

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

Poetry Workshop Weekend
31 July - 2 Aug 2009

Annual Luncheon
Saturday, 17th October 2009

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.

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

Well I'm still here; living in the same house that is. I have even had enough spare time to write a very short story which, apart from my efforts for our New Year party, is the first for about five years. I hope the rest of you have been more productive because the art of writing effectively is something that it easily diminished, though hopefully the desire remains and, subject to a few revisions, the skill can be recovered. I look forward to publishing your efforts as winners of one of our competitions, or the work of those not intended for such, or that which has failed to win.

Failures always have the potential to be amended and being a member of our folio network, or a writer's circle, will certainly help. Comments can be considered according to your view of their merit and may lead to an improved effort that will win when next entered into our competition. It can prove a bit of a chore, yet the outcome may surprise you and duly reward you – give it a go.

Roy Froud continues to give us the benefit of his generosity by sponsoring the Froud Memorial Prize. I hope members will support his objective of recruiting members through this competition. To do so you need to advertise the competition locally. Alan Gibbs may be able to provide details in an insert. If not, please try to photocopy the details and ask your local library and/or community centre to put a copy on their notice board. It is in everyone's interest to increase our membership, as this means we can return to more significant levels of prize money and number of such, as well as enjoying the benefits of new blood. Not that I'm suggesting there is anything wrong with our old blood – heaven forbid!

It is some time since I last quoted the dates by which I need your contributions for the next issue of "Author" so I have now recorded them under dates for the diary. My failure to do so of late resulted in your poetry editor sending me your poetic contributions too late for publication in the last issue – sorry Terry, mea culpa etc. Consequently I now have the pleasure of including those poems that were sent to Terry some months ago and which will now be enjoyed by those of us who either lack such talent, or prefer to hide our lights under bushels, or somewhere.

Nota Bene: There is another chance to win wealth beneath your wildest dreams, if you enter this year's Gompers' Article Competition. Yes it's R Tickle time again and no restriction on subject, so the sky's no limit, i.e. you can write about cloud formations if you wish, or the fact that the ants in your garden always go clock-wise around the garden gnome (well mine do). Anything that interests you can be the subject of an article, even possible causes of your editor's drivell. Speaking of which, with no response to my comment upon prose poetry, I am clearly not stirring the blood, or can it be that you all agree – surely not.

COMPETITON ENTRIES SHOULD NOW BE SENT TO OUR NEW COMP. SEC:

Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey SM6 6RT

After giving us more years than Methuselah lived, (at least it must have felt like that) Ron Jeffreys has retired from his post of competition secretary. There will shortly be more said on the subject, not least of which will be our gratitude to him for efficiently serving our needs for so long. We offer Nina our best wishes in her new role as his replacement.

Now here is something that is vital to your education. At 5 minutes and 6 seconds past 4 o'clock on the morning of the 8th of July this year, the time and date will be:

04:05:06-07/08/09 You must wait 1000 years for this to happen again.

Dates for the diary

Contributions for next issues of "Author" by no later than 25th July & 24th October please.

Chairman's Chat

It is always a sad moment when one hears that an acquaintance, whom you have known over many years, finally passes on; this was so when I heard that Vee Bradley had died. Vee had been a member of the Society well before I joined but I got to know her through her enthusiasm for the Poetry Workshop and regular attendance at the annual Weekend gathering. We had interesting chats on the train travelling to and from Birmingham. Living as she did in Hammersmith, Vee enjoyed meetings of the Society held in London and reading her poems. She possessed a poet's ear and mind that saw and explored the nuances of things that interested her coupled with an ability to express them in her distinctive way. A published poet too, in several good quality magazines.

This is one of her poems, published In 'Focus' 1990.

Trio

Who is she, lives within
my skin: stares out
when I am about,
with eyes of interminable
question?

No soul, you say?
This flower bowing
to the sun, moving
rhythm to the soft sound
of this gentle air, no soul.
And you?

Is this reality?
Each day melts into
invisibility,
each memory
adds one to one,
makes three solutions.

Terry Rickson

The following contribution from our President suggests we have something to look forward to.

The North Wind Doth Blow

Alan S.Watts

I have now completed my first novel, and its title appears at the head of this article. I trust it will be published very shortly now, and that you will purchase copies of it. Although I have written a number of books, as I think most of you know, this will be my first work of fiction, and the writing of it has taught me a lot about novel-writing and also about Dickens in his capacity as a novelist.

I was a writer from my earliest days and no gift could give me greater pleasure than a thick pad of cheap writing paper.

I loved writing and I tried my hand at all types. I recall a work of fiction which I began entitled "The Black Rider". This was a story about a highwayman; how it developed I cannot say. My stories unfortunately did not develop. My cardinal weakness as a writer was that I could not invent convincing plots, so I would begin a story full of confidence and after a couple of pages it would peter out because I had no idea how it should continue. Thus I was prolific in opening scenes and equally prolific in abandoned stories. Nevertheless, I found that writing fulfilled many of my needs. I could introduce strange characters and even stranger places. My imagination was never at rest. It would be working with the Crusaders in one of Walter Scott's novels, and when I had exhausted the potentialities which this afforded me, I would switch to a hearty seafaring adventure in the style of Captain Marryat. There were never any heroines in my stories; they were strictly for males.

Now that I can reflect upon these early attempts at novel writing, I realise I needed guidance. Advice from a mature person with writing experience would have been most welcome. Members of my own family regarded my efforts at writing with contempt. "Alan's rubbish" my elder sister called them. I have no doubt that they were rubbish, but they exercised my imagination and were also continually improving my narrative and descriptive skills. My love of Dickens necessarily made me look to his works as examples of what I wished to do. I copied out passages I particularly admired, and then I slavishly composed similar passages which I then regarded as "mine". It took me a while I believe, to realise that in doing such things I was hindering my originality. Eventually however, I abandoned these practises and strove to develop a style which was my own. I know that I did succeed in doing this. People have remarked upon my

style and I am glad to say that I have shaken off any lingering Dickensian features, at any rate they do not interfere with my work. I also found that I was able to develop my own plots and types of story without my having to rely upon copying from others. I never tried to copy school stories. I don't think I ever attempted to write one. However, I did once try to write a Western, thinking they would be simple. I therefore read a number by Louis L'Amour, but I found that considerable knowledge of the geography of the Wild West was required. Although I wrote quite a lot of my Western I failed again to have a believable plot, and eventually gave it up.

All this is by way of introduction to what I have to tell you. I came to realise that I was not much use at writing about the present day, but I had a good knowledge of the recent past. This being so, I hit upon the plot of a novel set in the 19th century. Having a good knowledge of Dickens, I felt I could write about his era without having to do too much research or getting bogged down by details. I also set a novel in the Lancashire district of which I was familiar. So it came about that I wrote a story of the unrest in the Lancashire cotton towns shortly after the end of the Napoleonic wars. This was my first attempt at writing "The North Wind Doth Blow". I think it was of considerable length, but I do not have a copy. I did however submit it to several publishers who promptly returned it. Someone must have said that this first attempt was too long, because I then set about reducing the length and re-submitting it. I had no success with the reduced manuscript, and I can only guess that I put it away intending to edit it and revise it later. Walter Scott had done much the same with his first draft of "Waverley", and it was not until he was looking out some fishing tackle that he came across the manuscript years later. He read it, was impressed by it, sent it to Ballantyne his publisher, and as everyone knows "Waverley" became the best seller and the first of the series "The Waverley Novels". I can only dream that I might have a similar success to that of Sir Walter. The fact is, however, that the typescript of my novel lay gathering dust in my room for, I cannot say, how long. But when I did read it, I thought to myself "This is good stuff", and then an advertisement in "The Spectator" caught my eye. It said "NEW AUTHORS REQUIRED. ANY SUBJECT." Now I have often warned members of our Writers Circle to be careful of answering such advertisements, and yet I wrote to these advertisers and accepted their good faith. They did ask a sizeable sum for their help in getting one's work published, and once I had agreed to go ahead and parted with my first instalment I became very worried indeed. I thought I had walked right in to a thieves' den, and kept saying to myself "A Fool and his money are soon parted!" Yet I was reassured as time went by, and I think that if the only way of getting one's book published is by subsidising the

publishers, then it may be worth it. It depends on what faith you have in your work. I must say that having read my novel once or twice, I have come to have great faith in it. I think it is an excellent novel, and it would have been a shame not to have paid a subsidy to get it published.

