

The Hay Short Story Competition was won this year by **Elisabeth Salje-Demaret**, who was born in Germany but raised in France. Her German mother and French father made her realise life was beautiful and complex in more than just one language. Lisa used to teach modern languages and has brought up a family of five. Writing has been a part of her life at every stage, first in French and German then, later, in English. She is currently working on a piece of historical fiction – in English.

‘The Mermaid in the Park’ is based on the tale of The Little Mermaid. It was inspired by the streets and squares of Paris, those convivial small green spaces in the big city, where the contemporary lives of France’s immigrant population are enacted, plain for all to see.

The second prize was won by **Carol Kellar** with her story **‘Mandy, the Serial Killer of Wilmslow’**, and the third prize by **Martin Booth** with his story **‘The Egg Round’**. Both these stories can be found on the Hay Community Support website www.haycs.co.uk.

THE MERMAID IN THE PARK by **Elisabeth Salje-Demaret**

‘Don’t do it! Are you mad?’ Sohane seizes Hamza by the forearm. She feels the tendons and muscles tense up as his fist tightens around the handle of the jack knife. ‘That white bastard...’ he growls dangerously under his breath. Sohane looks at her brother straight into his red-shot eyes. ‘No, Hamza,’ she says more softly, ‘leave him alone! You are only getting into trouble again’.

After the intense heat of the day, the air in the little Parisian park is still barely breathable, even at this late hour. Yes, Sohane had overstepped the boundaries, Hamza had caught her furtive glances towards the young Frenchman on the far bench. Athletic type. Good looks. Probably one of those boys from the *lycee* on the other side of the street. Some passing friends had called out to him ‘hey, Jean-Pierre, you coming with us?’ After a few boyishly gruff cataracts of jokes and laughter, they had disappeared again, leaving Jean-Pierre to his revision folder. Jean-Pierre... a fine, French name. It had swayed inside Sohane’s head like sea lilies in the warm current. Hamza had caught her unguarded gaze as it had rested on the reading boy for longer than the split-second allowed for just an indifferent, casual look. He had joggled himself up into the old anger that always inhabited him, and discharged a salvo of words whose sharp guttural edges had grated deep into her. Dishonour of the family...slutty behaviour...shame...Sohane’s feeble retort had only propelled Hamza further into one of his uncontrolled, whimsical rages against the whole world, especially the French - and he had flicked the knife.

Beneath her sweaty hand Sohane still feels the tremor of Hamza’s forearm. Under the big chestnut trees, darkness swallows one by one of the line of five benches with their unfriendly open S-shape that lets each bar dig into the flesh. She knows that she has overstepped what is permitted for a girl like her. After all, as the only boy of the family, Hamza is entrusted with the wardship of his sister’s honour...Sohane shivers. The knife

in his hand, the growing obscurity, the deep furrow of hatred between his charcoal eyes - and the French boy still on the bench just a few meters away. Hamza is so unpredictable. Sohane risks a glimpse over. The folder has fallen onto the ground and the boy's eyes are closed. From his ears dangle two tiny cables whose other ends disappear inside his closed hand. A passing bus shoots an aggressive horn at some unruly pedestrian crossing by red. Sohane clenches her brother's arm tighter. At last she feels the muscle soften and the tendons recoil inside the flesh. Only then does she release her grip, leaving a dark red mark on the brown skin. Slowly, grudgingly, Hamza folds the blade back into its handle. 'Come on, let's go home'. Raspy human words from the mouth of a vanquished tiger.

A sudden gust of wind plucks up some heat-dried leaves from the chestnut tree and allows them to flutter in the dense hot air before letting them land at their feet. 'Oh, come on now!' Hamza's voice quivers with impatience. As Sohane slowly gets up and starts to walk, her clammy jeans stick to her skin. They reach the little metal gate at the end of the path, now vaguely lit by a flimsy street lamp; they must pass Hamza's intended victim. Will Hamza keep calm? Sohane's heart beats double speed. The French boy's pose on the torturous bench is surprisingly relaxed, as if he does not feel the unevenly curved grate prodding into his back, drowned in musical ecstasy, blissfully unaware of the danger that is just brushing past him. He does not see his guardian angel approaching.

At each step they take on the gravel path, the gritty sound of Hamza's sneakers' soles mingles rhythmically with the tapping of Sohane's sweaty feet sticking onto her plastic flip-flops. Step - Tack - Step - Tack - and the crazy beat of her heart. Step - Tack... Warning drums in the desert. Surely the boy will hear them? Reflected in the street light, his Nike trainers make two ghostly moving shapes as they pound some mysterious rhythm into the dust. Muffled jazz sounds. Sohane looks at him intensely. Kind face. Soft eyelashes like a girl's, brown hair, long and wavy. Two strands dance on his forehead to the swaying of his head, rocked along by the jazz devil in his ear. His green Benetton T-shirt loosely touches his slender, muscular torso... Step - Tack - for one infinite, delicious second her gaze envelops his face, his body, his hair, his pose at ease on the treacherous bench, as if he offered himself whole to some goddess. At that moment, Jean-Pierre looks up. Sohane quickly averts her eyes.

