

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

## Former Presidents:

Humbert Wolfe (1935-40)  
Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
Sir George Rostrevor  
Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967-68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
Lord Snow (1975-80)

## President:

Charles Neilson Gattey

## Vice Presidents:

Richard Adams FRSL  
John le Carré  
Iain McIntyre

## Chairman:

Alan S Watts

## Vice Chairman:

Terry Rickson

## Membership Secretary:

Joan M Lewis  
17 The Green  
Corby Glen  
GRANTHAM  
NG33 4NP  
email:  
joan@lewis5634.fsnet.co.uk

## Meetings Secretary:

Ethel Corduff  
10 Malcolm Road  
Woodside  
South Norwood  
LONDON  
SE25 5HG  
email: ecorduff@hotmail.com

## Treasurer:

Joan M Lewis  
17 The Green  
Corby Glen  
GRANTHAM  
NG33 4NP  
email: joan@lewis5634.fsnet.co.uk

## Competition Secretary:

Ronald C Jeffreys  
186 Lewis Flats  
Lisgar Terrace  
LONDON  
W14 8SQ

## Publicity Officer:

Vacant

## Diary

### AGM

22<sup>nd</sup> May 2004

### PW Weekend 2004

30<sup>th</sup> July – 1<sup>st</sup> August 2004

### Closing Date for Bill Barnes Poetry Competition

30<sup>th</sup> September 2004

### Annual Lunch

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2004

### DATA PROTECTION ACT

**Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.**

### DISCLAIMER

**The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.**

### Poetry Editor:

**Joyce Thornton  
129 Whitechapel Road  
CLECKHEATON  
West Yorkshire  
BD19 6HS**

### Editor:

**Adrian Danson  
37 Hollingworth Road  
Petts Wood  
Kent  
BR5 1AQ  
email: adriand@onetel.net.uk**

# The SCPSW Author

Number 165

Spring 2004

## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Members' Successes
- 4 Letters
- 9 Market Information *Gordon E Gompers*
- 10 The W F & F G Froud Memorial Competition for a  
War Poem – Judges Report and Results
- 19 Poetry Pages
- 23 Poetry Workshop Pages
- 25 SCPSW News
- 27 Postcards From Portugal *Norman Bissett*
- 28 Freshers' Week *Norman Bissett*
- 29 With a Dzung in My Heart *Norman Bissett*
- 31 Walk on By *Maureen Mills*
- 35 Vanishing Act *Geraldine Smedley*
- 39 Heartbreak *Liz Furlong*
- 40 Teacher *Liz Furlong*

## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

Here we are again, with Spring in the air and our creative instincts buzzing with excitement. If that is not so then take a walk in the park and look at all the evidence of a new beginning and know that it is in you to do the same. If you are young you may already be bursting with ideas and hopefully ready to share them with us, if you are in the middle years responsibilities may be bearing down on you, so escape into your imagination where you are the master/mistress of your fate. If you are older, delve amongst the cobwebs of your memory and bring back those treasured moments, factually if you wish or maybe recording them as they might have been, rather than the less palatable reality. The power of our imagination is beyond measure, but don't be satisfied with dreaming, put your thoughts onto paper, refine them a little perhaps and offer them for judgement in one of our competitions.

I am delighted to find so many of we old fogies are now using e-mail to communicate. Surely we have reached the day when folios of stories and/or poems wing their way between members. Joan Lewis has raised this media again and I hope we will have a response this time. Having raised the matter in the past and met no response, I remain hopeful.

I strive to retain my optimism on the home front, though it remains difficult. The builders are in, dust is everywhere and it will be months before everything is finished. Then I will move into the spare bedroom that will be my domain, papers will be arranged in order, files will be placed where they are visible and accessible and I might be able to fully play my role as editor again. Unfortunately demands on my time and feeling of despondency that has been brought on by this seemingly endless saga, has caused me to be late with my efforts and thus Alan Gibb has been unable to get this Author to print and distribution on due date. Once more I can but hope to improve, but if anyone else would like to take over I would be happy to pass their name to the committee.

For those who have communicated with me in the past few months and found me wanting, I can but apologise and ask for your understanding – life has not been easy.

We are about to have our AGM again, where we will also announce the result of the Lewis Wright competition. Many of you will be unable to attend for various good reasons. Those who can should do so, as it is the occasion when any changes to the way we run our affairs can be aired. It might also be said that by attending you are at least showing support for your committee, each of whom usually attend and this can involve a long journey to do so. For those who cannot attend but would like to offer an opinion, I suggest you write to your Chairman and he will raise any appropriate issues.

Most of us have partisan views on something or other, but a bigot is something more. I once read a definition of a bigot as one who is so prejudiced that they are unaware of having any bias. One of our members wrote to me criticising Brian Jones for his praise of Jack London. The letter adversely compared London with Jane Austin and Anthony Trollope. Comparison involves taste as well as literary merit and is always subjective, but when the writer admitted to having never read anything by Jack London, I had to conclude that this was bigotry. I try to include all letters without editing, but this was too much. Having said that, I continue to invite you to send me letters on anything that you wish and I will try to publish them.

### **Members' Successes:**

You may have heard of Terry Wogan, as he has his own radio programme, but did you know that our own Joan Lewis is hot on his heels? She has had "Do they know it's Christmas?" (Author, Dec); 'Tempus Fugit' and "Mother knows Best' read out on Rutland Radio. Well it may not be Radio Two, but one has to start somewhere.

### **Letters**

Dear Editor

Re: Members' Successes

I joined the SCPSW (under its then name) some thirteen years ago, when I first became a civil servant, and have found the magazine both helpful and encouraging ever since. The first short story I tentatively submitted all those years ago received very positive feedback, and I still remember what a great boost it gave me in particular to read Joan Hykin's kind and encouraging words about it. Having successes in a number of your competitions since then also inspired me to keep writing, even at times when I felt I was getting nowhere.

I had quite a few stories printed in independent magazines after that initial spur, but was never confident that my work would be strong enough to sustain a whole book. However, I recently became involved with a new initiative to raise the profile of art and literature in the Medway Towns where I live, and, after seeing some of my work, Urban Fox Press said they would be happy to produce a single-author anthology for me, alongside those they were doing for better known writers such as Bill Lewis, Wolf Howard, and the flamboyant Billy Childish, former boyfriend of artist Tracy Emin and one of the founders of the growing ‘Stuckist’ international art movement. Urban Fox Press were set up with funding from the ‘Millennium Festival Awards For All Scheme’ and are a not-for-profit organisation.

I describe the project as ‘collaborative self-publishing’, as Urban Fox dealt with all the technical aspects along with arranging publicity and the book launch, while I was asked to make a contribution to the printing costs: in return, I retain the full price of every book sold, as the purpose of Urban Fox Press is to help and promote local writers and artists, and they are not a commercial business as such. Their stated aim is to encourage people to feel proud of the creative achievements of the area in which they live. My 100-page book is called ‘*Where Do They All Belong?*’ and comprises sixteen short stories on a common theme, that theme being isolation. I think that isolation, even loneliness, are growing concerns in this alienating high-tech age, and I just wanted to bring together a few of my thoughts on it in a way that might make people look afresh at some of their colleagues and neighbours. Several of the stories have already appeared in magazines, and others are brand-new, but I think they all fit together very well. One of them received an ‘Honourable Mention’ in the prestigious international publication ‘*Year’s Best Fantasy and Science Fiction*’ when it came out, which was a huge thrill for me.