It was a great encouragement to me when, having submitted my manuscript, I received a report from the publisher's reader, although I had become disenchanted by vanity publishers, believing that they would tell everyone who sent them a manuscript that it was well worth publishing, even if it were not. But I believed this particular publisher's reader who gave me great encouragement. I think I would not have gone ahead with this enterprise if the reader had not been so encouraging. I should say that the manuscript was in a bad state, having lain unattended for I do not know how many years. It had been typed on my little portable machine, and half the letters were illegible due to the ribbon being worn. I had also punched holes in the pages so that I could keep them together with string. When I submitted the manuscript I told the publishers about these shortcomings, but this did not worry them. In their expert hands it was transformed to the correct size for the printers, while all the damage which had been done by the insertion of string, was now repaired. I was very pleased with this transformation. I had feared that if I was to submit this manuscript to anyone I would have to re-type it on paper of a correct size, without holes and other blemishes.

And so the manuscript began to undergo various changes. The publisher made a number of suggestions, all of which I accepted, which led to the first set of page-proofs being sent to me. This was the first set of three proofs, none of which needed much further alteration. The major one, I think, was when I changed the name of a leading character. I knew that the book was nearing publication when the publishers asked me to prepare a very brief biography of myself and asked for a recent photograph. The next stage was for the publishers to prepare a cover. This posed some problems because although I knew my story was about trouble in a Lancashire cotton mill, I had no idea what a Lancashire cotton mill looked like. However, with the publisher's artist's help, a very satisfactory cover picture was produced, with the 'dark satanic mills' prominently displayed. This should attract all the attention of would-be purchasers. Once I had agreed with the artist's version and all the proof-reading was completed, I merely had to sit down and await delivery of the complimentary copies which I would distribute.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Barbara Stewart, The Old Malthouse, Brockhampton
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Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA
Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

wavelengths 19 (summer edition)

The summer edition of *wavelengths*, the magazine issued free to all members of the Poetry Workshop, is published this month. It contains the text of a talk on 'The Dymock Poets' given at last year's PW Weekend by Barbara Stewart, poems by our members and the usual PW Newsletter section giving details of all the activities of the group.

PW Weekend 2009

This is the last call for members interested in attending the annual Poetry Workshop Weekend. As previously announced, this will be held over the weekend of 31 July - 2 August at our new venue, the Hillscourt Conference Centre at Rednal, Birmingham. Their website is www.hillscourt.co.uk. The cost of the Weekend is £210, which includes full board accommodation and conference facilities. A Booking Form was enclosed with the winter issue of *wavelengths*. If you have lost your Booking Form, are a new member interested in joining us or have any queries about any aspect of the Weekend, please contact me, Mike Boland, at the address given above, or by e-mail to pw@gothicgarden.freemove.co.uk.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop will be held during the Birmingham Weekend. If any member has any points to raise or motions they would like to submit for discussion, please send them to me by 1 July 2009.

Bill Barnes Competition 2009

Details and Rules of Entry for this year's Bill Barnes Poetry Competition will be given in the summer issue of *wavelengths*. Closing date for the Competition is 30 September.

Subscriptions 2009

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2009. Existing members should have received a subscription form with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. Any member who has not yet renewed will not receive any further issues of the magazine, so if you haven't already renewed your subscription for 2009 do so now.

Please complete and send your form together with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above.

The cost of membership is £5 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

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

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- 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

Dates to Remember

1 July 2009	deadline for motions for the AGM
31 July - 2 Aug 2009	Poetry Workshop Weekend
1 August 2009	deadline for wavelengths # 20 (autumn issue)
September 2009	publication of wavelengths # 20
30 September 2009	closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition 2009
1 November 2009	deadline for wavelengths # 21
December 2009	publication of wavelengths # 21

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Berrylands

Steve Glason

Its blossom time in Berrylands
And in a garden statue stands
Looking there - oh so forlorn
Greets the milkman every morn.

Windows with their "Fleur de Lys"
Open onto cherry trees
With dainty flowers in petals pink
(Buses - red - a Kingston Link).

Lazy cats on doorsteps doze
And cars are given weekend hose
Thus midst all these Thirties homes
The Poet, in contentment, roams.

Musings

Bill Torrie Douglas

Air your voice from the side of a hill,
weep into a gale that bends the sea grass
as the wind swallows the call of small birds.
See the rain smirr across the firth,
a boy scratch a message in wet brown sand
before the tide floods, erasing his words.

They all disappear, vanish into measures of time,
musings for those who can detect a whisper,
who can read between the lines.
A leaf quivers in the rain,
a girl shivers in the cold of a winter night,
an unborn baby whimpers within her womb
like the echo of the sea in a shell.

Voices trespass into my thoughts,
low, indecipherable, subliminal words
beyond the logic of another glass of wine,
and the day closes in splendour
promising much in the awaiting dawn.

Awakening

Norman Bissett

Like the yellow brimstone, small tortoiseshell
and peacock butterfly, I have been hibernating
over the long, dark, dreary winter months,
trying to keep warm. But now I emerge,
fluttering at first inside the window pane, then venturing
out on to the garden path to warm my wings
in the Spring sunshine. I rejoice in the welcome,
unfamiliar warmth of the Spring sunshine.
Holding my face up to the sun and sky,
I beat my wings in appreciation.

St James's Park - Spring 1992

Steve Glason

Its Spring again - St James's Park
Plane trees with their speckled bark
Workers snatching lunchtime stroll
Munching sandwich or a roll.

On the shores of central lake
Flocks of geese - there's no mistake
Ducks & mallards - moorhens spied
Under weeping willows hide.

Brief sojourn goes quickly by
"I will be late!" - the startled cry
Finished - outing from Whitehall
Back to that important call.

Postcard

Bill Torrie Douglas

The spit of land,
gulls,
shimmering water,
cormorants in the sun;
thrum of ferry,
straight white wake
and the glitter of a windscreen

on the far shore.
Slow waves tease the rocks,
landscape is stones and jetsam
on the firth, topography
of a world beyond our sight,
like the iceberg, mostly beneath,
silent to the human ear,
stage-set for ruthless dramas,
as the terns and oystercatchers
wait for the tide to turn.

The cormorants bask
and I watch languidly,
wishing you were here.

Race Relations

Norman Bissett

Squirrels come in red or grey.
Each wants the other to go away.
Squirrels come in grey or red. Each, frankly, wants the other dead.

Badgers and chipmunks are black and white,
their stripes reflecting day and night.
A hybrid nature is very wise,
indicative of compromise.

Lake Windermere, Easter 2000

Ivy Hudson

Rain wetting, soaking, sinking
right through to my skin.
Soaking skin in socks and shoes
drenching torrential terrain.

Rain, rain morning and noontime
on waking or going to bed,
clouds settling on lowland pastures
rain permeating umbrellas as well.

Gift shops, factory shops, cafes and bars,
the rain drives us off the road,
flooded roads, teeming streams
specs mist over as we plodge.

It's fairing up, the sun comes out
but now it's time for dinner,
replete with food, wine and his company
who cares if it continues to thunder?

