

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

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.

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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

We are progressing slowly with the Anthology. I am busy copying all the selected work, ready to pass to our sponsors for discussion as to how much of it can be included, as we believe we have selected too much. We could easily have selected twice as much had space allowed, particularly as our most recent years have not been tapped. In our next issue I hope to report that publication is in hand and how copies can be obtained by members.

I have often extolled the virtues of a computer, now I have to admit a vice. Having returned from a week of bowling in between the showers in Bournemouth, I switched on my computer and found it no longer worked. Having recorded so much on the computer memory I was now up the creek without a paddle. One week later and all is well, except that I have lost another week and £180 in consequence – the money I can fortunately afford, but time....

To relieve her boredom when my wife felt retired, she has been doing B&B. That's all very well but she no longer rushes to greet me, remove my coat, massage my feet, put on my slippers, light my pipe and pour me a brandy, I now have to switch on the microwave and fetch my own dinner from the kitchen. Cries of, "I'm an artist, I need cosseting" fall on deaf ears – oh woe is me!

I hope those of you who are being cosseted, have been busy writing articles, poems and short stories for our competitions, or sending them to me for publication. If not, and this will clearly have been caused by lack of due cosseting, join me in complaining to your MP. To ensure their support, offer a few tips on subsistence claiming. I'm confident that this will be well received.

For those living within reasonable travelling distance of central London, and those prepared to travel the unreasonable distance from other planets, our Annual Literary Luncheon is upon us and I hope to see many of you there. I apologise in advance for a deteriorating memory that may mean my failure to recognise the genius that is you. I have the same problem each morning as I shave.

For those members who are still working, may I ask you to contact Jenny by email to provide any assistance you can give in getting publicity on to notice boards, particularly those in entrance foyers, a facility granted to CS Unions that may be extended to us if you ask. If you can think of any other way in which our presence can be publicised by your employer, this would be welcomed by Jenny. If we do not increase membership soon we will cease to exist.

Erratum

Issue 186 recorded that Terry Rickson had judged the Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition (this being as reported to me). It was in fact judged by Mike Boland.

Letters

Dear Mr. Danson,

It was very nice to meet you all on Saturday; and so sorry that Ronald Jeffreys was not well enough to attend. Please hand on to him my best wishes, and thanks for his friendly and efficient dealings with our poems over the years.

So, here is my valedictory verse:-

The entries for George Farley's clerihew

Are now down to ever so very few;

Fifty years have gone by

So my sisters and I

Think it's time that we wished you a merry new-sponsor.

Judging the entries has always been a great excuse for family get-togethers, including Brothers-in-Law, nephews and nieces, and friends. I do hope that the new sponsor will get as much enjoyment as we have, perhaps even for as long as we have.

Yours sincerely

Pamela Farley

Alan Watts Writer of the Year 2009

Congratulations to Society Civil and Public Service Writer of the Year 2009 Alan Watts our President. This is especially for his splendid book published this year *The North Wind Doth Blow*, a review of which appears elsewhere in 'Author'. This is Alan's first fiction book. Congratulations also to Alan on reaching ninety on 5th July.

Alan as a Dickens expert has written many book on Dickens related subjects such as *Life and Times of Charles Dickens* and *The Confessions of Charles Dickens*, *Dickens at Glad Hill* and *Afternoons at Doughty Street*.

Former Honorary General Secretary and President of the Dickens Society, Alan has collaborated with Charles Dickens great grandson Cedric Dickens to write the book *Sayings of Charles Dickens* and a lengthy essay *The miracle of Pickhurqt in the Goodness of Pickwickedness*.

Alan has also written other books such as *Be your own boss at 16*, and several career books on mathematics, electrical and electronics engineering.

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

Poetry Workshop Weekend

By the time this article appears in “The Author”, the Poetry Workshop will have held its annual Weekend in Birmingham. A report on how the Weekend went will feature in the autumn issue of “wavelengths”.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop was held during the Birmingham Weekend. The Statement of Proceedings will appear in “wavelengths”.

Bill Barnes Competition 2009

The closing date for this annual poetry competition exclusive for PW members is 30 September. Rules of Entry appeared in the summer issue of “wavelengths” and will be repeated in the new autumn issue. Norman Bissett has kindly agreed to act as judge for this year’s competition

Waves 2009

Publication of the 2009 edition of the PW’s annual anthology of members’ work was imminent when the deadline for submitting this Poetry Page arrived. Full details of Waves 2009 will appear in the autumn issue of “wavelengths”

Poems

Don’t forget that Poetry Workshop members have several outlets for their work. There is “The Author” of course, and the Poetry Pages edited by Terry James, which everyone is encouraged to support. Then there is “wavelengths”.poems to Mike Boland (guide for contributors given in each issue of “wavelengths”), and “Waves”, our annual anthology. Rules for submitting poems to Waves 2010 will appear in the winter issue of “wavelengths”.

Wavelengths #20

The autumn issue of the Poetry Workshop's own magazine, free to all members, will include the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham; poems from members; a report of the Weekend; minutes of the AGM; the Rules of the Bill Barnes Competition; and the PW Newsletter. There are four issues of "wavelengths" a year, each issue containing at least twenty pages. If you are not a member of the Poetry Workshop, you will not receive this lively magazine, so why not join the PW now?

Membership

If you are interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. He will be pleased to provide you with further details.

The cost of membership is £5 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. Cheques or postal orders are acceptable, but please remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year.contributions of poems and the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- access to the new e-folio
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend.

Dates to Remember

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

1 January 2010 PW subscriptions due.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Circus Ring

Bill Torrie Douglas

Ponies with bareback riders
circle the circus ring.
Trapeze artists soar in spangled
celebration, flying in spotlight
whilst we strain our necks.
Lion tamers brave bared teeth
and vicious claws,
tightrope walkers balance in air,
risking a fall from elegance
into the health and net.

We laugh at the clowns,
their wicked smiles, baggy pants
and clumsy routines.
Greasepaint is removed,
glittering costumes cast aside
like soiled surgical dressings,
nobody laughs or gasps, but
someone must water the horses,
feed the animals and wipe
tears from the face of the clown;

then make preparation for
tomorrow's performance.

Woking at Five

Steve Glason

Late Summer Friday. Woking station
Waiting for a train
(Lymington. then Isle of Wight)
And peering into carriage windows
I saw myself long ago. London Drone
Working in an office. pale and palid
With smokers cough and puffy eyes
As I slaved over paperwork.

Oh how exhausted they seem!
Slumped in seat snatching forty winks
With crumpled suit and furrowed brow
Looking forward to evening meal
With loving wife and children
In mortgaged home near Farnborough Main
Before that burning midnight oil
With figures to impress the Boss.