At a time when it is difficult for even the best new writers to find a publisher, the Urban Fox Press initiative seems like an excellent idea, and perhaps it is one which other local communities might think about adopting, to allow talented writers and artists of their own to reach a wider market. Having my very own book in print has certainly been an immensely gratifying achievement for me, and one that I hope every fellow SCPSW member will be able to experience for him or herself one day.

Details: *Where Do They All Belong?* (£6, p & p £1.50) is available from Urban Fox Press, 6 Albert Road, Chatham, Kent, ME4 5PZ.

Yours sincerely,

Michael O'Connor

[Quoted in full as I hope members will find it encouraging. Our congratulations to Michael – Ed]

Dear Editor,

I do not know why Val Whitmarsh should write so scathingly about us old folk by saying that the *Author* “isn't a writing magazine for the elderly – it's for *Writers*”, as if the elderly could not also be writers. Possibly because of advancing years, Val may have forgotten the letter of mine in the *Author* of Autumn 2001 in which I expressed surprise that a relatively young man of 83 was thinking of laying down his fountain pen.

I still manage to string a few words together from time to time. Some items of mine were included in a collection of “the wittiest letters” in recent years from the letters page of *The Times* which was published a year ago under the title “*Brief Letters to the Editor*”. I may also be represented in the next such collection, which is due to be published this month.

I still write a column for my church's quarterly magazine. I will enclose one or two items for you. Some readers of this magazine might like to try their hands at writing articles in monosyllables, but I should issue a warning with regard to this. These short words can be like a drug. If you start to use them you may find it hard to give them up. It will then be hard for you to go back to those words that are made up of more than one part. You have been warned.

All good wishes.

Henry Button

PS I have just received a copy of the latest volume of letters in *The Times* – “*Brief Letters to the Editor 2*”. This is a sequel to last year's book. It has one letter of mine in it.

[I know Val had no such intention and Henry and his age group are welcome and valued members – Ed.]

**Twenty Second Buttonhole** – Hymn writers from Christ's College

One of the hymns on August 17th was number 321 – ‘On all the earth thy Spirit shower’. It was written by Henry More. He also wrote number 299 – ‘Father, if justly still we claim’. Henry More was born in 1614. He came up to Christ's from Eton in 1631. He was elected a Fellow of

the college in 1639 and remained in Cambridge until he died in 1687. The previous Methodist Hymn Book had contained the same two hymns by him and also a third – ‘God is ascended up on high’ (number 220 there). Both hymn books contain two hymns by John Milton. These are ‘Let us with a gladsome mind’ (number 27 in Hymns and Psalms) and ‘The Lord will come, and not be slow’ (number 245).

John Milton was born in 1608 and came up to Christ’s from St Paul’s School in 1625. He spent only seven years in Cambridge and left in 1632, so Henry More might have met him. Milton died in 1674. In the Biographical Register of Christ’s College compiled by Dr. John Peile, Master of the College, Milton is described as ‘the greatest man who ever lived in this college’.

Charles Darwin was not a hymn writer. He came up in 1827, just two hundred years after Milton. He is described in the Register as ‘the greatest English naturalist of the nineteenth century’. Lewis Carroll was neither a hymn writer nor a member of Christ’s College, but I will add a few lines about him. A recent television programme showed a copy of his book, *Alice in Wonderland*, being sold at auction for \$1,400,000. This led me to wonder whether my old copy of the book might now be worth a few pounds. It was presented to me just eighty years ago by the Grimsby & District Sunday School Union as an ‘Honours Class Prize’ for the Scripture Examination on Peter the Disciple.

Henry Button

From the *Wesley Parish Quarterly* (the magazine of Wesley Methodist Church) December 1998

#### **Buttonhole Number 4**

The Hobson Street Chapel was not the first Methodist Chapel in Cambridge. Methodism in Cambridge was said to have begun in 1805, when a group of Methodists hired a room in the yard of the inn known as the Brazen George. The inn was in St. Andrew’s Street, opposite Christ’s College. For hundreds of years it belonged to the college and some students were housed there.

Some time after 1805 (the exact year is not known), a small chapel was built in Fitzroy Street. In 1829 the Wesleyans took over a chapel in Green Street that had been used by the Congregationalists. By 1845 the number of members had risen to 300 and larger premises were needed.

In 1846 a property in Hobson Street came up for sale. It was described as “Malting Premises”. Robert Sayle, a leading member of the Methodists, was able to acquire the property.

The old buildings were demolished and the erection of the chapel began. It opened for worship on Good Friday, April 6th 1849. An imposing building, it had a portico facing the street. The site had cost over £900 and the building itself (excluding furnishings) cost £3,300. The congregations from Green Street and from Fitzroy Street both moved there. Robert Sayle was a remarkable man. He was born in 1816, the son of a farmer and in 1840 his father provided him with £500 so that he could open his drapery business in Cambridge. In addition to his help with Hobson Street chapel, he also secured the site in Hills Road for another chapel and bought for the Methodists the Leys Estate so that a school could be built there.

Before the end of the century the Hobson Street premises were proving to be inadequate and in 1912 the building was sold to the County Council for £3,500. The Council also bought some of the adjoining property from Christ’s College so that a new building for the Council could be erected. This included parts of the chapel. [In 1983, the building was sold to Christ’s College and is now known as the Todd Building (after a former Master of the College), and was ready for occupation by students and staff in 1986.]

Before our church was ready, the congregation met for some time in Victoria Rooms in Market Hill which belonged to the Cambridge Electric Theatre Company.

### Henry Button

[I am grateful for information received from: Frank Tice, *History of Methodism in Cambridge*; David Decks and Jonathan Rodell at Wesley House; Michael Farrar, former County Archivist; C R Jakes (Cambridgeshire Collection); Lorna Poole (John Lewis Archivist) and Henry Button, Christ’s College Archivist!]



Hobson  
Street



## **Market Information**

Gordon E Gompers

Mix me a person

As a short story writer I am not much cop. Well, I have had about twenty published. Nothing to get excited about but for a louser like me quite an achievement I suppose. Even so, fortunately there are better examples to follow.

One of our most exemplary authors is Anthony Trollope. Not only was he very prolific but he created some of the most creditable characters in fiction. Some of his most famous appear in more than just one novel. What he did in novels can be done even more effectively in short stories.

Some of my best characters (that is the best *I* can do) have appeared in different stories. Having created a character I do not wish to lose him (or more usually her). I usually model my best characters on real people. Having a legal background I am usually aware of the dangers of libel. No doubt my most outrageous character was modelled on two very different women. I could say to either one if she protested: “Well, she is not based on *you*. After all, you would never do *that*.”

Another and more likely danger is if your role model is too nice she becomes rather colourless on paper. I am sure that Jane Austen modeled Jane Fairfax on a very nice young lady; but how we prefer the erring Emma Woodhouse. As for Lucy Manette of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* I would not have died for her and I doubt if Sidney Carton would have either.

My recipe for characters are: women as naughty as possible; and men as amiably eccentric as possible. After all, Jane Austen’s most likeable male character is not Mr Darcy but Mr Woodhouse, Emma’s dad.

[More a hint on writing than Market Info, but useful for all that – Ed.]

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS  
**The W F & F G Froud Memorial Competition for a War Poem**

Number of entries 43. The judge was Mr. Martin Blythe, and his CV will appear in the magazine along with his report and the full results which are as follows:-

First Prize £100:- **Mutuality**

Pen Name 'Artemis'

Norman Bissett, Edinburgh.