A Suburban Wander (Surrey 1995)

Steve Glason

Up Chiltern Drive and Raeburn Ave
Cherry trees and cyprus grow
Along the roads unending wave
Thirties Surrey there to show.

Mullioned windows - stainglassed doors
Height of Fashion - '35
Vistas from the upper floors
Brings an era so alive.

Tolworth Tower now looming soon
A lighthouse in suburban sea
Farewell to Surbiton Lagoon
Once setting in a leafy lea.

One Small leaf

Bill Torrie Douglas

There are millions of stars in the vastness,
there are galaxies distant and cold,
unknown planets exist in places unknown,
there are lifetimes and stories untold.

The cosmos extends beyond knowledge,
and if sometime Earth ceases to be,
the heavens won't move or the stars lose their shine,
just a leaf will have dropped from the tree.

Cara Lutetia

Norman Bissett

After the Ice Age,
when rhinoceros strolled
through Montparnasse
and ambled across
la Place de l'Hotel de Ville,
when woolly mammoths
rootled in the grass of Belleville
or close to Samaritaine,
the region settled down
for several millennia
of sun and rain. The river
dominated the topography,
mud flats and reed beds
on either bank,
with unlinked islands
lower than they are today.
On one of them,
surrounded by a wall,
dwelt the Parisii,
tending their vines and figs,
oblivious to the imminence
of le Moulin Rouge, le Tour Eiffel,
Napoleon's tomb inside les Invalides.

Footnote:

It is said that one should never blame the computer for errors, as they are created by humans. That is true to the extent that the person who wrote the program used in its operations is the one who is to blame, not the person who operates the computer. Even the former may not reasonably have been able to anticipate the sort of problem reported by Angus Livingstone.

“The strange case of the missing line:

This gave me the best laugh I've had for a while.

My commended George Farley poem The Envelope had the last line chopped off in the Winter Author. A pity, but these things happen. To my surprise I have just found it at the bottom of the poem Just You Wait and See in the Autumn Author and it is hilarious in the context. Have a look!”
[Even those who did not care for Vera Lynn would but hardly wish her such a fate – Ed]

SCPSW Annual Competitions Results 2009

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

The 26 entries were judged by Paul Williams novelist and former SCPSW Writer of the Year

First Prize was awarded to “Last Tango” by Don Nixon of Albrighton near Wolverhampton

2nd prize “Last train for Badgers Halt” by Lyn Adlam of Bude, Cornwall

Vincent Brennan Travel Competition

The 6 entries were judged by Alan Watts President of the Society.

The winner is “Galapagos” by Jenny Chamier Grove

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition

The 16 entries were judged by our Chairman Terry Rickson.

The winner is “Eclipse” by Angus Livingstone, second place “Breaking Glass” also by Angus Livingstone and third place “D’n’A” by Andrew Millican.

George Farley Competition

The Farley family decided not to award the prize this year and added the following comment: We were very disappointed at the low number of entries, only four. Unfortunately we also agreed that none of the entries merited the prize, failing to fulfil the requirements of humour and sharpness. In view of this, it is with some sadness that the family feel that the competition has run its course. We have kept it alive for nearly 50 years since Pop died, and have enjoyed doing so. We therefore inform the Committee that we are closing our sponsorship; hoping it doesn't mean the end of humour in the Civil Service!

With all good wishes for the continued success of the Society. Pamela Farley

[Sadly all good things must come to an end. We are grateful to the Farley family for having sponsored their competition for so long. The published winning results have provided us with much pleasure, but I am sure that humour will not be absent from future SCPSW work. Ed]

Lewis Wright Judge's Report by Paul Williams

After three readings I found it relatively easy to narrow down the entries to around ten that I thought had particular merit. Several of those that did not make it to the shortlist showed some skill but let themselves down by poor and sometimes confused presentation and punctuation. It was not simply that they used non-standard ways of paragraphing, especially when it came to direct speech, but their way of doing things was not always consistent even within the same story. Those that made it through to the next stage presented more difficulties for me, as I did not immediately see a clear winner and had to rely on intuition as much as more scientific analysis.

First prize goes to *Last Tango*, an entertaining tale of a woman's original way of dealing with the untoward advances of a creepy dancing partner. I felt that its sparkle, observation and readability gave it a slight edge over the others. Second prize goes to *Last Train to Badger's Halt*, a witty account of a man's interview for promotion. A study in embarrassment, it depicts a situation most of us will recognise.

There are several other entries worthy of mention. *Be a Darling*, the story of a young man's hapless attempts to impress a glamorous fellow-student. A well-written story with a slightly lame finish. *A Weekend in the Highlands*, the story of a mountaineer who is helped by a mysterious stranger. The good writing did not quite compensate for the slow pace and predictable ending. *A Still and Quiet Conscience*, an enigmatic account of a woman's private emotions during a terrorist attack on a top security building. Original but a tad difficult to follow (for me, anyway!). *An Occupational Hazard*, about a village undertaker's come-uppance at the hands of one of his 'customers'. Well written and mildly amusing. *The Tower of Truth*, about a fairground attraction with a difference. A poignant supernatural story. *Iron Oxide*, a ghostly detective story set in an army training range. *London 1903* (I'm not sure if this is the title or a subtitle, as the second part is titled London 1980). A well written story of the supernatural. *Back to Base*. An interesting experiment in 'stream of consciousness' writing. *Handle With Care*, about flat-pack furniture and domestic rivalry.

Last Tango

Don Nixon

(Lewis Wright Short Story Competition - winning entry)

I noticed his shoes first. You don't often see patent leather dancing pumps nowadays. These showed signs of wear. Clearly they had seen better times. Times when Victor Sylvester clones had ruled their strict tempo empires every Saturday night under the revolving silver globes in the local palais.

“How about this tango then? You look a sport. Are you up for it darlin’?”

It was a southern accent. At one time I'd have called it posh but since going to Madame Carter's evening class in drama and elocution for senior citizens at the Tech. in Accrington, I recognised Estuary and was less impressed. He was an object lesson in what Madame Carter calls glottal stops.

He grabbed my hand before I could reply. Cocky old devil, I thought and too full of himself. Didn't he know who I was? I sniffed. He was drenched in a cheap cologne. I was going to refuse but it was a tango and they usually only have one at the tea dance. All that swooping gets a bit difficult for stiffening hip joints and arthritic knees.

I've always loved the tango. It reminds me of Stefan. I never could pronounce his full name but he was a wizard at the tango. Every night in Blackpool's Tower ballroom during that Wakes week so long ago, we had danced closer and closer until that last Friday when I'd gone with him to find a space among the other couples under the blacked out Central Pier. The damp sand ruined my best frock but I didn't care. Nobody had ever called me Elisabetta the way he did. I was in love or at least I thought I was. But Stefan with the unpronounceable Polish surname had never come back to find me after the war and so I settled for my brother's best pal, a nice little semi, fitted carpets and a second-hand Ford Popular to begin with. Looking back, I suppose it was enough but I never again experienced that brief touch of ecstasy that Stefan on the damp sand gave me. My husband Harry was strictly a “Wham bam, thank you ma'am” sort of bloke and like many men of his generation didn't like to talk about these things. And then there wasn't all the sex stuff you get on television which might have given them some ideas. Modern girls really don't know how lucky they are with all this Liberation stuff and the way sex is talked about quite openly. I never knew what an orgasm was till I read about it in an article in a women's magazine and then it was far too late. My friend Myra once told me she had never seen her husband completely naked till they were

washing him before putting him in his coffin. We really were a bunch of innocents then.

“You’re up North then?” I said as I let him lead me on to the dance floor.

He nodded.

“Straight from the Smoke darlin’. Got a bit of business here and I met Bert Shuttleworth last night at the Masonic. He told me about your seniors’ club and gave me an invite. Said it was just the place if I liked ladies, especially the mature ones.”