The little gate clanks shut. Jean-Pierre remains alone in the park with his music and the ephemeral images of a young girl in ripped jeans. Arabic features...probably one of those girls from the *banlieues*. The vision does not go away; it remains stuck in his mind and demands recognition. Reluctantly, Jean-Pierre lets it settle in a corner of his sub-conscious where it grapples for a moment with the solo saxophone. A fierce, complex rhythm, soon perturbed again by the girl's brown, oval face, the sheen of her raven hair and the tapping of her bare feet against the plastic flip-flops... With one flick of his fringe he dismisses her, but the diabolical tempo of the pianist now conjures up whiffs of hideous ghetto-*cites* north of Paris, pockmarked estates, troublesome neighbourhoods, burnt cars, unwarranted acts of violence, gang warfare in which even the police do not dare intervene. Like the jingle of puzzle pieces thrown into the air, scraps of a sociology essay that he had written, about the integration problems of Algerian immigrants into French society, flash past him. The drum solo beats itself into a

cleverly controlled climax and the fine hairs on his suntanned forearms stand on end...the girl did have beautiful eyes. Held in place by all four musicians, an endlessly drawn-out fortissimo note is abruptly whacked to a halt by one last mighty beat on the drum.

Numbed by the music and the residual warmth of the night, Jean-Pierry rips the ear phones off. He safely buries music, girl, *banlieues* and all two strata down his conscience and exposes his senses to the eerie silence of the park. 'It's dark, must be late.' The little boy inside him does not much like the dark. All of a sudden he is seized by a surge of longing for the white pillow on his bed – the bed in his air-conditioned room - the room in his white, elegant *residence* – the *residence*, home, in his plush, clean, untroubled eighth *arrondissement*. He also wishes for the paracetamol in the cupboard which will relieve the headache he already feels coming. He gets up and walks away – leaving the malicious, fretful little wind of the summer night playing harp with the bars of the benches.

'Where's Hamza?'

'I don't know'.

Sohane's mother pauses a moment looking vaguely out of the kitchen window. Same old mouse-and-olive coloured tower blocks, same old rows of tiny square windows stencilled out of the walls like gouged eyes silently weeping their tears of dirty rain along the cracks. The Cite Soubise is deceptively quiet, but underneath its cracked grey skin the vileness of the *banlieues*, the stuff of headlines in the media, is at work. 'Gratuitous knife attack in the *banlieues*'... 'Woman raped by gang of youths'... Sohane's mother takes out the paring knife and slices with quick, expert strokes through a large carrot. 'Couscous tonight Sohane,' then, under her breath 'what is Hamza up to this time?'

Sohane does not answer. She sees her mother, the irregular pattern of the grease stains on the wall behind her, the washing outside the window flapping like birds caught by the wing. Hated bars of her cage! To get out, out, to escape for a few hours without the oppressive, compulsory male accompaniment! Just to dream a little... The usual refrain pulls at her ear. 'It's for your own good, your own safety... You know how they lay in wait for you, how they loiter near the lift, or behind the entrance. Remember what happened to Fatima last month'. Sohane remembers only too well. When the *Soubise* boys have drunk or smoked, they start to heckle, to taunt the girls. Easy prey. They hurl insults, call them names...and sometimes bad things happen. Sohane clears her throat. 'I have to go to Paris, Mother'. After a few seconds comes the lie. 'It's for a job. I must speak with the woman from the office of social affairs...' 'A job?' A sad joke rather. Bad school results, no skills, no money and an Arabic name. Why bother? The mother quickly looks at her, but says nothing and bends down again, suddenly absorbed by the remaining stump of the carrot. Sohane grabs her bag and her black polyester jacket and runs to the door before her mother should change her mind.

On the bench where Jean-Pierre had sat, a young woman says something funny to her boyfriend who laughs out loud. Sohane pretends to read the free newspaper she has found on the underground seat, but all her senses are on alert. Jean-Pierre...his relaxed demeanour, his green t-shirt, his music ...imprinted on the surface of her memory, his velvet face lays like a caress. The chestnut leaves rustle, but it is only her heart she hears

thumping. What is she hoping for? He has barely looked at her! Surely she is for him just one of these wretched *banlieues* girls? There's an abyss between their worlds.. Pressed through her thin black polyester jacket, the torture bars leave a grid on the skin of her back. Around her flip-flops lie many cigarette stubs and an empty package with 'smoking kills' written in big, black letters on it. She feels heady, the powerful scent of the lime trees in full blossom maybe... Will he come again? What if he does, what if he notices her? She hopes he does not come. Still sitting on Jean-Pierre's bench, the couple hold each other in a long, intense embrace. Sohan looks away. At that moment, the little metal door claps shut. Steps on the path, and the drum beat of her heart soars into a firefly dance of hope, fear, despair, and hope again. Jean-Pierre is back. Jean-Pierre is not alone. He hand holds another hand. At the end of the hand there is a body resplendent with impeccable, blond, contemporary l'Oreal beauty. The wind strums at the bar, the bus hoots at the pedestrians and the dead chestnut leaves crunch under their healthy, self-contented step. But Sohane does not hear any of this anymore. Her bench is empty.

The diesel smell from the crammed buses, the interweaving streams of people on the pavement going anywhere, going nowhere, the aggressive honks of the cars at the back of the queue by the traffic lights, the gummy white-noise of voices and mobile phone tunes, the syrupy crowd of perspiring compressed bodies flowing down the concrete stairs of the Metro, the backs of many heads bobbing and nodding at each step, the dizzying blend of cheap perfume, unwashed collars, stale corridor urine with the oxygen-free air beneath the low, cupped ceiling of the platform, air that is breathed out, and in, and out again from a thousand unknown lungs. And one black polyester jacket, receding to the size of a tear, until it is dissolved in the shapeless human sea.