As services pulled in and out
People hurried by as if in a race
Executive stress.close at hand.
No longer feeling guilty
I headed south to Brockenhurst
To piney heaths so heatherclad
Inland creeks near Bucklers Hard
And wayside halts like Beaulieu Road.

Back I came to Byfleet West
A centre of Commuterland
And standing on the platform
I felt refreshed.rejuvenated
Glowing with vitality
Gazing at Surrey preparing
For the morning rush to Waterloo.

Adopted now a healthy life!.

Hello Dolly

Norman Bissett

Bare-footed, shoeless
down in Tennessee,
the Smoky Mountains

fostered them all—
twelve ragged siblings,
holes in pants.

A one-room shack
with leaky shingles,
damn-all electricity,

diddly-squit amenities.
Impoverished, she was
stick-insect thin.

Pining for glamour,
she blossomed hugely.
She prospered mightily,

becoming a swan,
a multi-millionairess
dazzling peroxide songbird
(with umpteen shoes.
But nobody looks
at her feet).

The Dirge of the Short-distance Jogger Fred Jeffery

One, two, three, four.what's my motive?
Getting fit and getting thin,
Puffing like a locomotive,
Gasping out and gasping in;
Ever slogging, always jogging –
It's the only way I'll win!

In my romper suit I'm straining
Round the town, so deep intent
Passers-by think I am training
For some splendid track event.
Alas, misters, my poor blisters
For some other cause are meant.

Some girls think that I'm a failure;
Such a one is Rosie Ryde.
For her I'd run to Australia,
But that girl has got her pride.
I'm too crabby, fat and flabby
Ever to be by her side.

Take that Yuppy, Mike McNaughty;
Rosie thinks that he's the tops.
Smooth and smart and slim and sporty,
Always bragging never stops;
Large turnover, got a Rover
(It's a brute that chases cops).

Frankie of Finance Department
Is another, slim and sure:
Has a super, large apartment
Into which stray maids he'll lure.
He wants Rosie, nice and cosy:
Her old-fashioned ways he'll cure.

Nearly done upon the hour,
Home into my dismal den;
Have a shave, shampoo and shower;
Eat, then I'll beat Rosie's men.
Pub will cater. Eight pints later -Blast,
I'm back to twelve stone ten!

Life-Sentence

Ivy Hudson

Swans, lovey-dovey,
pigeons, cooey-cuddly,
kestrels, hawks, falcons mate for life.
Ospreys, broody-rudely
stay faithful crudely-doodly,
fidelity expressed like us in man and wife.

Prowling cats in gardens,
youths with pistols, rifles
put paid to choices, vows mutely expressed.
Our hearts and heads selected,
vows of love deflected
in us, unhelpful thoughts processed.

But, ospreys are still wooing,
doves billing-cooing,
cats and rifles banned and out of sight.
Swans and raptors mating
vows of loyalty and waiting
for each other in our winter of delight.

Fear

Bill Torrie Douglas

I lived upon the edge of life that year
and met the bastard Fear.
He looked me in the eye with not a smile
And held my gaze awhile.
I did not blink,
I knew no harm would come,
He only frightens some.
He followed me and warned that I could die,
I spat into his eye.

Fug

Steve Glason

In the morning rush hour train
Lingers last nights curry
On the breath its odours stain
Take-a-Ways in Surrey.

Fragrant smells like aftershave
Mixed with scented soap
Perfume. which the adverts rave
It is too much to cope.

Oh quickly open window wide
Let fresh air waft therein
(Standby for a bumpy ride
Committing mortal sin!).

Peach

Norman Bissett

Her skin was velvet,
crying out to be caressed.
But her heart was stone.
Nuzzling into that soft flesh
jarred, setting the teeth on edge.

Medusa

Norman Bissett

A pale, colourless
saucer, fringed with tentacles,
a sac of jelly
like a translucent muscle,
trailing serpents behind it.

The following article and photograph is copied with the kind permission of Kentish Times.

Author's Debut Book at 89

Marina Soteriou

An 89-YEAR-OLD man, who can no longer write after a fall left him paralysed down one side, is having his first novel published.

Widower Alan Watts from West Wickham first penned his novel *The North Wind Doth Blow* 30 years ago, but only found it again when he was going through some old papers.

Three years ago he suffered a brain haemorrhage, but his passion for creative writing has not subsided and he dictates much of his work for his daughter Fleur Hogarth to type.

The retired civil servant's book, which is to be published by Athena Press this month, is set in a cotton mill town in 1815 shortly after the Battle of Waterloo.

He said: "It is a historical novel. It is very much like today with the recession and that is what the story is about. It is about when work isn't available and people get restless and start up trouble."

The prolific writer, who now lives in Glebe Court Nursing Home in West Wickham, only found the manuscript again shortly before Christmas.

He said: "It was rather like Sir Walter Scott with *Waverley*. He mislaid it and found it when he was looking for some fishing tools and thought this isn't bad at all".

"I am, very pleased. The publishers read it and gave an interesting report on it and made me feel this is worth it."

The father-of-two, originally from Middlesbrough, spent most of his working life as a civil servant in the Department of Employment in Liverpool.

He was involved in drafting the highly controversial Industrial Relations Bill which was passed in 1971 and later repealed by the Labour government in 1974.

The Act restricted Trade Union rights and led to strikes by dock workers and miners.

Mr Watts said: “I thought that Sir Geoffrey Howe was a brilliant chap. He was the brains behind the Bill. It was a very interesting for me because it was like a writing job. I would have to write speeches for these people. A lot of the speeches I worked on were said in the House of Commons. Harold Wilson was very interested in me. I reminded him of someone. He kept looking at me and colleagues asked why Mr Wilson was attracted to me.”

The grandfather has written several books on Charles Dickens, one with the author’s great grandson, Cedric Dickens called *The Sayings of Charles Dickens*.

His latest book’s ISBN number is 978-1-84748-439-5 and will be available to order from most bookshops as well as at amazon.co.uk.



SCPSW President Allan Watts and daughter Fleur

The Retirement

Ruth Sear

My Grandad, Peter Penrose Payne, didn't celebrate his seventieth birthday in 1957. He was proud of the fact that he'd never celebrated any birthdays in all his adult life!

“What's the use of it all? Cards get chucked away after they've collected dust on the mantelpiece, and prezzies are usually something you don't want.”

So he never gave cards or presents to my Gran or any other family member.including me!

My grandparents lived in the next street. I was ten years old then, and popped in to visit the couple one Saturday evening. Grandad glared at the wireless as if it was responsible for the football results. My Gran silently concentrated on her mending, knowing not to disturb the listener. Grandad's attention, as he sat at the table with pen and paper, focused on the voice emitting from the machine. As usual it was the highlight of his week; tonight he might win!

