

# LOOSE LEAVES

Unbound Press Literary Competition Anthology  
Volume 1

**Loose Leaves:**  
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## **Preface**

This preface is simply a way of saying thank you to all those who entered our competitions, and congratulations to our prize-winners and runners-up, in this inaugural year of the Unbound Press Literary Competitions. We chose a range of different genres in order to present a varied read in this anthology – but even then, we were amazed and gratified by the sheer diversity of material entered in each category.

In order to showcase as much writing talent as possible in a single volume, we chose the runners-up purely on merit, rather than choosing a set number for each category.

The non-fiction entries in particular were a revelation – this was without doubt the strongest category overall, although not the most popular.

The biggest disappointment was the fact that we had to rule out a number of excellent 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of a novel entries, simply because they had previously appeared online – despite the fact it was made clear in the rules that this was not acceptable. We are looking for the fresh and new, so anything that has been freely available to view on the internet – even on a personal blog – had to be discounted.

We will be running a further batch of competitions next year, with some new categories – on the grounds that variety is the spice of writing!

Here it is, then, Loose Leaves Volume 1. Enjoy!

Nicola Taylor

## Contents

### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Winners

<i>All There Is</i>	Judy Walker	7
<i>Four Aces</i>	Seif El Rashidi	10
<i>It's considered unlucky to kill them...</i>	Gill Hoffs	13
<i>The Beginners' Guide to Parenting</i>	Louise Hume	14
<i>Heartwood</i>	Ursula Hurley	19
<i>Ice etching</i>	Annisa Suliman	24

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize Winners

<i>Death and the Boy</i>	Peter Jordan	25
<i>A Writhing Mass</i>	William Prince	29
<i>The Tattooist</i>	Phillip Sheahan	33
<i>The Resurrection of Danny MacNamara</i>	Malcolm Bray	34
<i>Death Divides Two Towns</i>	Cameron Dexter	38
<i>Inscription Found in Rilke</i>	Susan Nyikos	42

### Runners-up

<i>The House with the Red Door</i>	Amanda Montei	43
<i>Scotch Corner</i>	Miranda Landgraf	47
<i>November</i>	Lunar Hine	51
<i>We Killed a Nun</i>	Nicole Quinn	52
<i>The Theory of Networks</i>	Laura Solomon	56
<i>Apples and Endings</i>	J V Birch	61
<i>About Donald</i>	Ruaidhri Begg	62
<i>How to Date the Girl with the Middle-parted Hair</i>	Sarah Crossland	67
<i>Under the Wig</i>	Juliet O'Callaghan	71
<i>Pride and a Fall</i>	Desmond Meiring	72
<i>A Man of Stars</i>	Marilyn Messenger	76
<i>Picking up the Pieces</i>	Suzan Lindsay Randle	80
<i>Human Relationships under Capitalism</i>	Paul Brownsey	81
<i>Joan of Arc, Ringo Starr and Me</i>	Moy McCrory	86
<i>The Birds and the Light in Pedro Carbo</i>	Michael Palmer	90
<i>Ephemera: A Memoir in Objects</i>	Penny Wolfson	91

<i>One T Shirt Left</i>	Trina Beckett	95
<i>Venus of Willendorf</i>	Isabel Gillard	97
<i>The Veiled Island Woman</i>	Patricia Byrne	98
<i>Death Ride Girl</i>	Mark Wagstaff	103
Competition Results List		108
Contributors		110

*(Extracts from some of the 1st Prize winners follow – buy the book to read them in full!)*

**Short Story: 1<sup>st</sup> Prize**

**Judy Walker**

*All There Is*

I hand Liz my plastic carrier bag, which contains three thermos flasks and a foil parcel. We were all asked to bring a specified part of the menu – mine was the starter. Sort of a potluck supper but with the luck element taken out.

‘It’s soup – stilton soup – and bread.’

‘Lovely! So....?’

I realise she is awaiting further instruction. ‘It just needs warming – but don’t boil it, it’s got cream in.’

