed with paintbrushes, desperately needing a cleaning, bunched together in paint pots like peonies fresh in the spring. The floor was scattered with pencil shavings and scrunched up paper creating a crackle resembling that of a homely open fire. Under Zachary's residence, 32b was blanketed under an endless cascade of clutter with lifeless paint tubes and blackened erasers strewn around. Not surprisingly at all, eventually Zachary tore his

canvases, packed up his bag and started afresh – but his paint splatters remained a part of 32b till its end.

2002

Perhaps the most damaging inhabitants to Flat 32b were a lively family of five, poorly suited to the residence. The sheer size of the family was poorly suited to the mediocre living space of the residence, and many a time it felt like the family were about to burst through the creaking walls of their home. Janet and Michael persevered for 10 diligent years watching those boisterous toddlers transform into coltish pre-teens. In the early days, grubby fingerprints could be found on every surface, the floor was sea of discarded toys. Despite Janet's incessant attempts to tidy, mess always managed to make its way back into 32b – whether it be in the form of overturned baby food or finger painting gone awry. Flat 32b saw its worst of times under that family, the whitewashed walls began to peel, the murky carpet was missing chunks, a window had been smashed through in the pursuit of a ball game – this was 32b's demise.

Present day

Now the flat remains uninhabited, what once contained so much life is only a hollow shell – there is no newlywed couple to place their trinkets, no painter to splash life onto the walls, no children to dirty their home. All that remains is junk mail, crumbling walls, grubby floors; dishevelled, destroyed, derelict.

Mum's mulled wine.

Mollie Buckley, East Norfolk Sixth Form

I think it's the warmth of the first fire of winter that comes to mind when I think of home. My younger brother watching dad place the strips of newspaper and little planks of wood so carefully in to our old stone fireplace. "Not many are as lucky as us to have a fireplace" dad always says, and it's true, I can't imagine a home being a home without a fireplace. It's usually around November that the first fire is lit, and from that moment on the house isn't just warm, it's happy. No one argues, no one cries. We rejoice in the fact that we are simply together.

Christmas in our house is magical, fairy lights draped on the mantelpiece and the smell of mum's mulled wine fills every corner of our cosy home. When I was younger, Christmas was about presents and getting what I asked Santa Claus for. Colouring books and scented pens, a Nintendo and pretty things. Each year something new and the last Christmas's gifts get put at the bottom of the wardrobe. But as I've grown up, and the novelty of a jolly man coming down the chimney has faded, what I treasure more than any present, are my family. On Christmas Eve we all gather in the living room, to laugh and drink and share memories of past loved ones and Christmases gone by. My older sisters arrive with smiles, and from somewhere in the back of my mind Father Christmas comes creeping back, but now in the eyes of my Niece and Nephew. The hope and excitement they have in this figure reminds me of my younger self. The younger self that I don't miss, the self that didn't appreciate nanny when she would sit in her chair and sing to herself, gently brushing mince pie crumbs off her pink cardigan, and continues to sing Little Donkey. I think of her, and how proud she would be of me now, and how I would appreciate her now. And for a second I can feel that lump you get in your throat, and the warm tears clutching my eyelashes. But it goes quickly as I watch my pregnant sister rub and talk to the new life inside her, the bump that's covered in a jumper that reads "Merry Christmas ya filthy animal". We all have one, the sisters. We all giggle along on the sofa just at the thought of us all wearing it together, in public. Christmas Eve isn't the same without those laughs and grins.

The following morning we all have that childish light in our eyes as we open the presents, ripping and tearing open the things you thought people wouldn't remember. The beautiful book you saw in Jarrolds in March or the perfume you said reminds you of freshly washed sheets. Dad puts scrooge into the DVD player as we all sit comfortably in new pyjamas, with a glass of hot apple cider cuddled around to watch an old man fall in love with Christmas. Its almost tradition, the tune of 'Thank you very much' would become sickening at any other time of year, but from video tape to DVD, we've watched this every 25th of December. The dogs lay stretched in front of the guarded flames as the snow hits the skylight in the kitchen. The sound of Christmas carols sung loud project from the radio. Mum and I sing along, badly. But we don't mind each others ghastly tones, just that we are singing horribly together means everything. The neighbours come round with cards to wish us well, many

aunties and uncles ring to thank us for presents and we in return give thanks too. Pictures sent to relatives in Ireland to show the Buckley Christmas spirit. The white tablecloth and posh plates are set. To me, Christmas day is the best day in our little home. No one is selfish, no one is cruel. A calm air of joy and love floats around in our house, intertwined with the sweet fragrance of mum's new perfume and cranberry sauce. To me, it cannot be more perfect, than it is on Christmas day.