At the end of the results Grandad threw down his pen in disgust and switched off the wireless. He screwed the paper into a ball and flung it into the fire.

“Stupid players don't know how to score. Eleven years after the War and they've forgotten how to play! Nothing this week, never mind; might be lucky next week.”

He stared at the card I'd made, the colours of the wax crayons bright and garish.

“Happy Seventeeth! In my day, any kid who got their spellings wrong had to stand on a stool in the corner of the classroom and wear a dunce's cap. And do they still use the birch? That was effective, believe me. None of us dare misbehave then...”

He glared at the card. “Seventy! Me, Peter Payne, I'm seventy years old. I can't believe how time flies.” He sighed. “I don't know what on earth I'm going to do with my days, now.”

For it was only last week that he'd closed his shop door for the last time, and announced to anyone who might be interested: “I'm retiring.”

Peter Penrose Payne had started “t’ business”, as he called the shop, in 1925. By then he’d managed to evade death three times; he survived the Great War without mishap; he recovered from the pandemic flu that followed, and he narrowly missed being caught by an angry (and hungry) escaped circus lion in 1921.

Known simply as *PAYNE*, “t’ business” sold all sorts of useful items that included: tea cosies, egg cosies, antimacassars, chair back covers, doilies, dusters, hot water bottles, bed socks, golf club covers, potholders, firelighters, men’s collars, collar studs, ladies’ stockings, bicycle clips, candles, mouse traps, towels, handkerchiefs and tablecloths. And chamber pots! Those, commonly referred to as “Payne’s pots”, were a best seller for many years.

When Grandad’s son was old enough to join “t’ business”, two extra words were added to the shop front, and it became *PAYNE AND SON*. But the son, unlike his father, was unable to evade death (he was killed by a speeding car.) Peter never bothered to have the name changed even though my Gran had been told there would be no further little Paynes after my mum was born.

“T’ business” made a modest income until World War Two. The shop closed and the proprietor joined the Home Guard. In 1948 the shop re-opened and its trade, although slow, nevertheless managed to survive. But only just. For as the years went by, times changed; the type of goods sold in the shop became old fashioned and obsolete. Britain boomed; Britain had never had it so good, but *PAYNE AND SON* did neither.

Grandad watched people walking in and out of the nearest Co-op. The goods there were cheaper, offered more choice, were modern, and of course offered the divi! Never cheerful at the best of times he became increasingly pessimistic about the future of “t’ business.”

How did he spend most of his working day? By sitting behind the long wooden counter, reading the racing pages of the newspaper, with a gloomy expression on his face. Or in the office-cum-warehouse at the back of the shop, smoking. He always flicked the cigarette ash on the floor; it was a miracle how the premises never caught fire. He had nothing to do, just sit and wait for the consumers that never came to consume. He now moved slowly and lethargically, and was given to

exhaling heavy melancholy sighs with his heavily nicotine laden breath.

“Wore meself out, when I were a youth,” he often said to me.

I was puzzled. Wore himself out doing what? One boring day in the school holidays I had to stay in the shop with him whilst my parents went to visit someone, miles away. I asked him what he meant by wearing himself out. He lit a cigarette, his twelfth that day, shook his head mournfully and sighed.

“Time for a cuppa. Put the kettle on, child.”

Only four people had entered the shop that morning, making me jump as the loud bell jangled each time the door opened. They consisted of, a browser who bought nothing, a little boy who bought some firelighters, and two housewives. One bought a box of men’s white handkerchiefs, and the other bought a tie.

“I want a grey one, Mr Payne,” she said. There was only one box of ties in the shop. And they were all grey; there was never a large range of stock, and most of it was mainly left over from before the war.

After she had departed Grandad opened the till and plucked some coins from it. “Go and have a cuppa, and I’ll shut up shop for a bit. I’d best be off to, err, well to do something,” he said.

I knew he was going to some seedy house to place a bet. He stuck a card on the door: *BACK IN 5 MINS APPR OX*

He hurried away, lighting a cigarette as he went down the street.

Half an hour later he returned and it was business as usual (or lack of it.) He put a box of men’s white shirts on display on a table outside the shop.

“I’m selling them at six and nine pence,” he said. But he put the ticket upside down by mistake, and he was puzzled why no one even enquired about them.

“Perhaps I’m selling them too cheap and people think that there’s something wrong with ‘em,” he sighed. “Times are hard.” He shook his head.

I ate my sandwiches for lunch behind the counter. Grandad disappeared in the afternoon, probably to “do something” again.

No further customers entered that day after the morning's flurry (of four.)

When Grandad retired he spent his days either at the library reading the newspapers or sleeping on his armchair at home. Gran, who liked tending the small garden by herself, became annoyed with him.

“Go and get a job,” she ordered.

So he found a job as a night watchman in a local factory; but after he'd been there for six months it closed down. Then came a job as a gardener at a big house. indeed it was a mansion. in the country; but the owners moved away. After that he took a job as a petrol pump attendant at a garage; but it went into liquidation.

“I dunno what I'll do with myself,” he said.

There were three cinemas in our town. They were the Odeon, the Regal, and the Star. We children went to the Regal every Saturday morning, and were enthralled by the adventures of Roy Rogers, Hoppalong Cassidy and The Lone Ranger. Apaches, Cheyenne and Sioux uttered their war cries, thundering across the screen, before they bit the dust. Horses leapt over burning fences and tom-toms thundered. And there was space fiction that frightened some of the younger children.

The commissioner at the Regal was Mr Jones. He hated children, and spent a lot of time walking up and down the queue of noisy chattering youngsters, shouting at us to be quiet before he opened the doors to allow us in.

On Saturday afternoons we would re-enact the stories we had seen that morning.

The streets were full of noisy children, playing games. Children riding bikes, pushing carts, pushing doll's prams, playing “tag” in the middle of the street, skipping and playing hop scotch on the pavement.

The recreation ground (the Rec.) was a very important play area for the local children. It was large enough for bat and ball games. There were several fine horse chestnut trees on one side and on another side grew a straight row of poplar trees. There were also hawthorn trees, and in the spring the girls picked the blossom and wore it in their hair, pretending to be brides.

On Saturday evenings I would return to the Regal with my Mum and Dad, for the grown ups' film. There was the usual group of children, coins clutched in their hands, hovering around the outside, and saying to people: "Can you take us in, please?" because unaccompanied children were not allowed in the cinema in the evenings.

Mr Jones glared at me, recognising me from the morning's viewing. Up the stairs we climbed, I clutching sweets and chocolate, past the black and white photographs of famous film stars that adorned the walls. And at the end of the film we would make a dash for the exit, crushed in the aisles with the majority of the audience, to avoid standing for the National Anthem.

