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opening extract from

The Galloping Ghost

written by

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For Alison, James and Andrew Currier

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Chapter 1

"I don't want to be called Isobel any more," said my sister, striking a pose in the doorway. She was wearing blue lipstick and she'd scrunched up her hair into hundreds of little pink bunches. "I don't want to be called Izzie, either. From now on I want to be known as Bella. It's my stage name."

"Alright, dear," said Mum, looking up from her book. "Bella it is. Bella Weller. Won't that sound a bit odd?"

"I like it!" said my sister. "I think it's dead cool."

That's my sister Izzie all over. She really fancies herself. And since she's been in a band it's got well out of control. She and her friends spend all

their time shut in her room, making this dreadful yowling sound. Sometimes it's so bad I have to take my football down to the park, just to get away from it all.



"You look a right idiot," I said.

"Mum!" yelled Izzie. "Did you hear what he said? Do something!"

"You look lovely, dear," said Mum. (I could tell she was lying.) "Haven't you got any homework, Josh?"

I muttered something.

"What?" said Izzie. "What did you say?"

"None of your business," I said.

"Josh!" said Mum. "You can tell me. What is it?"

"Oh – nothing!" I said. "We've got to write a poem. About an animal."

My sister scoffed.

"You can't do it, can you?" she said.

"Of course he can," said Mum. "You're both good at poetry."

"Correction!" said Izzie. "**I'm** good at poetry. I'm always writing songs for the band. It's dead easy."

"I've read you enough poetry, Josh," said Mum. "I'm sure you've got the idea by now."

She was right about one thing. She **had** read us enough poetry. Other children got Winnie-the-Pooh and Kipper stories at bedtime. We got the Lady of Shallot and Morte d'Arthur. Our Mum read us long, dismal poems that made your hair stand on end. If you didn't fall asleep first, that is.

"You remember 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', don't you?" said Mum.

Remember 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'! I should think so! It was all about an old bloke who



grabs someone on his way to a wedding. Then he bores him stiff, whining on and on about some boat-trip that went wrong. I had thought it was never going to end.

"There was an animal in that," said Mum. "Well, a bird, anyway. Can you remember what it was?"

My mind went blank.

"An ostrich?" I said.



Izzie bellowed with laughter.

"It was an albatross, dumbo!" she said.

I glared at her.

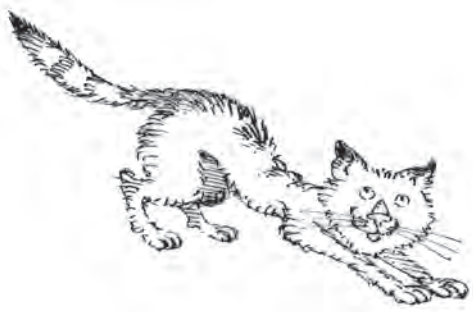
"That's what I meant," I said.

"I think you should just get on with it, Josh," said Mum and she frowned at Izzie. "Go on – try. I'm sure you can do it."

"Fat chance!" sniggered my sister as I went out

of the room; and she kicked my ankle, but secretly, so that Mum couldn't see.

It was that kick that did it. The more I think about it, I'm sure of it. If Izzie hadn't kicked me, I would never have seen the ghost.



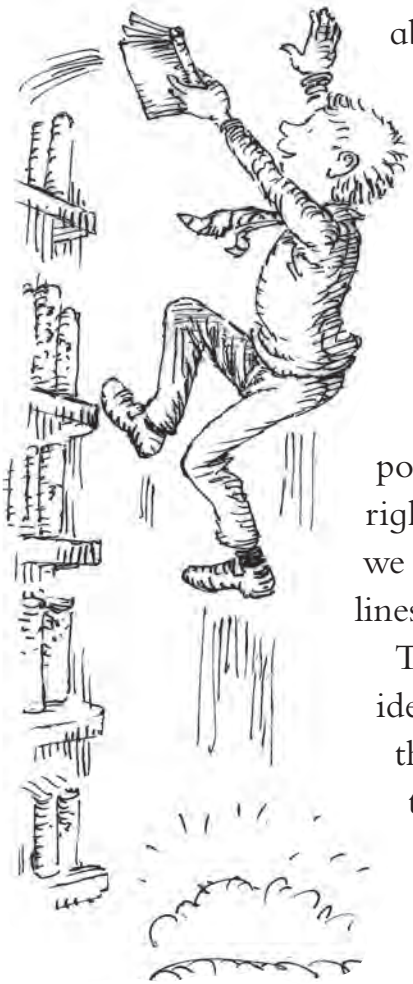
Chapter 2

I sat in my room, chewing a pencil, and tried to think of a poem. But really my mind was on Izzie. You'd think just being older than me would be enough for her, wouldn't you? But it's not. She always has to be top dog. She's louder than me. Cleverer than me. Bigger than me. (That's why I hadn't tried to kick her back; she always wins.)