Home is Where the Heart is

Damayanti Chatterjee, Herschel Grammar School

It is time to go. I want to go home. I have had enough of the ever-present heat and rickety showers. And the dirt-dust that seemed at first an embrace is now more of a stranglehold.

It is time to go. And the crumple of your eyebrows says it perfectly. It is a little fracture in the streak of a temple that age could never weather. And it makes my hands, so eager in their packing, leaden and stumble to a stop with guilt.

Two weeks a year you see me, but the welcome I get resounds like the familiar sound of the suitcase clunking on your floor. Suddenly home is a wet speck on a map and your arms are warm and real.

They say home is where the heart is, but my organ seems to sit resolutely on the fence of my lungs.

You smile out the grief we both pretend not to see and pass me your parting words since I was seven – a huge slab of Dairy Milk. Your hand trembles and it makes my heart tremble, like ripples on a lake. You won't live forever and that makes terror freeze in my throat and drip into my stomach.

They say home is where the heart is but I am young and scared and want nothing more than to go home to the pillow with the scent of my shampoo on it and the window that frames the oak that moults gold every year.

I see you moulting away.

I promise the perfunctory visit next year, but the question cannot help but rear itself in my head.

You smile kindly at my stuttering speech in your language and leave me to my thoughts.

The fan coughs from its abode on the ceiling, too loud in the silent room.

I can feel the telltale burning in my eyes so I close them and try to think of wet grass and warm jackets and slanting sun over green fields. I think of school and friends and the soothing bustle of everyday life.

The plane is delayed at the airport. It trundles about sadly, waiting to be allowed to fly home. I get a framed look of the city I was born in; the city I barely know. There is a glimpse of a swelling river, lit in holy reverence by sodium stars that twinkle fondly over slums painted bright by women's saris and miles of motorway. Pink flowers from trees that do not grow back home nod hypnotically at me through the heat haze, as they do at every foreigner. But across the milling miles of the city, you are sitting in the old house, thinking thoughts that would have a home in my mind.

We are in the air at last, eating and sleeping in the clouds. The plane lands with a contented sigh at Heathrow. These roads, after those two weeks, feel especially quiet, like the silence in our unlive house after we turn the key for the first time in a fortnight.

I go up to my room. There's the pillow I know so well, and outside is the yellow oak, sturdy under a setting sky that has had ink spilt across it in the colours I love so much. I sit down at the same old desk. And it is you I write to.

Stair Warden

Dominic James, The Cherwell School

Man of military dress, formally addressed,
As a silent Sergeant Major.
Stained with rustic chronology
And candled away with lights
Of his own time.

You always were the sentinel at the summit,
Scaring my infant conscious with
Your austere eyes of pig iron.
Now I consider, that wit was never
Lost upon you perception.

We share a genealogy, but not a
Single tale have we shared with one-another,
Perhaps brevity is what I miss from your misdirection;
Mocking gaze, or maybe it is simple:

I miss My Grandfather.

Untitled

Hugh Kindred, Pimlico Academy

The snail carries its home on its back

The crab wears its home like a coat

Some birds build nests high up so that they can remain

Sky born without flapping their wings.

Home is a place that is familiar – where you remain indefinitely

Or could not be away from for too long

The world is no one's home. I cannot make the world my home any more than a book can
reclaim a place in the forests with its lost kin.

Home

Ayesha Malik, Burlington Danes Academy

You stand at the doorway; the mismatched paint on the door does not shout 'stylish' but instead it says 'sturdy', keeping out the harsh winds and stopping the warmth of the insides spilling out into the open; a wooden ribcage protecting the heart, the home, the healing place. If you strain your ears perhaps you can hear the faint hums of music past its sell-by-date, but not yet turned sour; it rings sweet and true to the ears of the one who plays it and who dances to it because nobody is watching because this house is safe, because this house is warm and because its windows need cleaning, mum said, but it was simply added to the 'to do' list that never gets done.

Turning the lock of the first floor flat, the rabbit-hutch hallways twist and turn to the tune of tender tales of how it once was, how it is and how it will be. The walls are freshly painted, colour palette tastefully created and yet, the damp seeps through and through, and through the pictures and the paintings hung up to cover up the faults and through the curtains and through the floorboard and through your shoes and through your feet. And through and through until we paint another picture to hang over it, of faces and flowers and of tigers in suits and of shimmering crows' feet and feathers. Long-exposure photograph ghosts peer in through whitened windows at the passers-by. You pass them by.