But one day there was news. Young Bert Coggings, whose mum worked as a cleaner at the Regal, came dashing to the Rec. and announced: "Hey you lot, guess what! Old Jones has pegged out!"

A week later, Mum, Dad and I went to the Regal to see *The River of No Return*. As we approached the double doors a new commissioner stepped forward, resplendent in his uniform: maroon coat with gold epaulets and shiny gold buttons, light trousers with a maroon stripe on the side, and maroon cap with gold braid. He opened the door as we approached.

"Good evening Sir, good evening *Ladies*." The last word was followed by a wink in my direction. I gasped. Mum and Dad, after staring in astonishment for a moment, began to laugh.

"You old devil!" exclaimed Mum.

Grandad Payne actually chortled! In fact he looked quite jovial!

"I think I've been lucky finding this job. Can't see any future in watching films on those television set thingamajigs; cinemas will never close down."

He looked at the people behind us and shouted in a stentorian voice: "Form an orderly queue please! Thank you!" He turned to us and said, "You see, I've always wanted to work with the entertainments. Used to go to the music hall and the silent films a lot when I were a youth. Wore meself out sometimes, going there most evenings and weekends. I never really liked all those years in that shop trying to keep t' business going; but I'm going to enjoy working here!"

"Grandad!" A sudden idea entered my head. "Can you get us a free entry here, every time we come?"

You'll Never Make a Soldier

A Memory from John Edwards

It was a fine day or I wouldn't have attempted it. She hadn't arrived so I thought I'd walk and meet her. I picked up my bag and turned right out of the gate. The sign next to the gate had been newly painted. *West Lodge* it said and below some writing I couldn't read; but I knew those words in big letters. I heard them every day.

I began marching down the road with a confident stride. Down Station Road. All the time I was watching for her. She would be coming soon I knew. Perhaps the traffic was heavy. It usually was at this time with all the schools turning out.

The road had several bends so I had to keep careful watch for her. She might slip past me unobserved. But I was travelling down-hill. It was quite a steep hill so she would be travelling slowly up it.

I knew the way to the bottom of the hill. It was straightforward – just follow the road down. I wasn't sure after that. But I was certain she would arrive before I reached the bottom of the hill.

Then I rounded the last bend before the railway station. I saw the railway bridge over the road. A bus was waiting at the stop just before the bridge where there was a parade of shops. It was a single-decker bus – the railway bridge was too low for a double-decker to get under. I watched as two people boarded the bus. I was near enough to hear the conductor ring the bell and shout '*Hold tight!*' as the bus pulled away with a roar and a cloud of exhaust smoke.

I was at the one road I had to cross – I remembered that I had to cross the road, but couldn't remember which way to go after that. I looked each way. Must be very careful about crossing the road. It was a busy crossroad with lights. Nothing coming so I hurried over with a young woman pushing a pram. I'd be safe crossing with her I thought.

But still no sight of her. Where was she. It was already very late. She should have been there by now – in fact she should have been there before I started walking down the hill. What could have happened to her?

I was standing in front of the parade of shops at the crossroads. I knew she would be coming from one of the roads – not the one up the hill, but one of the others. I looked all ways and there was still no sign of her.

Panic started to well up. I was getting more than just anxious – I was wondering what would happen if she didn't come. Despair took hold and misery overcame me. A tear started to dribble down my cheek. I was all alone; abandoned. The crisis erupted in tears. I was crying uncontrollably.

A man passing by stooped down. "What's the matter son?" he asked.

I spluttered out between sobs: "My mummy. She's not come for me."

"Don't worry son. She'll be here soon. You mustn't cry. You'll never make a soldier if you do." He pulled out a handkerchief and gave it me. I wiped my tear-stained face wondering why I should ever want to be a soldier. According to the wireless they went to war and got killed.

An elderly lady had also stopped. "What's your name?" she asked.

I tried to tell her between gasping a few more choking snuffles.

"Do you know your address?" she asked.

"It's number six," I spluttered.

"Number six what?"

"I don't know."

Suddenly my mother was there. She was clasping me and hugging me. "I'm here now. Sorry I got delayed. Don't cry. Everything's all right."

The crowd that had gathered melted away. Just another lost five year old. No need to worry – his mum had arrived now.

My mum collected me from school on a carrier seat on the back of a bicycle. All the way home I hugged her tight. I couldn't see where we were going; but I knew we were going home. The wind whistled past and the pedals purred like a contented cat.

Some years later I went back out of curiosity to find West Lodge Preparatory School. It's now been rebuilt as an office block. How things change – but I hope not the concern and kindness of strangers towards lost children.

The Good Samaritan

Bill Torrie Douglas

Harry frequently interrupted his reading to watch the young man's slow progress along the Avenue. He was ringing every door bell and, when someone answered, he pushed a card under their nose and awaited a reaction. Whatever it was he was selling, nobody was buying.

As the young man got closer, Harry noticed the artist's portfolio. It was so large that the youth had difficulty carrying it under one arm. Harry put down his book and thought of retreating into the house; but he sat where he was, in the sun, waiting on the lad's approach.

He accepted the card when it was presented to him and read the untidy capital letters.

"My name is Pavel. I am from Poland and I am deaf. I want to study art here. Would you like to see my drawings?"

He was a wide-eyed youth of slender build and Harry thought that the high cheekbones and flat features were indicative of Eastern Europe. He also had a sallow complexion and the short spiky hairstyle that was in vogue with the young men of the day. Harry looked up into the brown eyes that gazed straight back at him. The boy's mouth turned up into a slight smile.

"Okay, let me see them." Harry pointed to the portfolio and then at the garden bench he was sitting on.

The boy nodded with a white-toothed grin and undid the faded tape that was holding the portfolio together. The drawings were pencil sketches of dogs, horses, flowers and trees and were the work of a competent artist, as far as Harry could judge. He was impressed by a sketch of three ships in full sail on a lively sea, billowing in the Baltic gales.

"How much?" He put on an enquiring expression which Pavel immediately understood. He responded by holding up eight fingers.

Harry nodded and pulled out his wallet. He withdrew a ten pound note and gave it to the boy who brought a little money pouch from a trouser pocket to get at his change. Harry shook his head and waved

dismissively at the pouch. Pavel's grin was white and his eyes radiated thanks. He bowed to his new patron before turning away down the garden path.

Harry was thinking about the type of frame that would suit the picture when Jake, from across the road, shuffled up the garden path.

“You didn't buy one o' his pictures did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

Jake bent over to study the drawing lying on the garden bench.

“You shouldn't encourage them. He'll be one o' these asylum seekers.”

Harry shook his head. “He's from Poland. They're in the European Union now.”

“Aye, it's all the same though. Comin' here to scrounge off the welfare state. I'll bet he didn't even draw that himself.”