‘And the bread?’

‘Just warm it in the oven.’

‘For how long?’

She’s not a cook, Liz. She waves me through to the lounge and disappears into the kitchen.

I’ve been looking forward to this girls’ night, but now I am here I feel awkward, as though I’ve arrived in evening dress when everyone else is wearing jeans.

The three others are already installed on two pale sofas. Patty is revealing that the trousers she is wearing are from H&M’s children’s department.

‘They were for age 13 and, even better, they were on buy one get one free, so Emily got the other pair.’ Having delivered her punch line with glee she sips her wine and sits back, ready to relish the reaction.

Predictably, everyone marvels. I think of the time I tried to get my son’s jeans on – we’re the same height – and they got stuck at my thighs.

Liz is back. ‘Is it the kind of bread that needs butter?’

I begin to wonder if she’s taking the piss.

**Essay: 1<sup>st</sup> Prize**  
**Seif El Rashidi**

*Four Aces*

'*Quatre As*,' a waiter announces, serving Caroline. There are few surprises at the Gezira Club; standards slip and slowly the old aristocracy fades, but year in, year out, the menu remains unchanged. The veal may be a little tougher now, and on crowded summer nights, many a jug of lemonade is returned to the kitchen almost untouched. 'Coloured water,' disgruntled members complain. I have recently discovered card games, and eye Caroline's dinner with interest, wondering what exactly the four aces are meant to be. Suddenly, I have card-game jargon on the brain. Except for my father, a regular, we are here for my friend to meet his boss's mother-in-law. 'Jasper is clever,' someone had stated earlier. Playing his cards right, I had thought, only then realizing the meaning of the phrase.

That evening, Jasper had called. 'The Gezira Club at nine,' he had suggested, unenthusiastically. Too polite to turn my father's invitation down, he was trying to entice a youngish crowd. I conceded easily, but expected an evening that was dreary at best.

'There will be singing and dancing,' my father had promised at our kitchen table a week earlier, as he extolled the virtues of several club members. I knew those club dinners well. There was indeed a singer who appeared in summer, singing old French favourites until the increasingly Arabised crowd demanded Egyptian classics. The dancing, though, was usually limited to Guido, an Italian-Egyptian whom I barely knew, but who represented an erstwhile cosmopolitan Egypt, alive only in the minds of dreamers like myself.

'Shall I wear a suit?' Jasper had asked, a question I had found absurd, until it dawned upon me that the club, now rather dowdy, maintained an illustrious reputation. Awaiting the arrival of my three British friends, I looked around, scrutinizing the area we referred to simply as 'the dinner'. Will they enjoy it? I wondered doubtfully while selecting a table, taking the surroundings in, as if for the first time. The members were predominantly old, many unashamedly inelegant, but respectable. The tablecloths were reasonably clean, the glasses matched each other, and the lawn, though yellow by British standards, was in good shape considering the heat. Our dinner companion, Madame Esmat, was upper-crust. Well-educated, multilingual and articulate, she was unimpressed by our waiter, who answered her questions vaguely, exemplifying the incompetence of the average Egyptian, she thought.

The rest of our party eventually arrived, and trundled in solemnly, except for Caroline, who was bursting with energy, as always. She later toyed with ordering a Chef's Salad, unaware that there was only one type of salad there, and that it was tasteless. With some encouragement from my father, she finally opted for the breaded veal dish whose name intrigued me.

Isabelle, a friend of Jasper's who had worked in Jerusalem, was poised but preoccupied. A bomb had exploded in Israel that night, and her boyfriend, a Palestinian, lived there. She left early to meet other friends, after having come across as 'refined', an epithet my parents use sparingly.

'I'd like to dance,' says Caroline enthusiastically after dinner.

'Then dance,' I reply, with a total lack of enthusiasm.

I immediately feel slightly idiotic as Abu Heif, recently chosen as the best swimmer of the twentieth century, and now in his seventies, walks off with Caroline in his arms.