He winked and I made a mental note to have words with Mr. Shuttleworth, our club Secretary. Before I could think of a reply, he swung me round and we were off in a series of swoops, angular bends and sharp staccato turns.

He could certainly do the tango. There was a professional flair in the way he guided me through the complex moves which can so easily throw you off balance and lead to disaster. I wondered if he had once been one of those red coats at Butlins that ask you to dance when your husband’s in the bar or playing darts. It felt strange to be dancing with a man again. There’s always a shortage of men at the club and most of them here can only manage a shuffle round the floor and then with their wives. And how possessive the wives are! They are so smug, some of them. They look at us widows as if it’s all our fault being on our own. As if we didn’t look after our husbands well enough. Not like them as they push their reluctant men round the floor with their snooty self satisfied expressions. The few single men there tend to be what we used to call confirmed bachelors and most of them look as if they’d prefer to be dancing with each other. When it comes to the tango it’s usually just a few game widows who stand up together. So I was used to the soft pressure of an ample bosom and the discreet perfume of supermarket deoderant. Unfortunately, that afternoon my regular partner, Rachel Ormerod was at the hospital for her veins and I’d been trying to avoid old Bill Pemberton of the clammy hands. So a man who could actually dance was a real bonus. Now I felt the hard thrust of a pot belly, which I’m sure was held in by a support, and the pungent tang of male sweat. He certainly wasn’t a member of the confirmed bachelor fraternity. I hadn’t been this close to a man since Harry died.

He began to hum the tune. It was embarrassing. I could see Myra Hebblethwaite smirking in the corner. Tomorrow it would be all round the Women’s Guild. “Do you know the name of this tune?” he asked. “It’s passionate stuff. Really sexy.” He gave me a sidelong glance and did a sharp turn with a sudden pelvic thrust.

“Just like making love.”

“It’s called ‘Jealousy’” I said as coldly as I could.

I gasped as he forced me down into a deep bend, swayed and his knee stabbed up against me. He looked across at the herd of wives standing by the Tombola. They were huddled like a lot of old cows sheltering under a tree out of the rain.

“I bet they’re jealous.”

He closed in on me again. I felt his fingers digging into the small of my back.

“You think a lot of yourself, don’t you? Typical southerner.”

He laughed and flashed a set of even white dentures that were certainly not on the National Health.

“No I didn’t mean me. I meant they were jealous of you. The way you dance and your figure. You’re as trim as a girl. Smashing. I bet you get plenty of offers. You haven’t let yourself go like some.”

He nodded in the direction of Myra, whose voluminous floral kaftan only served to draw attention to her ample frame. In spite of myself, I felt a tingle of satisfaction. Vanity they say is the last thing to go and I must admit I do like to look nice.

He drove me through a chicane of angled turns and bends which ended with me breathless and my nose in his right ear. The aftershave was overpowering and I could see his hair was dyed. In front of me was old Mr. Shuttleworth standing by the sound equipment. I glared at him. He looked worried as he saw my tight expression. As well he might. It was my Lottery money that was helping to keep this club going. Next month’s cheque was going to be a lot less after this.

“Enjoying yourself Mrs. Borden?” he wavered.

I sniffed. He smiled weakly as I went back into the deepest of bends.

“Bring me up,” I hissed. If you go on like this, we’ll end up on the floor. I’ll be a laughing stock.”

He whirled me round and we came to a sudden stop as the music ended.

“Put a waltz on now, Mr. Shuttleworth,” called out a sharp featured old biddy from the residential home. “We can’t all be show offs. Like some I could mention.” The wives around the Tombola moored in agreement. The husbands just looked resigned. Shuttleworth ran on the tape and found a slow waltz. The smooching sort that they used to play at the end of evening dances. But it was four ‘o clock in the afternoon. I saw my partner’s eyes

glint and felt his hand slide up my back. It settled on the clasp of my bra's strap. It was just too much. The old goat needed teaching a lesson.

"Good," he exclaimed. "A slow waltz. What a good way to end or perhaps to begin."

He flashed his perfect plastic dentures.

"It's Liz isn't it? Let me introduce myself. I'm Henry Pound but everybody calls me Harry. Some even call me 'Dirty Harry'. After Clint Eastwood you know," he added quickly. "I always say 'In for a penny, in for a pound.'"

He laughed and his pot belly shook against me.

"My husband's name was Harry.

"It was out before I could stop myself.

"Was? So you're a merry widow then?"

"My husband passed on fifteen years ago," I said primly. "And I may be a widow but I'm not what you mean by 'merry'. Not at all."

He laughed. I felt the pressure of his finger again on my back.

"Go on. I bet you lead them all on. You love it. A proper little tease."

I wriggled out of his grasp and walked back to my chair.

"Now I'm going to sit down. Thank you for the tango," I said formally. "I haven't danced the tango since.."

I stopped and suddenly thought of Stefan. If he were still alive, would he be like this odious little old man? Would that soft Polish accent now sound like a caricature of an ageing Don Juan? I felt a flash of anger. The tango had always reminded me of that young Polish airman and that brief moment of passion all those years ago. Now that memory was tainted. From now on the tango would be forever associated with this ghastly man with his wandering hands and smell of cheap aftershave.

"Are you married?" I asked.

I was curious, Did someone have to put up with his pawing? Had he legal rights? "Legal rights" were what I'd had to put with for years when Harry got back from the pub on Friday nights.

"Divorced. Twice. But now I'm free, willing and very able. Never had any complaints in that department."

He patted his belly suggestively.

“And I’m staying at a very comfortable hotel not far from here. Five minutes at the most.”

He gave a conspiratorial wink and the dentures gleamed again. He reached for my hand.

At that moment, Mr. Shuttleworth banged his little gong. The tea dance was over. I needed to get rid of Henry Pound but also to teach him a lesson. He’d pay for that bruise I could feel beginning to smart on the inside of my thigh.

I glanced out of the window. My taxi was coming up the drive. They had sent the new Daimler. The taxi firm was really spoiling me since I had won a packet on the Lottery. I shrugged. Giving a tenner as a tip was chicken feed now. I was enjoying my money. I remembered my recent holiday in New England. The guide had had a lot of fun with my name and the story of my murderous namesake in Massachusetts. It had been the highlight of the coach trip to the museum in Fall River. I made up my mind.

“I’m afraid I have to go now. They only let me out for four hours you know.”

He looked puzzled. I wanted to laugh at the idea of me, an elderly Cinderella having to leave the ball. I imagined Henry Pound turning into a pumpkin or a mouse and felt better.

“They are very strict on time at the Rehabilitation.”

“Rehabilitation?”

“Didn’t Mr. Shuttleworth tell you who I am?”

He shook his head.

“Well he should. He does some voluntary prison visiting. Do gooding. That’s where I met him in Manchester when I was up for parole. It was naughty of Bert not to tell you when he sent you over to dance with me. It was a little joke he was playing on you. He’s like that.”

“You’re in prison?” he gulped.

“I’m out on licence. I live in a special unit.”

I smiled to myself at the thought of my new luxury bungalow up on the moors as a special unit. For once he was silent.

“Don’t you want to know what I was in for? Most people do. That’s why they want to dance with me so they can tell their grandchildren.”

I gripped his arm.

“I killed my husband,” I said matter of factly. “He was just like you. A randy old goat. I put up with his carryings on for years. Then one day I found him in bed with my best friend.”

“What did you do?” he whispered.

In spite of the shock, he couldn't repress that flicker of curiosity.

“I hit them with an axe. You're not from round here or you'd remember it from the local papers. I was quite famous. They called me 'Lancashire's Lizzie Borden.' She killed her parents in Massachusetts you know and we have the same name. I'm Elizabeth Borden too. There was a rhyme about her and one of the journalists changed it to apply to me.”