Second Prize £30:- **Off Jutland**

Pen Name 'Nick Watson'

Don Nixon, Albrighton, Wolverhampton. (RAF Retd.)

Third Prize £20:- **Full Circle**

Pen Name 'Gunner'

Roy D. Stevens, Woolston, Southampton. (Ex Army R.A.)

Ron Jeffreys

Competition Secretary

\*\*\*\*\*

Martin Blyth

74 Danecourt Road, Poole, Dorset BH14 0PH

Telephone and fax: 01202 744024

Email: mblyth@martinblyth.co.uk

Website: <http://martinblyth.co.uk>

Education

Poole Grammar School 1945-52. Oxford School Certificate (7 credits).

Fircroft College, Birmingham 1957-1958. Awarded Robert Addy Hopkinson scholarship to study English literature and political theory. Contributor and student contributions editor *The Fircrofter* 1958. English Literature A level with distinction.

### Journalistic Career

1953-1989 Employed by local newspapers as a district reporter based in Poole, principally *The Western Gazette*. Began on *Poole & Dorset Herald* 1953-1956, also worked on *Bournemouth Evening Echo* 1969-1976

1953-1956 Member of Critics' Panel, *Amateur Stage* magazine.

1959-1964 Freelance broadcaster on BBC regional news and topicality programmes. Prior to the launch of local broadcasting I was involved in BBC closed circuit local radio experiments, which took place in their Poole studio. Poole correspondent for Southern Television [ITV] News, contributing news items, story ideas and scripts for voice-overs.

1980-1988 Assessor for National Council for the Training of Journalists proficiency tests at the Southampton centre.

1989 Obligated to take early retirement from work on medical grounds and seek treatment for chronic depression.

### Writing Activities

1960-1964 Freelance book reviewing and feature writing for *Hampshire* magazine. Also contributed to many national and regional newspapers, magazines and periodicals.

1978-1989 From the opening of Poole Arts Centre until giving up work I was involved in reviewing plays, exhibitions, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra concerts and other events. Met and interviewed many distinguished artists and performers.

1978-2002 Actively involved with the work of Word and Action, the Dorset community arts and theatre group, as a member of writing workshops and a supporter of Wanda Publications, its publishing division, until it ceased to exist at the end of 2002.

1990-1998 Responsible for the layout and preparation of camera-ready artwork for the poetry magazines *Doors* and *South*, published by Word and Action. When the magazines were amalgamated under the title of *South* in April 1997, I designed a new format, which was widely praised by contributors, reviewers and the Literature Officer for Southern Arts.

I edited, wrote an introduction and prepared for publication a novel *Voyage Round a Circle*, by Edgar Seagroatt, which was published by Wanda Publications in 1990

I have also read MSS [fiction, poetry, memoirs and local history] submitted to Wanda and advised on their suitability for publication.

1993 Wrote *The Dove on the Scythe*, the life and poetry of Philip Larkin, arranged as a play for three voices. It was based upon quotations from Larkin's own words, taken from his *Collected Poems and Selected Letters* [the biography by Andrew Motion had not yet been published].

1993 Elected a Trustee of Poole Historical Trust, a registered charity established in 1974 to promote local history, which has sold over 65,000 copies of its books. This work has involved me in many aspects of the commercial production of case bound and paperback books. I was co-author with John Hillier (chairman of Trustees) of *The Spirit of Poole 1953-1963* (1994) and *Poole's Pride Regained 1964-1974* (1996). Both volumes contain numerous photographs from my own collection [see below].

I read MSS submitted to the Trust and advise on suitability for publication, as well as editing and preparing MSS for publication.

1997-98 Completed two novels: *Live In, All Found* (a comic novel with a background in the hotel and restaurant business); and *If It Be Love* (a romantic novel with a background in the oil industry and local newspaper journalism). Unpublished.

1999-2001 Editorial assistant for *About Larkin*, the newsletter of the Philip Larkin Society. Responsible for redesign and typesetting. Article *Larkin, Llewelyn Powys, Love and Death* published in the April 2000 issue. Book review *Visible and Invisible Larkin* [Warren Hope's student guide to Philip Larkin] published in October 2001 issue. Book review *Done from Life* [Richard Bradford's biography of Kingsley Amis] published in October 2002 issue. Poetry and photographs in other issues. Elected to honorary life membership of the Philip Larkin Society, 2001.

## Publishing

1993 I established my own imprint with the Standard Book Numbering Agency and have so far produced the following volumes:

*XIX Poems* [1995] a first collection of my own poetry

*Afternoons at Ansty* [ 1996] poetry by Phillip Whitfield, R G Gregory and myself

*Wykeham Poetry* [ 1996] an anthology of the work of members of Wykeham Poetry, Winchester

*The Apricot Orchards of Maribor* [1998] poetry by George Hammond and Keith Bennett

*Competition Anthology 2000* designed for the New Forest Poetry Society

All these volumes were designed by me. The first four were also printed by me, using my own computer, printing and laminating equipment.

1996 I received a grant from Southern Arts to attend a Password Training course in Design and Production for Publishers.

2002 Following a decision by Word & Action (Dorset) to discontinue funding for *South* poetry magazine, I was instrumental in setting up a volunteer management team to take over the running of the magazine and launch a successful appeal for funds to continue publication.

## Internet Publishing

<http://martinblyth.co.uk>

I have designed and published my own website to the above domain, which I established in May 2000. The site carries examples of my own poetry and prose, as well as work from other writers.

By means of specially written comments, reviews and articles, and the establishment of an archive of articles from other publications, it seeks to address current developments in the poetry scene in the United Kingdom, with particular emphasis upon the customer's point of view.

The site has attracted widespread favourable comment from *Poetry Review* and other poetry magazines, individual poets, editors, organisers of several poetry festivals, and two of the most widely respected poetry listing sites on

the Internet. It has been given a “Rave” rating by Patrick Martin and listed as a “Hot Poetry Site” by Peter Howard. It has received an annual Golden Web Award since 2002. Current average hits on server: In excess of 30,000 per month.

## Photography

I have a collection of several thousand monochrome negatives of photographs taken by me, principally in Poole and Dorset, during the past 40 years. I have 35mm and medium format cameras, my own darkroom, and digital film scanning equipment. My photographs have been published in numerous books, magazines and newspapers.

## Poetry

I have contributed articles, comment, poems and poetry reviews to *The Rialto*, *PN Review*, *South*, *Doors*, *Hampshire*, *Tears In the Fence*, *Poet's England: Dorset*, *Wessex Journal*, *City Writings*, *About Larkin* and numerous other publications.

I have been invited to judge poetry competitions.

I am an honorary life member of The Philip Larkin Society, a member of the Poetry Society, and a member of the Friends of Ledbury Poetry Festival.

## **The W F & F G Froud Memorial Competition for a War Poem Judge's Report**

A letter from the competition secretary to Roy Froud, enclosed with the entry of 43 poems, commented: “A good entry, all things considered, and some very original and moving verses, as well as the usual blood and guts horror,” and suggested that choosing the prizewinners would be a difficult decision to make.

Your judge respectfully agrees with all those sentiments, and regrets that only three prizewinners had to be chosen from the five (numbers F4, F8, F9, F18 and F28) that made it on to a final short list.

It may be worth mentioning that of the 16 poems chosen for the first short list, three were from ‘Artemis’ and two were by ‘Serpico’.

‘Artemis’ wins first prize with *Mutuality* (F18), a poem written after September 11, 2001, that reads even more strongly in the light of subsequent events. Instead of looking back to the well-documented horrors of the two

world wars of the 20th century, it relates to the first major war of the 21st – the one declared by the United States, with United Kingdom support, upon global terrorism.

