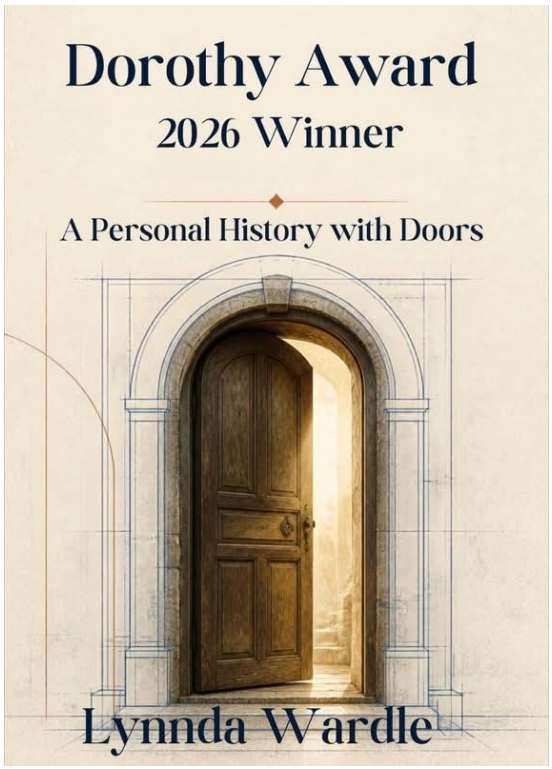
A Personal History with Doors

Winning entry Scottish Federation of Writers 2026 Dorothy Memoir Award



1966, The Vincent Hotel, Arcadia, Pretoria

At the residential hotel I am the smallest in a gaggle of children who run wild; a pack roaming the grounds, playing *toktokkie* on the residents, scampering away before they can open their front doors. We play hide and seek until it's too dark to see, and the grown-ups call us inside. My new friend, Ronelle, and I start an imaginary language and even though I am more eager than she is about naming everything in this new paradise. I don't mind. The hotel and its wild garden deserves its own special language.

Mom is unhappy
I hear her tell her sister
so humiliating, a hotel

1970, Linden, Johannesburg

I have dreamed of that kitchen. Solid white stable door. Dad kneeling on newspaper, painting it. The top opens to a long view down the garden. It's hot. Green vibrating in the sun; crimson geranium and sticky jasmine. Next to the Wendy house, the Chinese lantern, the fig and the lemon trees tremble in the heat.. Dad's outside. I can't see him but he will be there. Mom will be inside. I can't see her either but feel the force of her. These are their domains.

I lean over the door
feet cold on the kitchen floor
I could escape if I tried

1976, Parkhurst, Johannesburg

Monstrous arms of the wild date palm on the stoep stroke my window. Then the gate opens and I hear a hammering on the front door: *Polisie! Maak oop*! Elias who lives in the back room in our garden is in trouble, he doesn't have his Pass. My father is furious and swears in Afrikaans. But I understand. He chases the police off his property.

Bliksems!
Wat soek julle?
Voetsak![1]

1986, Honey Street, Berea, Johannesburg

The city is beginning to dream its future where anyone can live together irrespective of the colour of their skin. We have a large wooden door with three Yale locks and a chain. Security issues and we don't have a dog.
This feels like a community, but an anxious one: artists, young families, mixed-race couples, drug dealers, students and political activists move into the spaces left by the retreating middle classes. Everyone always on the move in a city where you could be pinned down, found out, classified.

[1] Refers to the Pass laws in South Africa, forcing Black, Coloured, and Indian South Africans to carry identity documents controlling where they could live or work. They restricted movement, enabled police harassment, and was eventually abolished in 1986.

Under new State of Emergency laws passed to keep political unrest in check, things get worse. Townships burn and school children stay home. People are detained without trial and found dead, hanging in their cells. Where's the line marking the end of this world to be drawn?

keep moving house to house
I flit seven times that year
stay alert, stay safe

1987, Boksburg, East Rand

I am her back-door baby.

When I meet Rene, my birth mother, she tells me that when she was in labour with me, she was forced to use the back entrance of the hospital because she was unmarried.

1998, Mary-Anne Gardens, Deptford, London

Blue door. A flat in a building shaped around a quadrangle. Sometimes on hot summer days residents lay out picnics on the grass. But mostly the square lawn is deserted, the kingdom of cats, including a ginger bully with a scar over one eye and a thin black-and-white lazing in the branches of a lilac tree. Sometime there's a dead bird on the path, evidence of their hunting sprees. At night, with my new baby son latched on, time glitches.

Parsed by the slow bell
new motherhood is a place
for which I have no compass

2001, Strathblane, Stirlingshire

Sometimes I forget to lock the front door. Once, I even leave it open by mistake. Trying out safety. This house comes with a husband, two babies, and a view of the Campsie Fells. I lie in bed feeding my daughter and can hear the school bell, the signal to pick up my son. It is a busy time and lonely.

The children leave home. The husband has been gone a long time.

Next door it's full-tilt teenage mayhem. A beautiful duet of rage hammering my egg-shell walls. Envious of where they are in life, their noise pushes against my silence. I long for the urgency of city sounds: an ambulance wailing its emergency, the mating call of an urban fox. Alone in the Blane valley I dream of city slopes.

In his late fifties, the Japanese poet Chōmei leaves his home after fire and famine ravage Kyoto. He turns away from worldly concerns and builds himself a small hut (a hō*jō*) in a remote area to reconnect with the natural world. I do this in reverse.

Woodsy knuckles
the giant claws
her way out

2026, Knightswood, Glasgow

An old-fashioned green door with a half-horseshoe door knocker. *Don't let the luck run out!* Built in the 1940s for a healthier life for its residents, Knightswood has generous back greens, a large park with ducks. Mary downstairs and I share a communal washing line, no fences between us. The dog frolics unchecked while Mary dozes in the sun and I potter in the shade. We curate our washing to accommodate her blowsy bed sheets and my walking gear. To the east, the sun dips behind Anniesland Tower and it's party time for the foxes running between 157 and 159, nosing the scent of chips and curry sauce floating above the sycamore. Clouds scud a moody sky.

Door open for
young vixens, singing dogs
poetry, wine and passion

What the judges said about the winning entry:

A wonderfully emotional, sensitive and expertly crafted piece of creative non-fiction. The use of doors to connect powerful, political and emotive writing is a strong thread, it binds the narrative together across continents and time. Eloquently written, with the shorter passages showing power in what is also left unsaid. The language used feels specific and deliberate, covering six decades in less than 1000 words but managing to feel deeply personal and give the reader a sense of really knowing the writer. 'I am her back-door baby', said so much historically and personally. There is great power in the final paragraphs switching to a hopeful tone which is balanced against the emotional pain woven throughout but never directly expressed.

I enjoyed the growing perspective from child to adult, and the arc of a life characterised with a wonderful sense of place. Colour, texture, scents and memories, all beautifully done. The poetic refrain used at the end of the passages breaks the rhythm of the piece and gives a new voice and perspective; it adds depth. A stand-out piece that I read over and over for being unique and individual but profoundly human at the same time.

Kirsty Crawford
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