Fake wood floorboards, scratched and worn by a million marathons to the bathroom and night. Iron coat hanger overwhelmed by iron coloured old coats for iron cold winters and although the chill slips in a jumper will suffice and the coats hang ready and waiting to charge into battle (and the winter too sharpens its weapons in wait). Can't walk barefoot in the kitchen because even though we sweep and we sweep the dust and the dirt gathers still. "Pick that up" they say as you drop again a piece of food but even though you've picked it up and you've thrown it away it's still there for the rest to sweep and sweep at day by day the dirt remains static and sullen to walk on tiptoes over.

And though it's small, there is a room you call your own, in this house, this home, this heavenly place. Soft toys on shelves sit on guard, the watchtower of perpetual childhood. Vanilla hangs in the air; the scented candle burns bright. The walls and the shelves and the surfaces are busy; posters and dolls look down at you from every angle, you lie down and you look up and there are posters on the ceiling even but you can also see the sky and the stars and every single little orbiting moon around every single planet in the galaxy, like huge brightly coloured clouds of dust each particle filled with a million stars and it's so unfathomable to you lying in your bed surrounded by posters and toys and people say you are childish but who can even think about not being childish when there worlds out there to explore but also worlds just as big down here that are just as unfathomable and only the childish can see them. Light pushes past the gaps between the windows and your blackout blind; there is no darkness when your window looks out onto four different houses. A baby sitting with the stars, mewls in its sleep. The elephants trundle past above your head to comfort it, a soft stampede of lullabies; the upstairs flat flattened out now by their feet. You close your eyes (but your eyes never really close, do they?) and the dreams fall like brick dust from the corners of the ceiling and rise from the slats of your bed like smoke and they sail you away; they delicate keys that open up your very unconscious and they lift you away

up past the babies and the elephants and higher than the longest giraffe up, up into stars and show you the most beautiful things, all the while the vanilla smell still lingers and you are still safe and sound and sleeping at

home.

End.

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Jake Marmot, Mossbourne Community Academy, KS5

the rain slips
in sad little rivers
along the concrete

and the perilous slide
of evening
into night.

we have run out of apple
juice
again, almost

an aeroplane interrupts
my thoughts –
I wonder where it is going

birdsong at
5am
sleep, sleep

listless sky –
reading Lolita by
quiet dawn

cracked lips –
how carefully he
chooses his words

ashen morning
far too cold to get
out of bed

hi, dad,
hi –
an empty greeting

clothes on the
line –
I hope it rains

train ride,
grey city screams –
take me away

autumn drizzle –
my clothes are wet
again

starless cloudless
sky –
abyss

a lamplit street –
waiting for –

There's No Place Like Home

Esme Partridge, Oxford Spires Academy.

'Do your knees still hurt?'

My sister was four years older than me and very sensible. As we sat in the shade my knees poked out from the legs of my shorts, pink and scratched. I sucked my liquorice stick.

'No.'

'Good.' My sister had a red lolly.

'They bled a lot didn't they? And I only cried a little bit.'

'You were very brave.' Her lips were staining red.

There was a pause as we ate. We heard Anna go out the side gate. My sister sat closer to me.

'I bled yesterday too.'

I bit a piece of liquorice off the end of the stick. It tasted metallic, like pennies.

'No you didn't.'

The liquorice was melting away down my throat. It tasted metallic, like blood.

'I did. In the night; you were asleep in your room.' She looked at me with wide eyes. 'I bled when Nicolas came into my bedroom in the dark.'

'Did he pray with you?' I never prayed before I went to sleep anymore- like we used to pray, at home, with Mummy.

'No. He kissed me and he took off my pyjamas. He hurt me.' She threw her lolly stick at the chickens. 'That's why I bled. He changed my sheets for me.'

I looked at my fingers; they were sticky and black from the melting liquorice. Then my sister kissed me. It was a long kiss and our teeth bashed together. Her mouth was covered in a red and black mess when we pulled apart.

'Don't tell anyone about the blood though. Anna would be cross about the dirty sheets.'

That night I dreamt that Nicolas took a liquorice stick, marched down to the end of the garden and slaughtered the goat with it. The goat bled and bled. Blood came all the way up to the veranda steps, and Nicolas had blood around his mouth.

I dreamt that I was in the bath, drowning in melted red lollies, and I couldn't get out of the bath because Nicolas was holding me under.

I dreamt that my sister was the size of a liquorice stick, in a sweetshop, in a glass high up on the top shelf. I was in the queue to buy her, but I was too late because the man in front of me bought her before I could. The man was Nicolas.

