

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## The Present Tense

by Francesca Duffield

After that shining green morning in July, I moved through the days like a severed head that finishes a sentence. I had to proceed, not with caution, but with reckless determination.

The handsome GP's face had clouded as he examined me, and he bent seriously over his urgent referral message. Not that I didn't already know. My night mind had told me in my dreams, which I had shied away from interpreting. I still shudder at the dream-memory of the bent back of the silent figure in a medieval linen cap slowly but unstoppably coming up the stairs below from the darkness, while I tried to hide my children. I knew if I saw its face all was over, that it would be too terrible to survive.

I reeled out of the surgery into a tumult of lovely life: the bakery's open door wafted sweet smells as smiling people greeted each other on the pavement, the toyshop door tinkled its bell, the lime trees in full leaf swayed over Bournville Green. Across the Green my boys were in the Arts and Crafts Infants School, safe with red-haired Mrs Dexter playing the piano at assembly, hand-print artwork curling a little on the display boards. Normal, normal, normal. Normal had instantly become extraordinary, beautiful, unmissable.

The letter offering me the job was still in my bag, rammed hastily back into its ripped envelope. A proper job with the long-desired title of Senior Designer, supervising two Juniors moving forward into the future with electronic learning. The Future. A vertigo-inducing cliff-top drop into empty air, with no parachute. The future for my children without me. We can only die in the future, I thought; right now we are always alive.

'Right now', I thought, carrying on, buying a stamp to reply and accept the job in writing. Smiling at an old man who held the door for me, even though he had had his future and I might not have mine.

I walked slowly home past the expectant empty school playground, catching the hive-like hum of the future coming through the open windows. The carillon in the belltower played the three-quarters of the hour with mechanical merriness. I felt strangely invisible and light, as if I was already in some other dimension, going through the usual motions from a great distance.

The quote had never seemed so apt: 'I can't go on. I'll go on'. I would go on. For however long I could, I would stay in the present tense: right now, we are always alive.