I put on the sing song voice the Infant teachers used when I was little.

“Lizzie Borden took an axe

And gave her husband forty whacks.

When she saw what she had done,

She gave her best friend forty-one.”

I grunted the special laugh that Madame Carter had taught us in the drama class when we were practising for the Lancashire Witches in the Jubilee pageant. She'd called it 'an eldritch screech' and it had got a special mention in the review in the local rag..

“Mrs. E. Borden was especially terrifying in her portrayal of Pendle's Old Mother Derndyke.”

It had made the front page. Some of the others were really jealous. The woman playing Alice Nutter has never spoken to me since. I repeated the laugh and he stepped back quickly.

“Would you now really like me to come back with you to your comfortable hotel? Who knows? I might try to improve my batting average and give you forty-two.”

I tried the cackle again. He flinched and scurried across the room and disappeared into the Gents.

I was still laughing when I got into the taxi. The driver gave me a strange look. I realised I was still doing the Mother Derndyke cackle.

“Are you OK Mrs Borden?”

“Perfectly OK, “I giggled. “Just done a rather good hatchet job.” I sighed. “A pity though. He could certainly do the tango.”

Last Train for Badgers Halt

Lyn Adlam

(Lewis Wright Short Story Competition – second place)

The picture on the wall was really starting to annoy Geoffrey. He hated it but his gaze kept returning to it all the same. Better to stare at the picture, awful though it was, than stare at the door; knowing that at any minute it would open, his name would be called and his ordeal would begin.

He looked at his watch for the hundredth time thinking that at least ten minutes must have passed since he looked at it before, but in fact it was only two. His eyes were drawn again to the wishy-washy painting; the untalented daubs of a five year old as far as he was concerned. If anyone had been there to point out to him that it was actually a print of ‘water lilies’ by the great impressionist Monet, he would have been none the wiser in any case.

His palms were sticky, his mouth was dry and he could feel beads of sweat trickling down the back of his neck. He really hated being made to feel like this and he deeply resented that very shortly he would have to perform like a poodle in front of three people he had never previously met who would take, less than 20 minutes to decide whether he was worthy of the promotion he sought. And what did they know? They weren’t there when he was working late. They didn’t see how hard he worked and the efforts he went to. And yet they were standing between him and a beautifully crafted model of the ‘*Flying Scotsman*’ in LNER green, complete with active smoke generator for added authenticity.

He was going to buy it with the first pay packet he would get in his newly elevated position. It would be the centre piece of his model railway; the crowning glory of his creation that it had taken him the best part of 15 years to build. He allowed his mind to dwell proudly for a minute on Badger’s Halt, the carefully planned miniature world in his attic. The world in which he was always in control. The (station) master of his own destiny, you might say.

He was up against Rawlins too, he suddenly remembered, coming back to the full sized world with a bump. Rawlins from Accounts; smart, young and silver tongued. Oh he could talk the talk, but could

he walk the walk - or was it walk the talk? He couldn't remember but the point was you never saw him doing much hard graft and you certainly never saw him in the office after 4.30 in the afternoon, especially on a Friday.

The door opened, making Geoffrey jump, and his nemesis strolled out. Rawlins looked cool and relaxed. He adjusted his tie and winked theatrically at Geoffrey.

“You can go in now. Knock ‘em dead!” he said.

Geoffrey got to his feet and walked uncertainly to the door, tapped on it and went in. The interview panel, who were seated at a table at the far end of the room, looked up as he entered. The chairman was a rather elderly man with an old fashioned handlebar moustache and a military bearing. He sat in the middle and his name plate announced him as Mr Smythe. On the chairman's left was a thin, ginger haired man by the name of Grimes and on his right was a large middle aged lady called Miss Monroe. It wasn't a big room, but to Geoffrey, walking across it with three pairs of eyes watching his progress, it seemed a mile long.

“Good afternoon, Mr err..Peake, isn't it? Sit down.”

Geoffrey sat down in the chair indicated to him which had a small table in front of it on which stood a water jug and glass. He felt like a rabbit trapped in the headlights of a fast oncoming car.

“Did you find us alright, Mr Peake?” the chairman asked cheerfully.

What a stupid question, thought Geoffrey, I'm here aren't I?

“Yes thank you Sir,” he said “the train was three minutes late, though.” Geoffrey couldn't stand a sloppily run railway station.

“Good show, good show,” said Mr Smythe, who was intent on getting through the pleasantries as quickly as possible and therefore didn't see any need to listen to the replies.

“You live in Littleton, I see.” He went on

“Well, not in the town, I live on an estate on the outskirts,” replied Geoffrey.

“Really?” said Mr Smythe, taking a genuine interest in the candidate for the first time. “Tell me,” he enquired, “what was the shooting like last season?”

Geoffrey was taken aback, in fact he felt really quite affronted. They had never had an incident like that where he lived.

“There has never been a shooting on our estate,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster. The Chairman looked crestfallen.

“Oh.. great pity, great pity that.” He muttered, almost to himself.

Deeply confused, Geoffrey was aware that he had somehow already managed to disappoint one of his judges. In an effort to redeem himself he groped about in his memory for information on a subject it had never occurred to him for a moment that he would be questioned on.

“There was a spate of break-ins a year or two ago. And a mugging,” he said hopefully, “but they caught the blighter, I think.”

It was now the Chairman’s turn to look confused, but before he could formulate a response, Miss Monroe lent towards him and said in a stage whisper, I think Mr Peake means that he lives on a housing estate, Mr Smythe, not a country estate.” She smiled knowingly at Geoffrey and he gave her a wan smile in return. Exactly how out of touch were these HQ bods? He wouldn’t need this wretched job if he owned his own country seat. His nerves jangling he made a desperate effort to compose himself. What was it someone had told him? Imagine the panel naked. It was supposed to be a great leveller. Suddenly he was gazing at the voluptuous Miss Monroe, the aging physique of Mr Smythe and the somewhat scrawny form of Grimes.

“Is something amusing you, Mr Peake?”

“Err..no, sorry, what was the question again?” Grimes’s sharp tone jolted Geoffrey back to a fully clothed reality.

“I asked you,” said Mr Grimes with exaggerated patience, “to tell me something about your current duties.”

“Oh, well, let me see....” How do you make the job of chief stationery clerk sound important? Geoffrey did his best.

“Speak up, man,” Grimes snapped as Geoffrey stumbled over his reply. He leaned forward to so that Mr Grimes might hear him better and knocked the water glass, which fortunately was empty, on to the floor. Automatically he dived under the table to retrieve it. It had come to rest between Miss Monroe’s chubby feet, which were at ten to two and seemed to be forced into a pair of impossibly small shoes.

Geoffrey glanced at the other feet under the table. Mr Smythe was wearing a highly polished pair of lace-ups and his feet were pointing straight in front of him, knees together, like the feet and legs of a man used to standing to attention. Mr Grimes was wearing sandals and ... odd socks! Not just slightly odd, one was red and one was blue! Where did they find these people! Was that a fashion statement or had he simply got dressed in the dark?

Geoffrey retrieved the glass and tried to stand up, unfortunately without backing far enough out from the table first. He cracked his head on the under side and heard another crash. Seconds later, water from the upturned jug was running off the table and soaking through the back of his suit, which, Geoffrey's gibbering brain reminded him was 'dry clean only'.

"Mr Peake!" said Mr Grimes sternly, "Will you kindly return to your seat and let us continue. You don't seem to be at all prepared for this interview if you don't mind my saying so."

Geoffrey slumped soggily back into his chair. The '*Flying Scotsman*' was beginning to disappear from view.

"Thank you, Mr Peake. Now, perhaps you would care to turn your attention to law and order in this country and give us the benefit of your opinion as to whether you consider the punishment always fits the crime?"