It shows the impact of militant Islamic terrorists upon communities far away from the scenes of devastation, and upon the efforts made, all over the world, to create multicultural societies in which people of different faiths, nationalities and other allegiances can live together in democratic freedom, harmony and justice. And as the speaker of the poem goes to the shops in just such a community, he finds himself confronting just the sort of emotions that lead to open warfare:

Mutual suspicion, contempt, antipathy, incomprehension.

It is not the best crafted poem in the entire entry, but the raw edges are part of its power. It deserved to win for its contemporary relevance, the candour with which it confronts its subject, and a sense of urgency and needing to be written.

The trouble with events like 9/11, or the horrors of fully mechanised warfare, is that no matter how many times one sees the images, they somehow defy description, because the mind – and language – cannot fully encompass the scale of the inhuman violence and suffering. As with other poetic subjects, such as love and death, there may be a temptation to get round the imaginative difficulties by recourse to particularly grave and grandiloquent language, well padded with abstract nouns.

So far as war is concerned, this no longer possible. The years 1914-18 were probably the last that could be addressed in such locutions: poetry from the second world war was markedly different in tone and language. Some of the best poems of either war tended to focus upon an isolated scene or moment to convey their message.

One thinks, for example, of poems by Keith Douglas in which the subject is a single enemy soldier – one he is about to kill, and another already dead, with his girl friend's photograph lying nearby.

This approach was adapted in several entries in this competition, most successfully by 'Nick Watson' in *Off Jutland* (F4) which wins second prize.

Just as the raw edges were part of the appeal of *Mutuality*, here it is the craftsmanship of the sonnet that creates the effect. Formal language and structure are juxtaposed against the wildness of the setting, as a sense of "grim finality" re-emerges at daybreak over the scene of a dreadful battle that seems so remote from us now:

For when the images of night time fade,  
Dawn clarifies in analytic grey  
The shattered hulks along the sea bed splayed,  
Behemoths welded for a pointless fray ...

The third prize goes to ‘Gunner’ for *Full Circle*, which like the poems by Keith Douglas mentioned above, deals with the death of a single soldier.

There are a number of poems among the entries that lament the fate of young men plucked from towns and villages to die a horrible death, but this poem has an ironic sense of completion. The young countryman follows his father in learning to plough and in fighting for his country. He watches his French counterparts gather in the harvest. Then, as the seasons turn and he prepares to take up his new role, the freshly ploughed land that will become a battlefield of the 1914-18 war reminds him of home. The memory

... lingered still  
As the bullet found its mark,  
Pitching him forward,  
And burying his face  
In the rich turned earth.

There is a simplicity and honesty of emotion about this poem, and the way it is written, that might well have been that of many young countrymen going to fight in France. The poem’s commendable avoidance of florid language serves to remind us that the reference to “The Glorious Dead” on the Cenotaph belies the reality for so many: their deaths were commonplace, their lives expendable. Ironically enough, the same obscurity even though they chose the moment of death for themselves – awaits the suicide bombers of today.

Martin Blyth

### **Mutuality** ‘Artemis’

The day after the world ended,  
with bodies falling from the sky like snowflakes,  
innocent victims plummeting  
downwards through terrible parabolas  
to sleep beneath polluted snow,



fluttering down like autumn leaves  
out of the heartless, grey September sky,  
through endless arcs of agonising silence,  
to lie beneath contaminated, urban ash,  
their powdery counterpane a bloodstained shroud,

weeping inside and angry, I walk along to the corner  
shops, to post my letters and to use the photocopier.  
The postmaster, a courteous Iranian ex-doctor  
sells me my stamps, apologetically.  
It's looking ominous, I say. There may be storms.

He nods, not his loquacious usual self.  
The newsagent, a welcome, workaholic guest  
from Pakistan – Karachi or Islamabad –  
feeds a fresh ream of duplicating paper  
into the machine, and doesn't look me in the eye.

And, outside, waiting at the bus stop for the 10 or 27,  
despite his umpteen years of residence,  
in hully-gully pants, shashiked and bearded,  
dressed in full Muslim fig, his black-clad, chadored wife  
equally sinister, the little desert rat who (claims The Scotsman)

runs our friendly, neighbourhood terrorist cell,  
his religio-sociologico-cultural activities  
under benign surveillance now by Special Branch.  
I catch his trader's eye and barter mutuality – mutual  
suspicion, contempt, antipathy, incomprehension.

## **Off Jutland**

'Nick Watson'  
The brittle moonlight splinters on the sea,  
Foam shatters into shards of glittering light.  
Breakers like salvos broadside through the night  
And waves ram, wind whipped in the headland's lee.  
Beyond, the ocean slides, unfettered, free,  
Except for buoys, gleaming rust red bright.  
Anchored firm, their mouldering cables tight,  
Strain downwards to a grim finality.

For when the images of night time fade,  
Dawn clarifies in analytic grey  
The shattered hulks along the sea bed splayed,  
Behemoths welded for a pointless fray,  
Now tomb sealed with ribbed sea drift overgrown,  
A rusting charnel house of mingled bone.

### **Full Circle**

‘Gunner’

He had learnt to plough  
A furrow, straight and true,  
From his father, under  
Arching country skies.

When war came he volunteered,  
As his father had  
Against the Boers,  
Fourteen years before.

At harvest time, in France,  
He watched, with melancholy,  
As workers gathered in the crops –  
The calm before the storm.

His unit spent the Autumn in reserve,  
And Winter, entrenched  
In icy immobility.

Spring, the killing season, came,  
And their allotted task –  
To charge up open fields  
And take a wind-swept ridge.

The ground was freshly ploughed,  
And, as he caught the heady waft  
Of perfumed soil,  
His thoughts turned to the  
Home field that he loved.

And stayed with him  
As he ran along the soft folds  
Of this foreign field,  
Bayonet palely gleaming  
In the weak sun.

And lingered still  
As the bullet found its mark,  
Pitching him forward,  
And burying his face  
In the rich, turned earth.

## **Poetry Pages**

Edited by Joyce Thornton

### **A Small Need**

Barbara O. Smith

I need to be someone,  
To be of some account  
Before I die. I need to prove my worth  
To show that there is more to me  
Than this simple every day identity.  
I need to step outside  
My ordinary skin  
And just for once,  
For only seconds of your time  
Become unique.

I have no craving for awards  
No Oscar or Nobel  
Will come within my grasp,  
And yet I have this need  
To earn some small acclaim  
No matter how mundane  
For you to recognise  
And quietly applaud,  
But briefly  
And without fuss.

I have no wish  
To see my name in lights  
No great desire for public adulation.  
I strive, but should I fail  
I need it to be understood  
That for you, I tried.  
Seeking only affirmation

That amongst the trivialities  
Of my life, there lived  
A precious thing,  
Some special part of me  
That made you proud  
To be my child.

### **Memories of Rame Head**

Terry Austin

A wall of green water  
waiting to engulf us?  
Force seven on the scale –  
five crew in the cockpit  
with navigator below.

His yells battle through  
the sound of tortured shrouds,  
whistling halliards above,  
“Rame Head to port –  
keep on this course.”

Limbs aching, hearts racing,  
another hour of this –  
bruise upon bruise,  
harness chafing, wet gear  
heavy as lead.

The craft ploughs on  
midst blinding spray,  
through savage troughs  
where fulmars wheel –  
mocking, screeching.