**1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of a Novel: 1<sup>st</sup> Prize**  
**Louise Hume**

*The Beginners' Guide to Parenting*

'I hate weddings, don't you?'

The man in front of me slams coins into the cigarette machine as if it's all its fault. His suit is tight in all the wrong places and can hardly contain him as he stoops to yank the packet out of the drawer. The jacket's got a ridge on the shoulder, like it's spent years on a coat-hanger, and the trousers show half an inch of sock at the bottom. I can tell he's wearing the suit grudgingly, like a footballer at an awards ceremony, or a TV gangster – someone whose body's made for running and kicking and beating the hell out of other people. He pulls a cigarette out of the packet with his teeth and offers it to me. I don't smoke but I take it just to feel the shock of his fingers against mine. As he steps closer to light it for me, thick strands of black hair tumble into a face that looks as if it's been chiselled by a great sculptor who just ran out of time. Nose slightly too big, mouth a smidgen wide, chin that looks as if it needs a bit chipped off. Together, these imperfections add up to an accidental sort of handsomeness. To me it's nothing short of spectacular and I've been wanting to get my hands on it through every single minute of this long, long wedding, which being French, started at ten this morning and probably won't stop until halfway through next Wednesday. I spent the entire ceremony at the *mairie* watching his dark, restless head out of the corner of my eye, itching to bury my fingers in his hair. During the *vin d'honneur* I imagined sweeping the champagne glasses off the table and pinning him onto it, and when he danced with one of the bridesmaids, only a conversation about a sideboard that looked like a late piece by Ruhlmann with my French brother-in-law, who's also the bridegroom, prevented me dragging her away by her hair extensions.

Now, at last, we face each other outside the *salle des fetes* in the corridor that leads to the toilets, and I wonder if he can tell what one-track programme of filth is running in my head. He's giving nothing away. Like his hair, his eyes are as dark as night and as impossible to read.

'Weddings are alright,' I say. 'They have their good points. Free booze. Opportunities to do things you wouldn't normally do, things you end up regretting...'

'But things that are fun at the time?'

He steps closer to allow the bride's aunt who's in a wheelchair to get to the ladies. Behind the odour of vodka, his breath smells of mints. It's unexpected and cute. He pulls one of the hairpins that are holding together my improbably neat tower of hair and puts it into his pocket. I slide my finger down his tie. The knot looks like one you'd find holding fishing lines together.

'Terrible choice, that tie,' I say.

'All ties are terrible choices, but you've got to wear one if you're best man.'

'But... pink!'

'Do I look gay?'

'You just look like a drunk man in an awful tie. How many have you had, anyway? I bet you can't walk in a straight line. See those pedaloos on the lake out there? Bet you can't get there without falling over.'

This is a ruse to get him outside, away from the guests who keep bustling past and asking why we aren't enjoying the dessert course, that the *petits-fours* are made by a pastry-chef who once made a cake for Johnny Depp.

It's dark outside. The pedaloos are tucked behind the floodlit pavilion of the *salle des fetes*, stacked up, waiting for the families who'll flock to the lake tomorrow if the weather's good.

He walks in a straight, if slightly slanted, line and suddenly produces a champagne bottle out of his jacket and two glasses. They're not proper champagne flutes, just tumblers

that he's swiped from the children's table. He holds them up like trophies and beckons me towards him.

'Ever had sex in a pedalo?' he asks as I join him. His hand slips unceremoniously around my waist and makes its way downwards. He pulls me closer and his breath on my neck feels like a silk scarf that someone's slowly sliding over my throat.

'You're going to have to try harder than that,' I lie, stifling a laugh.

'No, I don't.' There's a pop. Somehow he's uncorked the bottle with one hand. 'I'm French. Romance is part of my national character.'

'Romance? Is that what you're calling it?'