Geoffrey tried to gather his thoughts. Someone had told him that if you were asked for your opinion during a job interview, it didn't matter what your opinion was, so long as you had one and could back it up with reasoned argument. Geoffrey was part way through his monologue as to why he felt that capital punishment should be restored and public floggings introduced for the more minor offences, when he remembered that it had been Rawlins and judging by the expressions on the panel's faces, it had not been good information.

"Thank you," said Mr Grimes weakly as Geoffrey came to a withering halt, "I'll pass you over to Miss Monroe." He took a rather grey looking handkerchief out of his pocket and proceeded to mop his face with it.

Geoffrey turned slightly to face Miss Monroe, who was smiling fixedly at him.

“Well, now, Mr Peake, perhaps you could tell us what you think you could bring to the role of Resources Manager?”

It was a boring job, all about managing budgets, hiring and firing and producing figures and statistics for the Board of Directors. Geoffrey had a sudden inspiration - he would run it like a railway station! He took a deep breath.

He went on for a full five minutes about training, motivating and empowering, all the buzz-words he had heard banded about at meetings over the last couple of months. Not that he really knew what they meant.

In short,” he concluded eventually, I would ensure that the whole department ran like a well-oiled train, smoothly along its tracks and.. and that the needs of the passengers... I mean customers, came first.” He stopped, having used up all his railway similes. Miss Monroe was writing on the pad in front of her, but Mr Smythe was looking at him with renewed interest.

“And finally, Mr Peake, what are your hobbies?” asked Miss Monroe, looking up from her writing only long enough to ask the question.

“Hobbies?” asked Geoffrey in surprise.

“Yes. Hobbies. What do you do for fun, Mr Peake?”

Geoffrey became suddenly animated. He began to tell them all about Badger’s Halt. How he had built his model railway over the last 15 years and the way it had evolved from one simple track to a whole miniature community. He told them how the trains left the little town; wound their way through the hand painted outlying countryside, over lovingly constructed bridges and crossings, stopping briefly at a second, smaller station before climbing over papier-mâché mountain passes, through carefully crafted tunnels and back again. Finally, in an awed voice, he told them how he was hoping to add the ‘*Flying Scotsman*’ in LNER green with active smoke generator for added authenticity, to his already considerable collection of passenger and goods trains. It would be the final touch, his creation would be complete.

Throughout it all, Mr Smythe had listened with mounting fascination. When Geoffrey finished he began asking him a few

technical questions about the circuits and switches and how he had overcome problems of overloading. Eventually, Mr Grimes cut in saying that they shouldn't keep Mr Peake any longer and the interview came to an end.

Geoffrey shook hands with each of them and turned to go, feeling that perhaps he hadn't done too badly after all. There were two doors at the end of the room. Geoffrey had about eight seconds to remember which one he had entered by. He went for the one on his right - and walked straight into a cupboard, his momentum knocking several carefully stacked boxes off the shelves. He began trying to gather them up, silently cursing his ill luck. The panel watched him wordlessly. He could feel their eyes boring into his back.

"I...I..h..have a cu..cupboard, just like this one in m..my office," he stammered to try and fill the stony silence. He shoved the last box back in and slammed the door shut before they could fall out again, grabbed the other door handle and made his escape.

Back in the waiting room, his legs feeling like they were about to give way, he subsided into a chair and sat with his head in his hands. He still felt damp and he knew he had a large, dark, wet patch spreading across the seat of his trousers. What a disaster! He had practically handed the job to Rawlins on a plate. He was never going to get his beautiful train now, he thought sadly. He waited a while for the strength to return to his legs and then he let himself out of the building into the street.

Outside in the fresh air, he cheered up a little at the thought of another train ride home. He set off in the direction of the station. At least he would never have to see those three people again, he thought, trying to look on the bright side. He toyed with the idea of buying a lottery ticket on the way home. Somebody had to win - and maybe he would get his 'Flying Scotsman' after all...

The interview panel had watched as the hapless Geoffrey finally left the room and had let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Well," said Mr Smythe eventually, as no-one seemed to want to be the first to speak, I think we all know who the best person for the job is."

"Quite so," said Mr Grimes, I don't think we have ever had such an easy choice." Miss Monroe nodded her agreement.

“Good,” said Mr Smythe, collecting up his papers, “Peake it is then.”

“Peake!” Mr Grimes exclaimed, “You can’t mean that, surely, Sir?”

“Why ever not?” demanded Mr Smythe.

“The man’s a buffoon! You saw him; I’ve never seen such a performance!” Grimes couldn’t believe it, “and what about his opinions? He is positively fascist!”

“Nonsense,” Mr Smythe said firmly, “he’s a Station Master, one of the old school. What was it he said?” He consulted his notes, “‘would run the department like a well-oiled train.’ He’s just the sort this department needs, punctual, efficient ... although I’m not quite sure what all that drivel was about putting the customer first...”

“He’s a Stationery Clerk, not a Station Master! That’s just his hobby, although what sort of pleasure he gets shut in his loft all day playing with a few toy trains I’ll never know!” Grimes was exasperated. “What about Rawlins? Now there’s a man with invention, innovation and imagination.”

“Exactly!” said Smythe, as if they were the worst three of the seven deadly sins. “Bit of a loose cannon if you ask me, can’t see him toeing the official line. No, Peake is the man. What do you think, my dear?” The two men turned to Miss Monroe who had so far stayed out of the exchange.

She looked from one to the other. Mr Grimes was obviously right, but Mr, Smythe had far more influence over her future career than Mr Grimes ever would. I think, Mr Smythe, that if you consider Mr Peake to be the right man for the job, who are we to argue?” she said carefully.

Grimes groaned. Mr Smythe picked up his notes and got to his feet decisively.

“Well said, Miss Monroe. See to the paperwork, will you? I have to leave early this afternoon.”

Mr Smythe couldn’t wait to get home in fact. He had a large shed in his garden containing his own model railway. He had been trying for months to work out how to wire up the signals in such a way that they wouldn’t keep shorting out. That Peake fellow had just told him exactly how to do it. Yes ... Geoffrey Peake was going to be a very valuable asset indeed...

Gordon Gompers Article Competition

Any Topic; maximum 2,000 word; Prize £50; closing date 31st July 2009; £3 entry; double spaced with word count.

Entries with nom de plume and name and address on a separate sheet. If you wish to have your entry returned to you please enclose a S.A.E.

Entries should be sent to Competition Secretary

Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey SM6 6RT

Vincent Brennan Travel Competition Judge's Report by Alan Watts

Having read the entries two or three times, I can say that they are all interesting. Indeed, they have held my interest so much that I found it extremely difficult to pick out an obvious winner.

However, I think I must award the crown to the article entitled 'Galapagos'.

This was not over laden with difficult place names and gave a lot of information which could be easily digested.

Thus I learn the position of the Galapagos archipelago; that it is a cluster of islands 600 miles from Ecuador. I also learn about Darwin and his visit to the islands, and how he had tried to ride on a giant tortoise. I was told how to get to the islands and the type of people who would go there. The article was not over burdened by information about the blue-footed booby, or the sea-lions, but sufficient was included to give the reader a good idea of the place and its fauna.

I would like to add a word or two to explain why I passed over several of the other contestants.

'Around Dalmatia in a Skoda' had me giddy with unpronounceable names, which prevented me from really seeing the place.

'Pennine Country' was interesting, but did not really sparkle, although it did a service to the area and Lancashire men like myself.

'Castles and Coronets' were 'the influence of Mark Twain' detracted rather than added to the content.

'America's Venice and the Loggerhead Turtle' was extremely interesting, but the article is spoiled by various grammatical errors.