“You're an old cynic Jake.” Harry lifted the drawing and gently laid it onto the path by the side of the bench. “Anyway, it might be worth some money some day. Have a seat.”

The older man lowered himself slowly onto the bench and took a packet of cigarettes from the top pocket of his shirt.

“Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No, you're okay, kill yourself if you want to.” Harry watched him light up, “do you know that one of my great grandfathers came from Lithuania?”

Jake blew a puff of smoke into the afternoon air. “Where's that?”

“On the Baltic.”

“Where's that?”

“Not far from Poland.” Harry let Jake take in this information. “Anyway, your grandparents came from Ireland, didn't they?”

“Aye, but that was different....”

Jake's argument was stifled in mid flow as young Pavel came running back down the Avenue. He ran up the garden path, his wide eyes concerned and fearful, with low, throaty sounds coming from between his quivering lips. He was out of breath. Harry got up and grasped his arms, and then made a calming sign with one of his hands.

"Take it easy son, take it easy."

"He can't hear you Harry." Jake also struggled to his feet, "he's deaf."

Pavel was pointing up the street, still making noises and indicating that they should come with him. He then stopped, his eyes became even wider and he placed his portfolio on the bench and took one of the artworks out. Turning it over, he began drawing on the back. His fingers were amazingly quick and the image soon appeared. It was a well defined sketch of a woman lying face down on the ground. Pavel turned towards them, pointed to the drawing and then, grasping Harry's arm, he pulled him down the path. Jake hobbled along behind.

Pavel took them to a garden further along the Avenue. It was mostly hidden behind large shrubs and Harry had often thought that the interior of the house must have been severely dulled by these large growths in the front garden. The three of them manoeuvred around these monstrosities and reached the front door which was open. Lying face down on the step was an old woman, very still and pale.

"That's old Mrs Graham." Jake gasped between heavy breaths.

Harry lifted her wrist. "She's still got a pulse." He looked up at Jake, "we'll need to get an ambulance. You phone and I'll see if I can make her more comfortable."

Jake turned and stumbled down the path.

"Jake!"

The old man stopped.

"Use her phone. It'll save time."

"Right." Jake eventually got himself into the house.

Harry 's knowledge of first aid was limited and he dithered on how much to move her. He thought that he should get her onto a piece of level ground but she was either heavier than she looked or his strength was waning. He glanced up at Pavel who was looking as if he wanted to help. With a variety of innovative signs, Harry soon had the young lad helping him to move the old lady onto the level path. He then shifted her into the recovery position. He was relieved to hear her sigh and hoped that she had only suffered a fainting attack.

“Have you got that ambulance yet?” Harry shouted into the open door.

Jake's reply was distant. “Aye, I have now. I couldn't find the phone.”

It was not long before they heard the warning wail of a siren and the ambulance noisily halting in front of the house. The paramedics took over in efficient fashion and the old lady was soon on a stretcher.

“Well done lads. You done okay.” The medic looked up at Jake who smirked unashamedly. “I think she might have had a heart attack. She's taken some fall. Look at the bruise on the side of her face.”

Mrs Graham's face was a livid blue on the side that had been in contact with the pavings.

Quickly and smoothly they got the old lady on her way to hospital, even before her next door neighbour turned up to take control of the house. She also knew how to contact the old lady's son..

Harry, Jake and Pavel took their leave and sauntered back down the Avenue.

“Well that livened up the afternoon, didn't it.”

Harry laughed. “You could say.”

Pavel was tying up his portfolio, preparing to go when Harry tapped him on the shoulder and indicated that he should come inside. The young man shook his head and pointed along the road. Harry shook him by the hand and gave him the thumbs up sign. Jake also shook his hand before sitting down to light another cigarette. Pavel stopped as he reached the garden gate and waved back to them before striding away.

The two neighbours sat side by side on the bench.

“Mind you, he’s got some guts eh.” Jake blew smoke rings into the air. “Deaf, comin’ across from Poland, goin’ round the doors selling his drawings. Some bottle.”

“And he could just have ignored her and left her there. He didn’t need to get involved.”

“Aye. He could have passed by on the other side of the street...” Jake turned to Harry, “he could draw a bit as well, couldn’t he. That was a great wee picture of Mrs Graham, the poor old soul.”

“Yeh, you’re right, he certainly could draw. So much for your cynicism.”

“Do you think his drawings really could be worth some money some time.”

“Who knows, stranger things have happened....”

“I’m going to buy one.” Jake pushed himself to his feet and limped down the path.

“What was his name again?”

“Pavel.”

“Hey Pavel, wait the now.

“He can’t hear you Jake, he’s deaf.” Harry shook his head as he watched his neighbour struggle along the road.

“This bloody hip o’ mine. Pavel!”

Harry laughed. He had never seen his old neighbour move so fast. Jake caught up with Pavel just as he was coming out of the last garden, disappointed again.

Harry watched Jake looking through the drawings, stopping sometimes for a closer scrutiny. Eventually he chose one and the money was handed over. Jake shook hands with the young lad once more. Pavel gave a low bow, turned and disappeared out of the Avenue.

A Christmas Story

Angus Livingstone

It was Christmas Eve and all through the house nothing stirred, not even a mouse.

I'm a conceptual artist who has tried for years to win the Turner prize to no avail. But three years ago I had a great idea. I would create the first live entry using a family of mice. I would train the mother mouse to cook porridge for them all to eat. But I had to complete it in three years – the life-span of a mouse. The first year I spent teaching the mouse, I named Minnie, a sign language so I could to communicate with her.

That went well. Then I began the cooking lesson using a video tape of that chap Ramsay. That meant I had to teach Minnie, who by now had two children, a swear sign first and that took three months. It was difficult to get the concept over to her, although the children were swearing like troopers after two weeks.

I won't go into the details of the rest of the training but it was hard work for Minnie and myself. It was going to be touch and go if we could complete it in time for this year's competition being judged in December. Then early December, Minnie's heart started giving trouble – old age mainly. She responded to drugs, however, and I managed to delay the judging till the 24th. Minnie managed to complete the whole action for the first time on the 23rd.

The following day, the judges arrived, and Minnie began cooking. She measured out the oat flakes, the salt, and the water, and fetched the wooden spoon to give the mix a stir. I could see the judges were quite impressed so far.

The sound of a pavement choir singing a carol drifted through the window at that point. Minnie got very agitated and made a series of signs, too quick for me to understand, before keeling over with the spoon in her hand – dead.

Two hours later, after they had coaxed me off the window ledge, we all sat round the TV. By playing the recording at slow speed I managed to decipher Minnie's last words:

Don't you know nothing stirs on Christmas Eve, you effing pillock. Three effing years and nothing but effing porridge. Have you never heard of effing Cocoa Pops?