**1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of a Creative Non-Fiction Book: 1<sup>st</sup> Prize**  
**Ursula Hurley**

*Heartwood*

‘He looks like a horse’s arse, he smells like a horse’s arse...’ roared the rugby team as they charged around the quad. I tried to follow but I was laughing so hard I couldn’t breathe. The lake of Dry Blackthorn between my head and my feet made walking difficult. Rakesh, the captain, scooped me up as he passed and set me aloft on his shoulders. ‘Faster!’ I yelled, kicking his sides. Fist in the air, I urged them on like some demented Boadicea. Rakesh tripped, pitching me towards the cobbled floor. Somehow he caught me and swung me up and around, whirling me until I was dizzy. I tipped back my head and looked at the sky, where the stars streamed as though they were on over-exposed film. Then he swung me low (sweet chariot) and laid me gently in an open dustbin. When he’d stopped laughing, he turned and walked away. We never spoke. When we were sober (which was, admittedly, not often) we ignored each other. I was his drinking buddy, the Absinthe fairy. Beyond that I did not exist.

‘Come on,’ said Mike, my Other Half, wedging his hands under my arms and hoisting me out of the bin.

‘Good job it was empty,’ I panted, dusting myself down.

‘What shall we do now?’ he asked, lighting a cigarette.

What I should have done now was go back to my room, make a large black coffee, and get on with my Shakespeare essay. But cider logic was in charge. ‘Drink more, obviously.’

Mike offered his arm and we wove through Second Court, where the bar was calling last orders. As we wobbled over the shadowy cobbles of Third Court I looked up at Professor Rattigan’s window but all was dark. My essay was due in tomorrow and I knew it was bad. I had to face it: the token Northerner from a bog-standard comprehensive simply couldn’t cut it.

We stopped on the Bridge of Sighs so Mike could take a piss. ‘Do you have to?’ I asked, looking away in disapproval. Back home this was yobbery. Here it was high spirits.

‘Fraid so,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t wait.’

‘Well I need to go too, but I bloody well *have* to wait, don’t I?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mike, buttoning his jeans. ‘I reckon we could rig up a funnel and a hose pipe down at the labs. I could make it my final year project.’

‘I’m not holding your hand now,’ I said over my shoulder as I walked on into New Court.

‘Maybe Cat’s having a party,’ said Mike. ‘Let’s go and see.’

‘OK,’ I said uncertainly. Cat was rather like Holly Golightly, except she went somewhat more heavily. I wasn’t sure if she was my friend, or just someone doing the same course who stopped for the occasional chat. To be honest, I was intimidated by her famous parents, her beauty and her wealth. I didn’t want her to think of me as a hanger-on or an autograph chaser.

‘Darling!’ trilled Cat as she rose unsteadily from the table and teetered towards us. She gave Mike a lavish hug and a kiss on both cheeks. It may have been my imagination, but I thought she stiffened slightly when she saw me. If she did she disguised it winningly, hugging and kissing me too before returning to her seat, where she toyed with a leathery-looking fried egg on toast. She lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, then said, ‘Fuck it,’ and stubbed it out in the egg. ‘That’s boarding school for you. I’ve been living on crisps and fags for so long I can’t eat anything else. Still, it kept me out of the way while Mummy had her *glittering* career. What’s a minor eating disorder compared to that?’ She poured herself a large slug of gin and downed it in one, slamming the glass on the table.

She looked like she was going to cry, and I wondered whether I should try to comfort her. I was about to risk it when Mike lunged for the stereo. I jumped as *Cabaret* blared from the speakers.

‘Come on old girl,’ said Mike, rubbing her shoulder. ‘Show must go on and all that. Knock off the gin, it never helps. Here,’ he said, opening her drinks cabinet, ‘let’s make cocktails. Ursula, you know how to make a Cosmo, don’t you?’

‘Erm,’ I said. The only Cosmo I knew was a magazine.

Cat rested her head on Mike’s chest and smiled as she closed her eyes. He stroked her hair fraternally. Then she jumped up. ‘Cosmos ahoy! Get the vodka out of the freezer, will you?’

I hastened to comply, helping myself to a nip in the kitchen – the Dry Blackthorn had worn off, leaving me with the social skills of an amoeba.

*To read*