Finally, 'Up the Nile without a Paddle' was extremely good, and it was a hard choice. It certainly would have been awarded second prize, if there had been a second prize!

Well done to all. We are sorry that there are not more prizes available.

Galapagos

Jenny Chamier-Grove

(Winning entry of Vincent Brennan Travel Competition – 2009)

The land iguana, a large, straw-coloured lizard, gave us a cursory glance before stretching its head to munch a few sparse green leaves dotted among the brushwood. Nearby a sea lion lolled against a boulder. “The Santa Fe land iguana is found nowhere else in the world,” pointed out our Guide, Rissel. It was only the second iguana we had seen that morning, as we clambered over the Island’s peculiar parched surface and along a rough, stony trail.

I had come to the Galapagos archipelago, a cluster of isolated islands 600 miles from Ecuador, expecting to find myself stumbling over lizard warrens. When Darwin visited the islands in 1835 he grumbled that there were so many iguana burrows that he had scarcely room to pitch his tent. While making the notes that were to inspire “On the Origin of Species,” Darwin tugged at the tail of an iguana and received in return an indignant stare. Our group remained at a respectful distance, but the iguana was a reminder of why I was there - to see how these islands were, as Darwin described, “so marvellously tenanted.”

With Theresa, an old school friend, I had flown from London via Madrid, landing in late afternoon at Quito airport in Ecuador and spending a night at the Hotel Quito, perched on a hill between the city and cloud-capped mountains. Next morning we flew to Isla Baltra, in the Galapagos Islands, where we took a bumpy bus ride to the ferry, staring at the and plain dotted with giant cactuses that seemed to gesticulate like scare crows.

Once in the main Island of Santa Cruz, we began a two-hour drive in a minibus, the road winding through misty hills. We stopped to scramble down into lava tubes, long underground tunnels formed by the solidifying of the outside skin of a molten lava flow. Back in the bus, we begged the driver to stop again as we spotted a giant tortoise plodding beside the track. Darwin thought the tortoises looked like antediluvian animals and wondered at their immense size. He even tried to ride on one but had trouble keeping his balance. I just stood and stared - enthralled.

It was almost dusk by the time we reached the harbour at Puerto Ayora. As we were ferried out to our boat, blue-footed boobies plunged headlong into shoals of fish and brown pelicans squatted on the rocks around the quay. Darwin had reached the islands in *HMS Beagle*, a ten-gun brig, but

we were clambering aboard a less warlike vessel, the ninety-eight foot *Gap Adventurer V*, with sun deck, dining room, a bar and cabins for twenty passengers.

Before setting off on this journey of exploration I worried about who those other passengers might be. The cruise was not cheap and I feared that it might attract the rich and supercilious. As it turned out, I could not have been more wrong. Women were in the majority and our group included two young doctors and a hospital worker from Toronto, teachers and education workers from Briton, a woman accountant-turned-backpacker, a professional harpist and a honeymoon couple from Donegal.

As we scrambled from our ship onto *pangas* (motorised inflatable dinghies) that' powered through the choppy sea - we felt less like pampered tourists and more like determined explorers.

On our first morning, the pangas took us to a line of lacerated rocks so that we could go swimming with sea lions. Clutching my mask and snorkel I plunged into the chilly water, spotting a stingray motionless on the sandy bottom, yellow-tailed surgeonfish, iridescent blue parrot fish and a white-tipped reef shark. I hoped that the shark was truly "shy and retiring," as Rissel had assured us that it would be. Coming up for air, I was intrigued to glimpse a pair of powder-blue feet, perched on a rock above my head. At last, I thought, I've seen a blue-footed booby - close up. Then I ducked underwater and, to my alarm, saw a sea lion swimming straight at me. Just as we seemed on course for a collision, the sea lion swerved and missed me by a whisker. When a second sea lion, and then a third, did the same, I began to recover my nerve, although I started to suffer from hallucinations. Was I imagining it, or did the sea lions have smiles on their faces?

When the pangas deposited us on the Island of Rabida, we were astonished by the sea lions that lolled on the dark red sand, making no effort to move at our approach. Meanwhile inquisitive mocking birds poked around in our bags, while pink flamingos searched for shrimps in a nearby lagoon.

That evening as our ship headed round to the west side of the Island of Santiago, with frigate birds wheeling overhead, the vessel began to pitch and toss. We were cutting into the treacherous polar currents encountered by early whalers and buccaneers. One by one the passengers left the dinner table, leaving their food untouched. On deck, I was surprised to see that we were accompanied by the ghostly white form of a swallow-tailed gull - the only gull that hunts at night, searching for the luminescent light of squid.

In daylight, Santiago, with its long, flat black lava shoreline, dotted with caves and inlets, had a Cyclopean appearance. Once a hideout for British

buccaneers, it was known as James Island in Darwin's day, and it was here that we found a large colony of marine iguanas. With crests like spikes running from head to tail, the iguanas had a thrillingly devilish appearance, but they remained motionless, draped over warm boulders or basking in the sun on lava rocks. Suddenly we heard a snorting sound, and saw to our surprise that one of them had blown a little puff of spray into the air through its nostrils. "They do this because they need to expel salt from their bodies," Rissel explained. Nothing personal. It wasn't aimed at us, then. This was the Island where Darwin had stayed for a week in a tent, sketching the beaks of finches and the great black lizards, intrigued to find that the iguanas had a 'well-characterized genus, having its marine and terrestrial species, belonging to so confined a portion of the world."

The Galapagos archipelago was discovered by a bishop in 1535 who reported to the King of Spain that the islands' birds were "so silly that they didn't know how to flee." Three years earlier the ruthless, cannon-firing conquistadors had overcome the Inca nation in Ecuador and imposed colonial rule. Pressed into forced labour, the indigenous people organised rebellions against the Spanish ruling classes until, finally, following years of fighting spearheaded by Simon Bolivar, Ecuador gained independence in 1830, and claimed the Galapagos Islands two years later. For nearly ninety years politics took a bloodthirsty turn, with presidents hacked to death or murdered by a mob, but since then Ecuador's history has been less violent. Some of the Galapagos Islands were declared to be wildlife sanctuaries in 1934 and the archipelago became a National Park twenty-five years later.

"The regulations for visiting the Galapagos are quite strict," Rissel explained. "You can't land on the islands without a guide, the itinerary is planned a year in advance and groups are limited to no more than 16 people. It's true that the number of hotels and restaurants in Santa Cruz is growing and this encourages people to move to the islands from the mainland. Maybe this leads to some illegal fishing. But we do need tourists. We need you. We really do. That's what keeps the Galapagos going."

As we sat sipping cocktails on our last evening, I tried to remember which encounter had been the most thrilling: the courtship of the blue-footed boobies honking and stamping their feet, the red, yellow and purple Sally Lightfoot crabs scuttling over wave-washed lava, the whiskery face of a sea lion looming through the water towards me, and I felt that there was something that I could not quite grasp, as if an island was drifting out of sight. It was those cold currents, the cindery slopes of volcanoes, and the remoteness of the islands that had made them unique. That would leave me with a sense of illusion and mystery, and that was what I would remember them for.

Herbert Spencer Competition Judge's Report by Terry Rickson

Judging poetry competitions is always a pleasurable experience, and I was pleased to be asked to adjudicate this year's Herbert Spencer Competition. I enjoyed reading the poems but was a bit disappointed that there were only sixteen entries this year - where were you all?

Moving on to the results, I have chosen three winners plus two poems I've singled out for Commendation. It goes without saying that all such judgements are subjective and owe much to the whims, prejudices and opinions of the individual. Therefore I thought I'd start by giving a brief explanation of how I go about the task.