"I'll show her!" I thought and chewed harder at my pencil. I chewed and I chewed but nothing came.

Our cat, Merlin, wandered into the room and rubbed himself against my leg.

"That's it!" I thought. "A cat! I'll write a poem



about a cat."

I wrote:

"Once I had a
little cat.
It got squashed flat.
Poor little cat."

I sat and stared at my poem. I knew it wasn't quite right. Miss Wilson had said we had to write at least eight lines. This was only three.

Then I was struck by an idea. A really good idea, though I say it myself. I tip-toed along the landing and Merlin padded after me.

The walls of Mum's room were lined with shelves and most of them were packed with poetry books. I stood on the bed. I couldn't reach the highest shelf so I decided to do a bit of bouncing. One! Two! Three! I went higher and higher and on the last bounce I just

managed to snatch a book.

I tip-toed back to my room and examined my catch. It was very dusty, for a start, which I thought was a good sign. Mum couldn't have looked at it for years – if ever. "Little-Known Victorian Verse," it said on the front.

Better still! I started flicking through the pages. If it was 'little-known' no-one would be able to tell if I'd written it or not, would they? I flicked on. Some of the poems were very long. Much too long for what I needed.

Hallo! Here was a shorter poem. "Alexander Twistleton-Tharpe; 1810-1895," it said at the top of the page. There was even a little drawing of him. He was a strange-looking, **long** man; everything about him was long – long beard, long hair and a long nose, with a pair of round, pebbly glasses balanced across it.



"Twistleton-Tharpe must have written thousands of poems in his long life," it said underneath. "We offer 'The Roaming Zephyr' as a taste of his work. Unfortunately, like his other poems, it has not stood the test of time."

Better and better! I read on. This is how it went:

A roaming zephyr drifted o'er the Downs,
Threading the bosky slopes at break of day;
Rustling the sedges of the sullen mere,
It frolicked blithely on its jocund way.

It chased away the darkling shades of night,
Greeted the milkmaids and the shepherd lad.
It whispered in the blushing ear of dawn –
It touched the waiting world and made it glad.

There were a lot of words here I'd never heard of. 'Bosky'? 'Sedges'? 'Jocund'? What did they mean? And who was this Dawn who was having her ear whispered into? I hadn't got a clue. Miss Wilson was going to guess something was up if I wasn't careful. I supposed I'd have to alter it a bit. I picked up my pencil. A zephyr? What was that? Probably an animal, a bit like a zebra. I started to write and

went on writing. My poem was finished so quickly I surprised myself. This was it:–

The Lonely Zebra. By Josh Weller

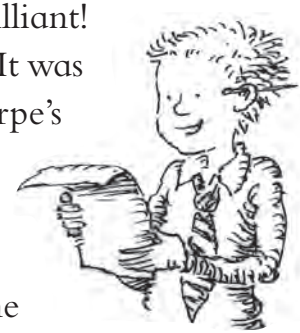
A lonely zebra wandered into town,
Trotting around the streets at break of day.
It busted through the hedges on the Rec
And messed about all down Jocasta Way.

I had an idea that 'frolicked' meant 'messing about' and there was a road near us called Jocasta Way – that sounded quite like 'jocund', didn't it? My poem went on –

It wore its shades and chased away the cats,
It scared the milkman and it kicked Kev's Dad.
It whinnied through the letter-box –
It woke me up, it did. And I felt glad.



I sat back and read it over. Brilliant! I was a genius! I read it again. It was better than Twistleton-Tharpe's effort, anyway. At least you could understand what it was about. I tip-toed back to Mum's room and bounced the book back onto its shelf.



"That's one in the eye for you, Izzie!" I thought.

"Meeow!" said Merlin and he started to purr.