We watch as they soar,  
swooping crest tops,  
then diving leeward,  
their raucous cries  
torment our dulled senses.

Two dorsals leap –  
Dolphins? Kindred mammals  
sharing precious moments?  
“Ease off – bear away.”  
The magic disappears.

Waves hit broadside,  
we heel over – look down  
into the surge below  
then at the wave peak  
as we level and rise.

“Sorry lads, tiller slipped.”  
Curses, then laughter breaks  
through chattering teeth.  
Salt burned eyes gaze  
at the homeward cliffs.

### **Model Boat**

Sylvia Neumann

My father’s fingers itched to build a boat.  
He knew he’d laid his last keel  
with this model grand Bank Schooner.  
Lines designed to slice Atlantic swell,  
wheelhouse and hatches ship shape,  
paintwork blue as the balmiest ocean.

But the rigging was fine as spider silk,  
cleats and shackles tiny as pin-heads.  
The task required finely tuned fingers;  
his faltered and his eyesight faded.

Still he persisted, garnering tools,  
patiently fashioning plywood,

until death took him one evening tide  
and beached his boat in an empty berth.

### **Conennexions**

Mike Boland

“Townies don’t ken country ways,”  
The old man softly said,  
“Agin the law to pick wild flowers?  
Proper daft!” he said.

“That wood were full of bluebells once.  
My sister Joan and me,  
We’d gather armfuls every day.  
Like carrying home the sea!”

“We’d gather armfuls, take ‘em home,  
Always loads to spare.  
And when the spring next came around,  
They’d mist and glimmer there.”

“That wood were full of bluebells once.”  
He stopped and scratched his head.  
“No bluebells now in Bluebell Wood,”  
The old man softly said.

### **Illumination**

John Abrahams

We all return at times in answer to the stone,  
The golden Cotswold stone. Early sunsets,  
Late sunrises, and the first snowfall that ever was:  
Grey stone eyes are gold once more,  
And I’m half blind at fifty four.

Now the city overflows with light;  
I move my eyes upon its opening world  
And think to live a little while again  
To stand upon the level bank, and gaze  
Through snowy air towards the whitening spires.  
I turn the page, the candle gutters, the sun is in the sky,  
And as the heart unfolds I seem to see  
Another city ceaselessly.

### **Poetry Workshop**

Mike Boland

---

Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR  
Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA  
Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

---

A belated Happy New Year to all readers of The Author!

As I'm drafting this article to meet Adrian's deadline, the Bill Barnes Competition Special edition of the Newsletter is about to be posted to all 2003 members of the Poetry Workshop, so when you read this you should have received your copy. If not, let me know and I'll make sure you get one.

### **Bill Barnes Competition 2004**

The rules for the 2004 competition will appear in the Spring Newsletter, so look out for that. This year's Competition will be for rhyming poetry only, in accordance with our policy to hold such an event on alternate years.

### **PW Weekend**

As previously announced, the dates for next year's Poetry Workshop Weekend are 30 July - 1 August 2004. The venue is Elgar Court, University of Birmingham. A booking form was included with the Winter Newsletter- if you didn't receive (or have lost) your form, or if you are a new member and are interested in joining us, let me know and I'll post one to you.

The cost of the Weekend will be £127, which includes full board and conference facilities. A deposit of £30 is payable on booking, with the

balance payable in June. Alternatively, by prior arrangement with the Treasurer, you may pay by instalments.

## **WAVES 2004**

“**Waves**” is of course the Poetry Workshop’s annual collection of members’ work. As you will have seen in the Newsletter, Liz Rowlands has taken over from Bill Douglas as editor. If you are a member of the Poetry Workshop and wish your work to be considered for inclusion, please send up to 3 poems, maximum 30 lines, to Liz at 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, Berks, SL6 2YR. Poets printed in the collection will be asked to purchase 6 copies at £2 each to assist with marketing costs.

Don’t forget the deadline is **31 March 2004**

## **Subscriptions**

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop for 2004 fell due on 1 January, so if you haven’t already done so, don’t delay in getting your membership renewed. You should have received a renewal form in the Winter Newsletter, or alternatively you can renew using the form enclosed with the last issue of **The Author**

The membership fee remains unchanged for yet another year, being **£3** for members of the SCPSW .

**Please** remember to make out cheques correctly; they should be made payable to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop A/C.**

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- three lively Newsletters each year, plus a fourth, Competition Special issue
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW’s annual anthology of members’ work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition ( open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.



## **Dates to Remember**

Jan/Feb 2004	Competition Special Newsletter
31 March 2004	Closing Date for <b>Waves</b> submissions
April 2004	Spring Newsletter
30 July-1 August 2004	PW Weekend 2004
September 2004	Autumn Newsletter
30 September 2004	Closing Date for Bill Barnes Poetry Competition
December 2004	Winter Newsletter

## **Thanks to our Saviours**

I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of members who have sent in an extra sum with their subscription – small or large, the sums are very welcome indeed. I hope they will understand that for me to write and say ‘thank you’ would gobble up funds in postage. It is good to know that the Society is still valued by some of its members and they can be assured that we’ll keep it going by hook or by crook. Thanks, everybody.

Joan Lewis, Acting Treasurer

## **Focus Group**

The Focus Group suggested by Louise Lloyd and set up consisting of Louise, Rebecca (Bec) James, Sylvia Neumann and Mike Boland has made its suggestions for modernising and publicising the Society. The Committee is eternally grateful, being fully aware that they are fogeys and some fresh ideas are required.

This is not a full report – not because the Committee wishes to sit on it in time-honoured Civil Service fashion but because we want to invite younger members to join us to thrash out the ideas. Louise and Bec cannot continue because of family commitments so **VOLUNTEERS** will be needed.

## **Publicity**

This section gave many ideas that are already put into practice – but in some cases obviously not getting through to potential members. Ethel is slaving over a hot index of departmental magazines and e-mailing info, doing a batch a week. This highlights the requirement we have long recognised: that the Publicity Officer needs to be a SERVING officer, someone on the inside to track down constantly changing departments, agencies etc. Certainly leaflets/posters slotted into the *Author* for members to display will be followed up. We did it 2 years ago, with some success.

## **Magazine**

Lots of ideas to improve the *Author* – change of logo (yes, probably), change name of Society (we’ve just had that hassle!). Ads for competitions for small fee; listing members willing to be contacted by e or snail mail; ‘My Successes’ column (yes, write to Adrian); mini-competitions (yes, we’ll revive, we used to have them) – all these are ideas that *will* be followed up.

## **Meetings**

Regional meetings – by all means but local people must organise them – we don’t know where the best hall, pub or whatever is. Weekends – unlikely, my efforts several years ago produced 7 takers so was cancelled.

## **Communications**

Folios and competitions by email – yes. Please see separate headings.

## **Email Folios**

If you are interested in:

- a) taking part In e-mail folios and/or
- b) running a folio (some guidelines available)

Please e-mail Joan Lewis stating article, short story or?

## **Email Competition**

Winner will be posted to Society web-site

Write first 150 words of CRIME novel (Would you turn the page?) and e-mail to Joan Lewis

### **Prose Mini-Competition**

‘Black and White’

I ran a mini-comp many years ago on this subject and the range of entries was gratifying. Please write 500 words of prose – article or story – on any aspect of this theme but *not about racism* and send to me (address in front cover) with 2 first class stamps as entry fee, by closing date of 30 April.

Joan Lewis

Prize – Book token £7.50

SCPSW: First Prize Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2002/2003

### **Postcards from Portugal**

Norman Bissett

What did the summer hold?  
Sculptured dentelles. Flamboyance in stone.  
Mind-boggling Manueline filigree  
At Belen, Batalha, Alcobaca.