Of course, I read through all the poems carefully several times. I look for three main things: a) the technical handling of the poem; b) whether the subject of the poem is interesting; c) and whether the subject is fully developed. I have to say that many if not most of the poems fell down on the first point - where rhyme was used it often went awry or was thumpingly obvious, and the odd canard of inverting words to make a line fit the rhyme crept in as well - where free verse was used, lines sometimes became pedestrian and, dare I say it, prosy. However, the variety of subjects covered was interesting and most were developed to a satisfying conclusion. After several readings I settled on a short list of five; deciding on the final order was difficult, and although I changed my mind more than once, my final decision is as follows:-

First Place: "Eclipse", second place "Breaking Glass" and third place "D'n'A".

Commended: "Transcendence" and "Castle Ruins at Dusk".

Comments:

Eclipse

I enjoyed the sense of depth behind the poem - who are this couple, what's their story? There's something Hardy-esque about it. I also liked the extended metaphor of the lunar eclipse relating to their dying affair. The use of rhyme is good, even though the metre is erratic and there are some over-long lines. However, overall I thought this was the best of the entries this year.

Breaking Glass

A well-handled free verse poem, with some interesting thoughts on the illusions of life. It would have been better for a less clumsy ending, and one that didn't end with a question.

D'n'A

A brave attempt at a complex and major subject, tackling both our genetic inheritance and the ethics of designer babies. It would have finished higher but for some clunky lines and the fact that the rhythm falters in places.

Transcendence

The use of rhyme is good, although the metre is erratic in places. A good effort but overall the subject wasn't strong enough for me to place it higher.

Castle Ruins at Dusk

There is some good imagery here, and a sense of atmosphere. The subject though is perhaps a bit hackneyed. The rhyme works well generally, although an inversion creeps in to line one of stanza five, presumably in order to make the line fit the rhyme. I felt that the word 'some' was overused.

Eclipse

Angus Livingstone

We had a farewell meal at our favourite café.
But even then, we hadn't much to say.
I hoped my glimpses wouldn't meet her glances.
Too late for regrets, too soon for second chances.

We left the café and the ghost of our lukewarm affair,
blinded by darkness, drowned by winter's cold air,
to behold the moon being slowly eclipsed and gazed
at her purity sullied, her whiteness being erased.

We had destroyed the old myth, yet tried to ignore
the incipience of a new one and parted before
the eclipse completed. And neither she nor I
looked back again to wave a last goodbye.

Breaking Glass

Angus Livingstone

Man can only stand so much truth. F. Nietzsche

So easy for the self-deceived
to hide away those awkward truths
behind the mirror's silvered glass,
beyond the smiling Janus face.

Not me - I cast no shadows of deceit.
I watch out for illusions
and the mirror's I know well:
left is right, depth is false,
everything has the coldness and hardness of glass.
There is only reflected light
to give the poorest life to its images.
If the glass were to be broken,
even the illusions would be lost
in the time it takes to die.

So why should I believe the sadness I see in those eyes
and that the love I once cherished
has broken the window of my heart and flown away?

D'n'A

Andrew Millican

Mother carried X, father carried Y.
Between them their sticky combination
created something new - me, myself, I.
Amazing that these microscopic bits
in endless genetic variation,
produce such distinct characteristics.
The strange idiosyncrasies and streaks
that bubble and mix and make me unique
is part of Nature's continual plan
to create the perfect specimen - Man.

So where does nurture fit in Nature's plans?
The blueprint of the seed remains the same
in multiple generations of man
but living is what makes who we are
and this identifies us more than names.
Peer or pauper, servant or superstar
our background and upbringing contribute
to erudition, humour and beauty,
kinship, kindness and the ability
to be as whomever we want to be.

Now D "n" A is a department store
where prospective parents shop for offspring.
Buy on-line or browse the gene banks for more
personalised attributes of your choice
Where any traits are for sale offering
you the perfect child. Why let Nature foist
on you disease and disability
when you can have the best? It's plain silly
to use one strand of [as your parents did]
De-ox-y-rib-o-neu-cle-ic acid.

Transcendence

Angus Livingstone

Though wordsmiths take thoughtful pains
to give life to bubbles in the stream
can they break their mundane chains
in a lucid moment of their living dream,

and create a self-engendered phrase,
a virtual particle of passing thought,
bubbling from the unfathomable haze
with weight and charge of nought,

but with an attribute to point and steer
towards an artless wordless place
and having pointed, disappear,
leaving but a thought - and space?

Castle Ruins at Dusk

Don Nixon

The wolf note in the wind whines round the eaves
And prowls pitch shivering through the ruined hall.
Beyond, gaunt trees, stripped bare of vein drained leaves
Stand stark like guardsmen, sentinel spear tall.

At dusk, the sandstone's fleeting afterglow
Softens the jagged remnants of the walls.
A cutting arc of sound pierces below,
Shrill from a tower where a screech owl calls.

The ancient keep looms on its grassy mound.
Inside, a honeycomb of masonry,
Centuries' debris scattered on the ground
Strewn like some monumental shifting scree.

Slow spreading like some lethal wyvem's breath,
The evening mist coils round the curtain wall,
And seeps inside the casements of the hall
As if to bring a silent smothering death.

Raw power and feudal pomp in dust now lies,
In crumbling vaults below a chantry's tomb.
Above, heraldic armoured in the gloom,
A knight stares up with marble sightless eyes.

And as I gaze upon this warrior's rest,
My drab existence seems to ooze away
As fancy conjures up some ancient lay,
In day dreams of some old heroic quest.

Not everyone can get to our New Year Party, but the theme of last year has been in the mind of Catherine French ever since, from whence came her version as follows: [Ed]

The Real Mrs Dunmore

Catherine French

‘Mrs Dunmore was last seen talking to a young man at Waterloo Station before boarding the 16.20 train to Exeter.’

Carl stared disconsolately at the computer screen and tried hard to think what on earth could come next. The rules of the game were that once you had started you couldn't change the first sentence. You just had to

make do and follow through to a natural conclusion. The fact that they were his own rules didn't change a thing.

Perhaps using his aunt's name hadn't helped. The sentence had seemed so promising when he wrote it, but now it looked like there were only two variations on the outcome, both of which many other writers had exploited far better: than he could ever do.

Either this Mrs Dunmore never really existed, she was a figment of a malicious mind and strutted her hour upon the stage of life but turned into somebody else as soon as she had boarded the said train...

Or she was kidnapped and stowed away in the luggage compartment, but that was hardly an original thought either. The Lady Vanishes was a classic, and he didn't see himself as a plagiarist. There had to be another solution.

He was just about to go and make a cup of coffee when the phone rang. The dial showed a number that was unfamiliar to him but he answered it on the third ring, ready to make a dismissive comment, and promptly stared at the screen in disbelief. His mysterious caller was none other than the aunt whose name he had just written on his computer. She was going to be in London the following day, and maybe they could meet for lunch?

He agreed eagerly, and as an afterthought explained the problem he was having with his short story, hoping she might point him in a new direction. She didn't have any instant ideas but promised to give it some serious thought and discuss it when they met.

So he postponed thinking about it and looked forward to his lunch with great anticipation. His aunt had been his saviour on more than one occasion and he had reason to believe that this one would be no exception.

The next day they met as planned, and they spent so long catching up on the two years since they last met that it was nearly half past three before they got round to the subject of his short story.

His aunt had considered the matter and suggested that Mrs Dunmore was perhaps a police officer about to go undercover as bait to catch a ring of drug dealers. It was a risky business and the announcement had been made to convince them that they could relax, so as to draw them into the open.

Carl was delighted, and agreed that the plot was one that he could develop effectively. Then, aware of the time, he realised that she had a train to catch. He went back to the station with her and saw her off, then hurried back to his flat to write the rest of his story.

The real Mrs Dunmore was last seen talking to a young man at Waterloo Station before boarding the 16.20 train to Exeter.