Goodbye cruel world.

The Painting in the Shop Window

Oliver Eade

Ever been to Hasselt? If you have you'd know why it's called the fashion capital of Flanders, for in the main street almost every other shop is a designer shop or a stylish shoe shop. Quite extraordinary for such a small city. Early in the morning, in those empty streets, you would be perfectly justified to wonder how on earth they get by, those shopkeepers, with so much competition, but wander through the pedestrianised zone in the afternoon and you soon see how they make a living. The same streets are teeming with people. Fashionable, shoe-conscious men and women of all ages, shapes and sizes.

It was on one such afternoon that Pieter Thywissen wandered down Demer Straat and into a shoe shop so posh there were only two shoes in the window. To the right a stiletto-heeled, pastel-pink lady's shoe with an elegant pointed toe, a few imagined footprints away from a small leather bag of exactly the same colour. To the left, a man's shoe. Lime green, with white stripes. It stood alone. Together, these three items, none of which bore any indication of price, defined a space where a small display heralded the season: a few sprays of artificial pink blossom, a square of artificial pale green grass and an open picnic hamper containing one lean-to bottle of champagne and two tall champagne glasses, both empty.

Inside the shop were a few more shoes arranged neatly along shelves, but Pieter Thywissen had no interest in these. It was the shop window that had caught his eye, and that's where he was heading for. No one seemed to pay him any attention as he stepped over the stiletto-heeled pink shoe into a space beside the picnic hamper. No one appeared to notice when he set up his easel, upon which he rested a large oil painting. And the shop assistants were totally oblivious of the drawings Pieter Thywissen spread out on the floor in front of the hamper, the pink shoe and the green and white striped man's shoe. They weren't in the least bothered about him.

He had brought along a small stool and placed this by the easel. He sat on the stool and looked out at the people looking in, hoping that someone might notice his painting. Notice it and *see* it as a work of art. *Look* at it.

Pieter Thywissen was an artist. That's *all* he was, now. An artist and a name at the foot of a painting and a few drawings. His painting, however, was more than a message, more than a communication from one to another; it was a baring of his soul, and as he sat and looked back at those gazing shoppers in the street he wondered whether there was a single one amongst them who would wish to see into the soul of another. He thought of all the famous Flemish painters. Long after they had died people still paid money for the privilege of gazing at the painted souls of those great masters. Now, at last, Pieter Thywissen, hitherto unknown in this world, had his own space, his own gallery. Surely someone out there would care to look at his soul ... and for free.

Many came to the shop window and gazed at the pink shoes and pink bag and the green and white stripy shoes, and some of them laughed. At the shoes, not him, for they appeared to see neither Peter Thywissen nor his painting. But he continued to hope as he sat alone looking out at the street. He hoped and waited and hoped.

The painting showed a woman, a man, a child and a dog, and for the artist it somehow mirrored his soul so perfectly. 'The Family', as it was called, defined the happiness of his past and was his best ever work. Of course, his soul mirrored the feelings of the people he had known; ordinary people, like those who stood and stared at the garish shoes. Surely they would see their own feelings in his work, he thought to himself as he sat and waited? And if this were to happen they would want to tell others, and they too would come to the shop window to look at his soul, and see their feelings mirrored there. People would come not only from Hasselt, but from all over Belgium. From other countries in Europe too, and from America and Japan. They would come not because of the pink shoe and the green shoe with white stripes. They would come to see the greatest work of Pieter Thywissen.

Meanwhile he sat and he waited and the people came and stood and looked. At the shoes and at the bag. Some entered the shop and browsed the shelves for other fashionable shoes whilst others shook their heads, grinned, and walked on to the clothes shop next door. Or they headed in the opposite direction for the chocolate shop just along the street.

Days passed by, and Pieter Thywissen was still there, sitting in the shop window beside his painting. Hundreds – no, thousands – of shoppers must have stopped and peered in, but had any of them seen his soul? Had any even noticed the painting? He was patient, though, for time was on his side. It imposed no restriction on him as he sat and he watched and waited. But the shoppers, they only looked at the shoes and the bag and saw nothing else, and the glamorous shop-assistants went about their business, ignoring the man sitting in their window.

Then one day he left. He could have remained there for an eternity staring back at the staring shoppers, but for the sake of his bared soul he could take no more of it, and he left. And he left behind his painting, his soul, for it no longer seemed important to him. Stepping over the pink stiletto shoe and the hamper and the bottle of champagne, he went straight through the window, through the eyeless staring people. He continued down Demer Straat, towards the old cemetery where he shrank back into nothing beneath a crumbling, grey tombstone.

“Mummy!” cried the little girl as her elegant mother stared at the pink stiletto shoe in the shop window. “Look at the little girl in that picture, Mummy. Why is she dressed all funny? And why is she looking at me like that?”

But the girl’s mother was far too absorbed with her own inner ‘should I or shouldn’t I?’ debate to heed her daughter’s questions.

“I think Mummy should get her shoes here, darling,” she said to the girl.

“Mummy, can we get a dog like the one in the picture? *Please*, Mummy?”

“Come on, sweetheart. I’ll try them on. I won’t be long.”

“The dog, Mummy?”

“No dog dear. Just want to try on those shoes. Look, there’s a chair inside. You can sit and read your book.”

“But Mummy, I want to look at the picture. I want to look at the little girl and the dog.”

Her mother wasn’t listening, and reluctantly the little girl stopped staring at the painting and followed her mother into the shoe shop.

But she never forgot the image of the young girl with her parents and a dog in that shop window ... the family of her dreams.

The Badminton Club

Ruth Sear

New members wanted for established badminton Club. Join us on Thursday evenings, 7pm to 10pm, Saint Mary's Church Hall in Hill Street. For further details contact Mrs Sarah Lynch, tel...

Anna Kemp dialled the number.

“Sarah Lynch speaking,” a loud voice answered.

“Hello; I saw an advertisement in a newsagent's window about badminton – can you give me some more details?”

“Have you played before?” Sarah Lynch's voice sounded irritable.

“Um, yes. A bit. But not for some time.”

“We play to a reasonable standard.” Sarah placed her hand over the phone's mouthpiece and whispered to her husband, “Put my plate in the oven.” She removed her hand and said to Anna, “Do you know where Saint Mary's is?” Her voice sounded aggressive, hostile.

“Yes. I really wanted to know how many players you have; do you play all year round, and how much does it cost to join...”

“There's twelve members, yes we do, and it's £80 a year. Bring your own racquet, wear white soled trainers, and we supply the shuttlecocks. Any other questions?”

“Err, no. I'll pop along next Thursday, then. My name's Anna Kemp.”

“We'll expect you. Bye!”

The last word was almost a yell; it caused the enquirer to start and almost drop the receiver.