Descending from the Castle to the river,  
Vertiginous ganglia, the tangled warren  
Of the Alfama’s narrow alleyways,  
Smelling of fish. The clattering 28,

Navigating tight mediaeval seaways  
From the Mouraria via Bairro Alto  
To Estrela Peak. Tokens cascading  
From a friendly one-armed bandit, Estoril.

Grotesquerie in Sintra, gargoyle wedding  
Of Saxe Coburg-Gotha and Walt Disney,  
Miss Havisham the cob-webbed bridesmaid.  
A chapel built of skulls and human bones.

And in the Alentejo, latifundias, counties of corn,  
Whole provinces of cork trees, olives, vines,

Drowsy with dolmens, cromlechs, standing stones  
And crenellated mountain villages.

What else remains? The Elephant Man,  
Immobile at his Restauradores pitch,  
Half-statue, half-catastrophe, eyes glittering  
Coals behind the molten carapace,

His face's melted, frozen, igneous crust.  
He does not move. His hat shrieks out rebuke  
To passers-by who pass, in terror, by,  
Streaming around him as round leprosy.

The sun smiles down. The tourists play.  
For him no day is ever holiday.  
SCPSW: George Farley Prize 2002/2003

### **Freshers' Week**

Norman Bissett

He was large. He was loud.  
He stood out from the crowd  
And his brain was the size of a pea.  
He had hair on his chin  
And a vacuous grin.  
Was he bothered by that? No, not he.

She was doe-like, demure  
And a trifle unsure  
As she bicycled up to the College,  
Only sixteen years old,  
Flaxen hair of spun gold,  
To partake of the fountain of knowledge.

Lust emboldened his eye  
As she bicycled by,  
Looking out for the School of Divinity.  
He suggested that he

Be tutor, she tutee,  
For a Master of Arts in Virginitie.

He was loud. He was lewd.  
Her seduction ensued,  
When ensnared in his Wykehamist scarf.  
In the bar with a jar  
She went rather too far  
And succumbed to his villainous laugh.

SCPSW: First Prize The Vincent Brennan Travel Article, 2002/03

### **With A Dzong In My Heart**

Norman Bissett

**T**himphu, Bhutan's tiny capital, is Alpine flavoured. The colourful buildings have ornate wooden lintels, decorated window frames and shingle roofs.

The main street, Norzim Lim, is lined with nondescript general stores, handicraft shops and a few pharmacies, stocked with traditional native medicines, based, Jacobean-style, on the theory of humours. There are two roundabouts, a Swiss bakery-cum-tearoom, a dry cleaner's and no traffic lights.

The locals, from king to commoner, all wear national dress. The women's ankle-length *kira*, woven from beautifully coloured fabric, is fastened at the waist by a wide belt, and at the shoulders by silver brooches. The male equivalent, the *kho*, is a long robe, of tartan or striped weave, tied around the waist by a slim belt.

Worn three-quarter length, like a dressing gown, above thick woollen stockings and stout walking shoes, the effect is both romantic and demure – a cross between Genghis Khan and Jeeves, with a touch of Rob Roy thrown in for seasoning.

On holiday, we were privileged to travel extensively in Bhutan, revelling in its magnificent scenery, absorbing its gentle Drupka Buddhist culture, charmed by the smiles of its friendly people.

Until recently, few Westerners had visited this sparsely populated country, the size of Switzerland, hidden in the eastern Himalayas, between India and Tibet. Even today, tourism is limited to around 3000 visitors annually to avoid

upsetting the country's delicate socio-economic balance and rich but fragile culture.

En route to the old winter capital of Punakha and the Wangdiphadrong Valley, we crossed the 10,000 foot Dochula Pass, its summit festooned with prayer flags, fluttering from lance-tipped bamboo poles. The Himalayan views were stunning.

In a 70 kilometre stretch, we descended from alpine forest, bearded with lichen, through deciduous oaks, to a sub-tropical region of rice paddies and orange groves. The hillsides were a riot of crimson and white rhododendron, azalea, juniper, magnolia, edelweiss and gentian. Lower down was a cornucopia of bananas, strawberries, peaches and pears.

Prayer flags flutter on every promontory, scattering supplications on the wind. In the monasteries, huge, richly coloured prayer wheels are slowly turned by chanting, red-robed monks with shaven heads. The landscape is dotted with thousands of *chortens* or *stupas* – sacred shrines built as receptacles for offerings – around which the faithful walk in a clockwise direction, as a token of respect. Complex *mandalas* adorn every temple.

Strategically placed at the confluence of rivers or on lofty escarpments stand the impressive, Potala-like dzongs – the monastery-fortresses that formerly defended each valley and served as the administrative centres of their region.

With their elegantly-sloping, outer defensive walls, huge inner courtyards and richly decorated galleries, like those of a Renaissance playhouse or mediaeval caravanserai, the dzongs embody one of the most beautiful architectural forms in Asia.

With several hundred others, we crossed the beautiful covered bridge at Paro and climbed the steep path, past the Rinpung dzong, to attend the great *Tsechu* – the annual religious festival which continues for five days, each spring. Stalls were set up for the sale of food, drink and handicrafts. Dressed in their holiday finery, families sat on the grass in the sunshine, enjoying picnics of fatty meat and rice. An air of good-natured conviviality prevailed.

At the far end of a large open courtyard, surrounded on three sides by ornately decorated buildings, a dozen monks in burgundy robes sat in an upper gallery, playing sonorous music on traditional instruments. Masked dancers performed ritual dances. Like a Hollywood version of the Sermon on the Mount, a multitude of spectators thronged the hillside overlooking the square, seeking the best vantage point from which to glimpse the action.

Colourful as was the Paro Festival, the highlight of our trip was a visit to Taktsang Lhakhang, the Tiger's Lair, which, at almost 10,000 feet, is one of the most venerated pilgrim sites for all Buddhists, and one of the most spectacular in the entire Himalayas.

We could have completed the steep climb on foot in around four hours. Instead we opted to do it the easy way, on horseback. Dismounting at the final promontory, we walked the last 100 metres that brought us to the log cabin that is the Taktsang teahouse.

From this elevation, the view of the Tiger's Lair, perched like the monasteries of Mount Athos or Meteora on a dizzying pinnacle on the other side of the valley, is truly extraordinary.

Sitting in the sun on the teahouse terrace, we gazed up at the place of meditation, clinging to its impossible cliff. Drunk with silence and crystalline air, we gazed higher still at the mountain summits towering above it, then down over the beauties of Bhutan, spread out below us. The rhododendrons were in their full glory, crimson and white.

We had no inclination ever to leave that mystical and enchanting place.

Winner of Lewis Wright Competition 2003

## **Walk on By**

Maureen Mills

**I** thought it was just another uneventful, winter's day but I was wrong, very wrong.

I remember hurrying back to the office, cutting short my lunch break. I wanted to spend half an hour warming up, away from the cold with a hot drink and a chat before starting work. I took my usual short cut between the tall, sadly neglected buildings.

Suddenly I realised someone was trying to attract my attention. I looked upwards to see from a ground floor window a shabbily dressed elderly lady beckoning me and pointing towards the front door.

"Damn," I muttered quietly, "I don't need this. Whatever can she want? Suppose I'd better find out."