I woke up panting after each nightmare, too afraid to call out to Anna in case he came to me instead. After I woke up the third time, I decided to lie awake and think of home. I pulled the covers up and whispered.

‘There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home.’

A scream filled the silence, it was full and round. It was Anna’s. I fled downstairs. She was standing in the hallway, hand flat against the wall, staring into the open kitchen.

There was the shape of a skull in the darkness; there was a body on the kitchen table. The tap gleamed in the dark and there was a knife, large and sharp, glinting on the floor. A hand, falling limp from the table top, looked as if it was pointing towards the knife. It was my sister’s hand.

Anna pushed herself from the wall, turned on the kitchen lights. My sister lay on the table, as if in an operation, white and unconscious. Red wings billowed out around her; blood had trickled along the grain of the oak table. Her pyjamas were soaked. We had not seen the blood before; blood is black in darkness, like pools of liquorice. But blood is scarlet in the light- it winked and shimmered around my sister.

Anna sprang into action. She closed the kitchen door, picked me up and carried me into the lounge. Nicolas had come downstairs and was standing speechless. I closed my eyes tight because I didn’t want to look at him. Anna held me in one arm as she telephoned for an ambulance. We heard Nicolas walk out the front door and the old truck start up. He didn’t wait.

In the ambulance, Anna and I sat side by side. The kind ambulance man gave us yellow blankets. He had lifted me up and put me in the back of the van after my sister had been wheeled in there. He had fed two bottles into her veins; one had blue liquid in it, one was a bag of blood. Anna held my sister’s hand. We had left a policeman to take care of the house while we were at the hospital. The policeman had asked me questions.

‘Do you know why she hurt herself, did she give a reason?’

I didn’t say.

Now the sun was beginning to come through the clouds and there was a greyness about the world outside. But the ambulance was pure white, like a sterile bubble. Peace shrouded over me; I felt soft and calm. As we drove through the pre-dawn light, I knew that this was the safest we had been all summer.

Home

Catherine Sleeman, The Holy Trinity C of E School

I've always thought that buildings are like graveyards for memories; the dead preserved between walls like flowers pressed in pages, the lost parts of our selves hung up like portraits or calendars; reminding us of our lives.

I've taken to wondering about why we got our kitchen re-done while we let the rest of our house fall apart and I think I've found the answer. We don't want to remember our dead.

Over the summer we striped back the tiles and painted the walls with sunshine; the washing machine and the microwave migrated and the floor space receded to make way for all our cupboards to be empty. We dragged the evidence out into the yard and scribbled over it like it was a spelling mistake. The kitchen was the room where we'd all died several times over and so the cemetery had to be uprooted and annihilated before we began to smell the decay of the past versions of ourselves. We had to prise mould from the corners and resolutely redecorate the place where Anorexia had been most prominent.

It was ironic really that this purge was to rid ourselves of Anorexia when purging had, so frequently, been a means of feeding it.

It was pointless really because the kitchen might have been the part of the house that got bombed the most heavily by my brother's eating disorder but it was not the only room with bullet holes punching through the paintwork. Each wall is avalanched away by postcards and snapshots and letters home that my fourteen-year-old -self framed with fear and anger and hate. What my home means to me is the bed I saw my mother howling on and the scales my brother teetered on and the doorway my father swore from. When I see the painting on my brother's wall I think not of art but of a children's hospital and when I see my blue bean bag I think not of film-watching but of the practise of crying tearlessly.

We know a family who lived in the same little Mental-Illness-Bubble that we did. "We've still got the lamp shade that she threw her plate of tomato pasta at," they say whenever we see them. "We have a good laugh about that," and they explain the way they deal with their history like the person who taught them optimism did a better job with them than ours did with us. We're four cynics crouching under one roof like we'd rust in the rain that we miser over. Unable to move on. We attempt but it is too hard, too rigid, too stiff. My joints have more titanium than my grandmother's – no, not titanium; lead. Every time I try to step away from anorexia I find that there is too much grit behind my patella, too much debris lodged between my brittled bones. Debris that's left over from all the toxins and dirt and tears that

I couldn't manage to cry. I hug myself on the staircase and wonder how many years it will be before I can watch the front door without watching for dying Crane Flies. How many times must I sit opposite my brother before I can forget sitting opposite a skeleton? How long will it take to stop seeing vomit stains in the toilet and the writhing veins in my brother's arms?

I'm waiting for the day when we can throw away blood-stained lampshades and remember instead how, as children, we threw paper aeroplanes down these stairs.

It was always my brother's plane that flew the furthest.

