Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Hill Top Light

by Stuart Finegan

“I hope this bloody camera works.”

The old man held the battered camera in both hands and peered through its rain-speckled lens. His voice vanished beneath the ferry’s engines and the hiss of rain drifting in from the sea. Low clouds smothered the horizon as the vessel emerged from behind the harbour wall, rising and falling gently on the swell.

Beyond the rain, the island appeared much as Arthur Bell remembered it: whitewashed cottages, a church spire and green fields empty of life.

A century ago, almost four hundred people had lived there. Fishing boats crowded the harbour, smoke curled from hillside cottages, and children hurried along the narrow lanes in every kind of weather. There had been a school, a blacksmith, two churches and three working farms. Each summer, the fields rang with voices during the harvest.

Then the island began to empty.

The young left first, searching for work on the mainland. Fishing became less profitable, winter storms damaged the harbour, and families who had lived there for generations departed with one-way tickets. The school closed. The blacksmith’s forge collapsed. Farms surrendered to the wind and sea, while ivy and gorse swallowed walls that had stood for centuries.

Now only a handful of people remained throughout the year. Tourists came in summer to walk the cliffs and photograph the beaches, unaware that every ruined cottage contained a family’s story.

The island looked peaceful, but beneath its weathered skin lay generations of feuds, tragedies and secrets. People remembered things here. Arthur knew that better than anyone.

As the ferry entered the harbour, he looked towards the hill above the old church. Bell Farm stood somewhere at its summit—once his home, and his prison. The farmhouse had lost its roof decades ago, and one stone gable had collapsed. Yet he recognised its silhouette against the sky. At eighty, Arthur felt he was returning to a dream he had spent sixty-three years trying to forget.

He rented a room above the Cow-Shed Pub near the harbour. Its slate roof gleamed after every shower, and peat smoke drifted from the chimney each evening. The locals barely noticed him. Like most visitors, he carried a camera, walked the coastal paths and sat alone in the bar nursing a pint. To them, he was simply another tourist. Arthur was content to let them believe it.

Each morning, he wandered the island's lanes, filming ruined cottages, dry-stone walls and abandoned boats. He climbed windswept hills and crossed empty beaches where seals watched him without fear. Yet wherever he went, Bell Farm remained visible. Watching. Waiting.

At night, beside the pub fire, Arthur felt the weight of unfinished business bearing down upon him. He had not returned for tourism or nostalgia. He had come seeking forgiveness for a secret buried sixty-three years earlier—a secret he had never revealed to another soul.

On Sunday, he finally climbed to the church overlooking the harbour. It seemed smaller than he remembered, its stonework scarred by salt and rain. Behind it lay the graveyard, where headstones leaned at strange angles, as though the wind were slowly pushing them towards the sea.

Arthur moved carefully among the graves until he found the one he sought. Thomas and Margaret Bell. His parents. Their names had almost disappeared beneath the lichen. Weeds surrounded the stone, and no flowers marked the grave. No one had visited for years. Arthur stared at their names. Then, with great effort, he lowered himself onto one knee.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry I left."

The wind disturbed the skeletal branches of the yew trees, and suddenly he was seventeen again. He remembered his father's anger and his mother's tears. The arguments. The shouting. The night everything changed. The blood. Arthur closed his eyes. For most of his life, he had convinced himself that running away had been necessary. He had been given no choice. Yet before his parents' neglected grave, that certainty deserted him.

Perhaps they had deserved the truth. Perhaps he had abandoned them when they needed him most. The guilt had followed him through every city, every job and every year of his life.

"I'm tired," he said. "I don't want to carry it any longer."

The church bell rang once.

That evening, Arthur sat overlooking the harbour while rain drifted across the sea. The ferry prepared for its final crossing, its lights blurred by the gathering darkness. He filmed the harbour, the church and the distant hill—simple things he wished he had appreciated when he was young.

As he lowered the camera, something caught his eye. A woman was descending the cliff path. She wore a dark, ankle-length coat and a bright red headscarf. Something about her seemed familiar, though Arthur could not understand why. She stopped. Even at that distance, she appeared to be looking directly at him. Then she smiled. It was not the polite smile of a stranger, but the smile of someone who knew him.

A chill passed through Arthur. The woman crossed the harbour road and approached steadily. Her face awakened fragments of memory: a classroom, laughter and summer afternoons beside the harbour. She stopped before him.

“Arthur Bell.”

“Do I know you?”

Her smile vanished. “You certainly should.”

A sudden gust lifted her red scarf. Arthur stared into her deep green eyes and remembered a name he had not spoken in more than sixty years. The woman glanced towards Bell Farm, then back at him.

“They finally told me where you buried him.”

Arthur’s hands began to shake. The camera slipped from his fingers and struck the wet stone. For what seemed an age, neither spoke. Behind them, the ferry sounded its horn. The woman stepped closer.

“Would you like to show me where?”

High above the harbour, on the dark hill where Bell Farm stood abandoned, a solitary light appeared among the ruins—a light that had not been there moments earlier. The woman saw it, but neither of them moved.

They both knew the farmhouse had been empty for more than sixty years.