Sarah slammed the phone down. She turned to her husband. “Now for my grub. Fetch my plate!”

John Lynch carefully extracted his wife's supper from the oven. As he placed it on the table he said mildly, “How many enquiries have you had, since you placed the advert?”

“One,” Sarah snapped.

“I see.” He added nervously, “If the supper isn't hot enough dear, I'll warm it up for you.” He knew how much she relished her food. “But why didn't you let the answer machine take a message?”

‘Shut up,’ came his wife’s surly answer, as she attacked the lamb chop, spearing it savagely with a fork and cutting it vigorously with a knife.

After she’d eaten John, washed the dishes; Sarah switched on her computer wondering how she could murder her main character. Should she shoot or poison him? Or thrust a knife through his heart? Fresh ideas were becoming a problem, unlike like years ago when she had first started writing her detective stories. When she was fired with ambition to be a famous writer (that she never became.) She gazed at the screen. How could she bump off this bloke? He was beginning to annoy her. Her fingers flew over the keyboard. Two hours later she said, ‘Phew, dead at last. The police will have difficulty with that one. It’s a good idea, pushing him off Beachy Head.’

Sarah was forty something; she was plump, tall and strong and had brown hair with grey roots and a plain face. If anyone enquired about her hobbies her answer was she had two passions in life: writing, and playing badminton.

‘But what about your husband?’ someone might ask. Then Sarah would give an unpleasant laugh and reply, ‘He’s hardly a passion!’

Poor John Lynch.

He was Sarah’s second husband. Sam (her first) Sarah would tearfully tell anyone who listened, was killed in a road accident. Soon after this sad event she met John; they literally bumped into each other on an ice rink. As the blade of her boot seared through the flesh of John’s arm the widow thought: ‘Ah, I could make you my number two!’

They were married three months later and lived unhappily ever after. They shared only one common interest: badminton. In an attempt to inject some spice into their lives they joined a club that met every Thursday at Saint Mary’s. But the game split them further asunder because of Sarah’s ambition to be the best player there.

She was an optician’s receptionist. She spent her evenings and weekends participating either in flower arranging, tap dancing, ladies’ yoga or writing. She had her own study and when creating her stories she shut herself behind a locked door. Although she *said* she was happily married her life never included John; she said it was difficult to spend time with him because he worked shifts.

Poor John Lynch.

Soon after the nuptials he began to drink heavily; how often had he advanced towards that locked door to be repulsed by the notice that hung there bearing the welcoming words:

KEEP OUT. GENIUS AT WORK.

Sarah finished her story about the Beachy Head murder. With visions of the Booker Prize floating before her, she went to bed at midnight.

On Thursday evening Sarah went to the Church Hall to prepare for badminton. John said he would stay behind and finish the washing-up and follow a short time later, but the moment Sarah left he went to the drinks cupboard.

It was forty minutes before he came to the Hall. By then several members had arrived and there was a game in progress. He walked in with the new player. Both were laughing; John's face was flushed and – to Sarah's surprise – he looked *happy!*

“This is Anna, everyone.” John beamed at his companion. “We met in the car park, and stopped to chat.”

“Hello!” the players chorused.

Anna was very pretty. She was in her thirties and had blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, blue eyes, a creamy complexion, and a slim figure. She wore smart sports clothes.

“Hello,” she smiled, her red lips revealing perfect white teeth.

Sarah didn't like women who wore loads of make-up. It was all showing off, and they were always poor players.

“I'll show you how *I* play,” she thought to herself. “You and your glamour, wait until we're on the court, Anna Kemp.”

“Ready for a game?” she snapped. Anna nodded as she withdrew a gleaming racquet from its cover. Sarah turned to John to hide a sneer.

“You'll be my partner,” she said in an authoritative voice.

She noticed he was wearing his new shorts; they showed off his legs. She reflected he'd a good pair of legs. She told old Larry to partner Anna. John was a good player, and Larry was poor.

Sarah thought, “This game will be a doddle.”

But it wasn't.

She (and John) lost.

Anna (and Larry) won.

John played well, but not well enough. Anna was a brilliant player, and it was thanks to her outstanding ability that the game was soon over; Larry hardly moved! Sarah played her best, and tried every way she knew to outwit Anna, but it was no good. The Lynchs only managed a low score. Sarah was bitterly disappointed; she had wanted to show this upstart a thing or two. It was humiliating.

Throughout the evening Anna continued to win every game. Sarah refused to partner the new member. At the end of the evening someone asked Anna if she'd enjoyed herself.

"Yes thanks," she replied brightly. "The standard's – well, it's different to what I was used to." She nodded to Sarah. "You're a good player. Well, I'm off now; so goodnight, everyone. See you next week." She went from the hall, looking as cool and impeccable as when she'd first entered. Sarah stared after her, feeling breathless, old, fat, very hot and sweaty. And her back ached.

'She's usurped your position as top player!' laughed John. "Anna's a jolly good player; she's nice; and not bad looking, either."

Sarah said nothing. As they left they saw Anna Kemp speed away in a smart little red car. Sarah felt a wave of dislike overwhelm her. She swore and muttered to herself "I hate her! She needs to go!"

The following Thursday Sarah arrived home late from work, so she was late going to the Club. John had already left with the hall keys. "He seems anxious to be there tonight," Sarah thought, and the reason soon became obvious. There was the red car in the car park. As Sarah entered she saw Anna and John on the court.

"John's so fit and energetic tonight," Anna said. She smiled flatteringly at him.

Throughout the evening Anna was lively and cheerful. Sarah thought, 'She's becoming too popular!'

Then both women found themselves sitting out, whilst waiting their turn to play. Sarah turned to Anna. "Do you work?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

“A writer!” Sarah, examining the handle of her racquet, nearly dropped it. “What do you write?”

“My agent calls them pot-boilers.”

“You’ve got an agent!” Sarah gasped bitterly.

“Yes. But I call my creations romances or escapism. Whatever they are, they bring in the money. I’m lucky; I can stay at home and enjoy my lovely garden and my cats. I’d hate to have to commute to work every day.”

Sarah hated gardening and cats.

“I don’t recognise your name.”

“I use a pseudonym. Miriam Midnight.”

Sarah gulped, and then jumped from the chair. “They’ve finished now. Shall we play?” She felt choked with anger and jealousy. She recognised Anna’s pseudonym. Hadn’t she often seen the books at W H Smith’s and Waterstone’s? And the library? Sarah had been there recently and borrowed *Pacific Passion*. She thought the writing was poor, the characters weak, and the sex scenes (there were many tucked in the pages) were – well, nothing but erotic fantasy. But nevertheless Sarah read the book, telling herself that it was purely for research. But she had to acknowledge that her own stories were pale in comparison to Miriam Midnight’s. She couldn’t bring herself to admit she had been “glued” to the book. She’d hidden it from John; she thought it wasn’t suitable for him.