As I approached the dilapidated door, I noticed at the side, a column of ten bells, all with scruffy pieces of paper attached, some barely legible. This house, like practically all the others in the street was divided into bedsits. Apprehensively I turned the handle, almost hoping the door would be locked and I'd have an excuse not to enter, although I had no wish to spend the afternoon worrying about what I should have done.

As I entered the dismal, unheated hall, the smell of cabbage, combined with stale cigarettes, made me feel slightly sick. A door creaked and the old lady appeared, leaning heavily on a walking stick and clutching a tatty black cardigan around her shoulders. I could see at a glance, the rest of her clothing was hardly sufficient in such temperatures.

“Hello dear. I knew you wouldn’t let me down, not like *her*. She should have called to-day. I pay her good money you know. To think she calls herself a good neighbour Huh! Never here when she’s needed most. I saw her, all tartyed up, going off with some bloke. You see, I’ve had a fall and I’ve no food. I can’t afford taxis. Could you pop to the shops and get me some bread and a few tins of soup to keep me going?”

I didn’t have to think twice, how could I ignore such a plea? I thought of my grandmother living alone, who’d be about the same age.

“Of course,” I answered, “I’ll get whatever you want.”

“Oh and don’t forget some milk for the tea, dear. I don’t know when she’ll be back. They’ve no sense of responsibility, some people.”

“What about Social Services?” I asked, “Have you told them? I’m sure they could help you.”

“No, I have not. I don’t want any dealings with them, nor doctors neither, they will put me in a home. I know them sort only too well. Promise me you won’t let on.”

Seeing the old lady’s anxious state, I agreed, thinking it best not to waste time arguing. I felt concerned – but I really didn’t wish to get involved and I slightly resented my free time being used in this way. I hurried to the supermarket and bought some basic provisions.

When I returned to the house, she showed me into her sparsely furnished room.

“Thank-you my dear. I’m Lily by the way. What is your name?”

“Alison,” I replied, trying to edge my way out.

“I work at the large office block in the next road.”

“I must find my purse,” Lily said, looking around the room, as if she had forgotten where it might be.

“Don’t bother now Lily. Another time will do. I don’t see a telephone here, is there anyone you’d like me to ring for you?”

“No, I’m fine now. We’ll sort the money out tomorrow.”



I returned to my comfortable overheated and brightly lit office, somewhat later than planned but at least I knew Lily wouldn't be hungry. I felt sad seeing the way in which she lived, although I certainly didn't want to enter into any sort of commitment – yet she played on my mind all afternoon. That night my grandmother sounded surprised to get a mid-week telephone call checking on her well being.

\* \* \*

At lunch time the next day, Lily was again looking out of the window, as I climbed the precarious stone steps to the main entrance. How long had she been waiting? I wondered.

“I'm so grateful, Alison,” she said, as she met me in the hallway. “Now you haven't told the authorities about me have you? I don't want them poking their noses into my affairs.”

I shook my head. “Is there any news of your neighbour?” I enquired.

“No, but she's like that. She'll come back when he's fed up with her. You mustn't worry about me, although there is just one thing I wish you would do for me.”

“Certainly,” I answered, wondering what I was about to take on.

“Well, it's my friend's birthday to-day. I have her present all wrapped up. It's a box of chocolates. Could you take it to her? She doesn't live far away. I've written the address out for you.”

I nodded, relieved Lily's request wasn't too time consuming. “I'll go now,” I said, then asked, “can your friend help you in any way, until your neighbour comes back?”

“Oh no dear, Doris doesn't go out at all. I've helped her in the past but now I'm just not up to it. Not since I had my fall. We get on well, we understand each other. By the way, be sure to tell her that her specials are on the bottom layer.”

I took the parcel, which was hardly in pristine condition and left. I did wonder how Lily had bought the chocolates and wrapping paper but I assumed her neighbour had obliged.

Doris occupied a flat in a house very similar to where Lily lived. At least though, it had an entry phone system for security.

“Doris, I'm Alison. Lily has asked me to deliver a present for your birthday,” I announced.

“I don’t know you. It’s not my birthday. Go away and leave me alone.”

I sighed. How had I allowed myself to get so involved? Maybe I should have walked past yesterday and let someone else attend to Lily. I repeated Lily’s name several times and only when I mentioned the present was chocolates, was I permitted to enter.

Suddenly, before I had a chance to close the door behind me, I heard police sirens and the screeching of brakes. Turning around, I was amazed to see two police cars outside and four officers rushing up the steps. As I stood aside, it came as a total shock to realise I was their target. My handbag and the package I was carrying were snatched and my arms were pinned behind my back.

I felt too appalled and horrified to even protest as I was tumbled into one of the cars, only vaguely aware of a small crowd gathering. They must think I’m guilty of some horrible crime, I thought. Yet, whatever have I done?

When I realised I wasn’t taking part in some sort of horror movie and this was for real, I found my voice.

“The world’s gone mad! What is this all about?”

There was no response. When we reached the police station, the parcel was ripped apart. I watched in stunned silence, as a further nightmare was about to unfold. The top layer of chocolates were thrown aside and a plastic bag removed. I remembered Lily’s words about the bottom layer. I saw the look of satisfaction on the officers faces. Their job was done.

\* \* \*

Over the next few weeks, I felt unable to walk along the road where I met Lily. I felt betrayed, and disillusioned with everyone.

I learnt that Lily and her friend Doris, had been dealing in drugs, selling their evil wares to desperate clients. They lived like misers, so money wasn’t their chief incentive, it was simply how they got their kicks. The police had suspicions for some time that the occupants at both addresses were associated with drugs and had finally obtained the evidence. In that way, I suppose I helped.

But I found it incredible that I should have been made to suffer the humiliation Lily put me through. She did indeed have a fall, which had

curtailed her activities, so she needed someone to make deliveries and I would have been the perfect cover for the job. When questioned, Lily admitted she didn't know any of her neighbours, the story she told me about the lady who'd let her down was just an artful ruse to get my assistance.

Thankfully, I was not detained overnight. Yet, to my dismay, nothing much happened to Lily and Doris. They were considered too old for prison and got off with warnings.

Eventually, returning to work one lunch time, I did take the short cut. The house I dreaded seeing was still there of course but I felt the event was over and done with. Stupidly, I couldn't resist looking up at the window – and there she was, Lily, clutching her black cardigan, smiling, beckoning me to enter.

Runner-up Lewis Wright Competition 2003

### **Vanishing Act**

Geraldine Smedley

**M**aggie's day had started badly. Already her handbag had disappeared into that parallel universe, as objects do, only to reappear some time later in a totally different place. And now, to cap it all, her reflection was talking to her. She stared miserably at the mirror, eyes red from weeping, and wondered vaguely why she could not feel her lips move.

The image in the mirror was insistent. "You're cracking up," it said, "you should get out more instead of mooching around in here talking to yourself."

Her next door neighbour, Mrs Jukes, was busily gossiping to Mrs Next-door-but-one. With one accord the two women ceased their chatter and two pairs of eyes turned towards Maggie with the intensity of laser beams.

"Well, 'ello dear," shrilled Mrs Jukes, "nice to see you – aven't seen much of you since your Bill cleared orf ..." she reddened a little ... "course, you might not like to talk about it ..."

“Well,” interrupted Maggie brightly, “these things happen, don’t they, Mrs J, good day to you.” With indecent haste she lengthened her stride, but not quickly enough to miss the half-concealed aside from one of the women.

“Course you can see *why* he went – she’s just let ’erself go, ’asn’t she?”

Eyes smarting with unshed tears, Maggie stumbled, stifling a sob. She felt strange, as if the cruel remark had somehow depleted her. She stumbled again. Looked down. In disbelief she remained motionless, mind in turmoil. Her legs were missing. Gone. Yet she could still feel them. Tentatively she took a step forward. Fine – she was moving, at least.

“It’s only your nerves, Maggie,” she told herself shakily, “you really *must* go to the doctor’s”, and she made halting progress to the surgery, which was hot, crowded and standing room only.

“You are aware that we run an appointments system, I suppose?” sniffed the receptionist haughtily upon Maggie’s arrival. “Doctor’s very busy.”

“I ... it’s rather urgent, you see ...” Maggie attempted to explain, “it’s my legs ...”

With a supreme effort the receptionist tapped in Maggie’s details on her computer keyboard. “You’ll have to wait until the end of surgery,” she snapped, “take a seat.”

There being no seat to take, Maggie hunched miserably against the surgery wall, trying desperately to disguise the problem of her missing legs. She need not have worried about anyone else’s concern, however, for around the packed and stuffy room patients sat or stood, studying yellowing notices decrying tobacco, or exhorting the populace to consult the local pharmacist before bothering the beleaguered GP with its trivial aches and pains.

Gradually the room began to empty, and Maggie was left alone amid a quantity of ancient magazines, scattered over the waiting room floor by disgruntled patients.

The doctor, a tall morose individual whom Maggie had never seen before, exited his surgery and strode towards the reception desk. Maggie heard the conversation, conducted in sibilant tones behind her.

“... this woman ... late ... *says* it’s urgent ...”

Maggie heard with dismay the doctor’s irritable grunt, and then –

“Come this way ...” in gruff tones. He marched back to his consulting room without a glance in her direction.

“What appears to be the trouble?” he asked Maggie abruptly, before she had a chance to sit down.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, doctor,” Maggie said, as she always did.

“Yes ... yes,” he muttered, rifling through the mountain of papers on his desk.

“It ... it’s my legs you see ... they’ve gone.” There, she’d said it. And to her horror, Maggie began to cry.

The doctor was already writing on his prescription pad.

“Age?”

“Pardon?”

“Age?”

“I’m 51.”

“One with water three times a day – see me in three months.”

“Er ... will they help my legs?” Maggie asked politely, “it’s just that ...”

There was a deep, dismissive sigh. “It’s your age, Mrs ... er ...er ...”

“Andrews.”

“Ah, yes, Andrews ... all women have these problems from time to time.”

Maggie gazed blankly at the proffered prescription. “What are these?”

The doctor finally looked at her with the gaze he usually reserved for difficult and confused geriatrics. “They will help you to relax,” he enunciated slowly, “come back in three months. Good day to you.” And Maggie deduced from his body language that the interview was concluded.

She was concerned to notice, however, that before she could reach the chemist's with the magic prescription, the lower half of her body had joined her legs in their vanishing act.

It was a relief to see her cousin Brenda behind the counter marked 'Prescriptions'. Maggie was beginning to tremble violently and it was all she could do to fumble in her purse to find the required amount of cash. Perhaps if she could just confide in a friend ...

Meanwhile, Brenda was scanning the doctor's scrawl intently. "Prozac," she mouthed breathlessly, "well Mags, I thought you looked peaky, but I didn't know you were going gaga – well I never." She disappeared into the shop's dark recesses, presumably to deliver the document to the pharmacist, then rushed excitedly back to extract all the intimate details from the unfortunate Maggie; but her cousin had gone.

Maggie sat, alone and afraid on the steps of St Veronica's. A quick and terrified downward glance had confirmed her worst suspicions; she could see her arms, but the rest of her body had disappeared.

Slowly and painfully, Maggie pulled herself towards the studded door of the church. "Oh, please ..." she muttered desperately as she tried the handle, and her heart gave a lurch of relief as the door swung open. So far so good. With a huge effort, for she was shaking from head to invisible foot, Maggie tottered down the aisle and collapsed into the nearest available pew.

"Can I help you?" a mellifluous voice asked from her left, and Maggie turned in gratitude to see a robed figure.

"Are you the priest? Can you help?"

"Well, yes," replied the reverend gentleman, to which question Maggie was not sure, "but there's just one difficulty ..."

Maggie looked at him beseechingly. "Help me, Father – I'm losing my body, and my mind."

"Actually," said the priest, "I'm expecting a visit from the Dean at any moment. Your visit is a little inconvenient, I'm afraid. Could we make an appointment for, say, eleven a.m. tomorrow?"

"An appointment!" shrieked Maggie. "I'm disappearing and I've got to have an *appointment*?"

“I’m sure that we can deal with this amicably,” placated the reverend, seeing that matters were getting out of hand, but Maggie, her throat constricting with the pain of this – the ultimate rejection, fled – down the aisle, through the door, into the light.

She ran, sobbing crazily, down the steps, through the park where the breath of her passing lifted the fallen leaves into silent eddies of whirling brown death. She ran, faster and faster, and as she ran she felt her body lighten beneath her. Breathing in shallow gasps now she pelted through the shopping arcade, where a swift glance in the supermarket window told her that there was no reflection.

Maggie began to laugh hysterically, and continued her headlong flight, through groups of shoppers, some of whom paused, curious, for a second before shrugging and continuing upon their way.

“I don’t exist!” she screamed to the blurred faces as she tore through their midst. “Maggie Andrews is no more – do you hear me?” And she screamed and wheeled in her terror.

And behind her, as she ran, the milling crowds closed ranks and went about their business.

## **Heartbreak**

Liz Furlong

**H**earbreak Hotel is the perfect rock and roll record. Of course, to be perfect, a rock and roll record must not be perfect – its perfection lies in the sum of its faults. Here are some of them – it’s too short, you can’t dance to it, and it’s a bit silly.

Because the track is so short, you can never quite hear enough (naturally this enhances the pleasure and the thrill of it) and you want to play it over and over, but you have to resist this. To hear it enough would be to hear it too much.

As well as being everything a rock and roll record should be, there is more to this record – it transports you into a parallel 50s dimension.

It’s night, you are stumbling along a road (*this is lonely Street*). You aim for the flashing red neon light (*Hotel, FLASH, Heartbreak, FLASH*). You walk into the hotel (*Although It’s always crowded, you*

*still can find some room*). There, you don't have to suppress your feelings any more. You shout them out (*I'm so lonely I could die*). You won't embarrass anyone here – least of all yourself (*So lonely, baby*). You can cry all night, with all the other *broken hearted lovers*, and you won't disturb a soul.

You can go back to Heartbreak Hotel any time – 10 or 20 years later – it will still be there. You'll slouch down Lonely Street in the old clothes, (they'll always fit) – and afterwards, carefully fold them back into their box.



**Teacher**

Liz Furlong

Mr. Kenneth Williams,  
form teacher 3W  
Christ Church County Primary,  
always called Mr. *Kenneth*  
Williams to distinguish  
him from *Mr.* Williams,  
the headmaster of the school.

Mr. Kenneth Williams  
didn't rule with ridicule,  
but he did shout. He shouted,  
if we didn't try, wanted  
responses. Any. Not the  
*right* answer. Any answer.  
To show we could think. Sir! Sir!



Mr. Kenneth Williams  
started the camera club;  
Advised the use of filters  
for better definition  
of black and white skies. Useful  
advice (like always read the  
exam paper carefully).

Mr. Kenneth Williams  
Christ Church County Primary  
imparted his passions to  
us. Dickens, genius and  
photography. This is what  
I remember. Not sums or  
English grammar. Sir! Me Sir!