The evening progressed. Anna and her partner were playing against Larry and Sarah. Before a serve, Anna told a joke; everyone roared with laughter, except Sarah. “I’ll get the last laugh on you, Kemp,” she thought coldly. Towards the end of the game she felt angry. She was losing; she must do something quickly. She deliberately aimed a devastating smash at Anna’s face. The shuttlecock hit its target and Anna dropped to the floor. Blood began to pour from her face. A moment later everyone was fussing around her, offering handkerchiefs, ice cubes from the kitchen, and lifts to the nearest casualty department.

“I don’t feel well.” she groaned.

John turned on his wife. “You might have killed her!” he exclaimed. He whispered in her ear fiercely: “In fact, I believe you meant to hurt her! You’re jealous of her!”

Sarah turned pale. She stared at him. “I bet she has a hell of a headache tomorrow. John...”

But John turned his back to her and tenderly dabbed Anna’s face with his handkerchief. Larry offered to take the patient home. Sarah’s mind was racing. But she knew that John wouldn’t do or say anything further about the incident. It was the way she’d trained him.

As the players entered the car park, Sarah looked up to the sky. She thought, “Are you up there Sam, watching me? If you are, I’ll tell you something. You might be having company soon!” And she shot a glance at John Lynch.

Three weeks later at 5pm Sarah’s phone rang. ‘Sarah Lynch speaking,’ she answered sharply.

“Hello, err, I saw your advertisement. In the um, newsagent’s window. About the Thursday badminton.” The enquirer was a man, elderly and nervous. “Let me see, I wrote it down. Where did I put the paper? I’m so forgetful these days. Ah yes, here it is underneath...”

“Have you played before?” Sarah interrupted aggressively.

“Err, well yes. A little. I was a late starter. You see...”

Sarah thought, “Oh crikey, he’s going to give me his life history.” She interrupted again.

“Well we don’t want complete novices because we all play to a reasonable standard. Do you know where Saint Mary’s is?”

“Err, yes. May I join you tonight? If that’s convenient of course. My evenings are rather lonely. I’d been married for forty years last April when my poor wife...”

“What’s the name?” Sarah gave a sigh of impatience.

“My name is, err, James Jonathan Luff.” Mr Luff’s voice seemed to suddenly develop a quaver. ‘Shall I bring shuttlecocks?’

“No. Just a racquet. Come tonight if you want. 7pm.” Sarah slammed the receiver down.

Sarah arrived at the Church car park at 6:30pm. It was a very dark night. She always arrived early to prepare for the evening; switch on lights, open the cupboard marked *Badminton Only*, put out the net and place chairs in position.

She unlocked the Hall’s main door and entered; then hesitated. She sniffed. There was a strong smell of gas!

She switched on the small torch that was attached to her car key ring, made her way to the kitchen and unlocked the door.

“I bet it’s that old cooker. I knew it would cause a problem sometime,” she thought as she entered.

An overwhelming gassy odour caused her to cover her nose and mouth with a handkerchief. A loud hissing issued from the ancient gas cooker in the corner. She shone the torch towards it but the light was becoming feeble. Groping, she found all the cooker knobs were in the ‘off’ position.

“Damn, I wonder where it’s leaking; I need to get help quickly,” she thought. Sarah never panicked (except when she was losing a game.) Then she exclaimed angrily, “My mobile! Bother, I left it in the car!”

She moved towards the kitchen door and nearly fell over a racquet carelessly discarded from the local school’s afternoon badminton session.

“Blooming kids! I might have been hurt!” She added a few more curses at the absent children, and without thinking properly she groped the wall for the light switch near the doorway. Her fingers made contact with hard cold plastic.

She pressed down the switch.

Mr James Jonathan Luff also arrived at Saint Mary’s Church early; at a quarter to seven to be exact. He’d been worried about parking his car (he worried about everything) – he wanted to be sure of a space in the car park for his new Fiesta rather than leave it on Hill Street.

But as he slowly and carefully drove towards the Church he realised that there was no possibility of parking in the car park, nor anywhere in Hill Street – a barrier prevented further progress. The road appeared to be full of fire engines, fire fighters and police. The Hall was ablaze. The wind drove the billowing black smoke everywhere. And as he stared in wonder at the flames leaping high into the night sky he saw a covered body on a stretcher being carried to a waiting ambulance. He heard a policeman say: ‘she’s a gonner.’”

“It looks like the badminton club’s off tonight,” Mr Luff thought sadly.

Summary of AGM on 23rd May 2009

Attended by 8 members and chaired by Terry Rickson.

Minutes of last Annual General Meeting were read and agreed.

Membership Secretary reported recruitment slower than last year, with only 10 new members. Membership of 124 is the lowest ever and our viability must now be in question.

Records show that 10 years ago we feared membership may drop below 330. In Ian McIntyre's time we reached over 450 and anticipated 500. Jenny is doing what she can but the Civil and Public Services are ever more fragmented, we face competition from writing magazines and writing groups: the latter spring up everywhere and many members go to writing circles for the instant feedback that the Society can't give. Our folios take months to get round. Even non topical articles or stories don't gain from stewing around for months. Should we soldier on or call it a day?

Meeting Secretary thought the popular New Year Party should continue as the CS Club are more accommodating about numbers the Annual Lunch should continue for this year. Due to many commitments she never finds time to finish her book and other writing, so has decided to give up being meetings secretary in 2 years time. It will give time to arrange for someone to take over if we are still here. The meeting discussed this issue. Roy Froud said, "He joined after entering P.D James competition and sponsors the Froud children's writing competition in order to gain new members. The annual lunch is enjoyable and Froud Competition is now open to all ages. We are all getting long in the tooth. Feels it is time to wind down". Terry Rickson thanked him for his comments and said we will review this in another year. Beryl asked for member's comments about Charles Neilson Gattey as she wants to write an article about him.

Treasurer reported only 22p interest on Gordon's account, gratitude for donations and that competition receipts were up. We can finance Author to year end, despite postal increases.

Publicity Officer said that she sends details of competitions to as many societies as will publicise it. Can only judge when somebody

joins and mentions where they heard about the society. Some magazines are short of space. Foreign Office rather snooty about mentioning us in Diplomat. They have an email newsletter which she may try. Shortage of space can refer to websites. Has sent out details of Froud competition. Notice boards in foyers of Government buildings may be worth using, but how to find out about them is a problem. When she rings she gets someone who deals with general enquiries. Works and Pension do not answer the phones. There are a lot of agency staff now. She needs something to publicise something each time e.g. competitions and these need to be put on society's website a.s.a.p. (Discussion continued at some length, but largely depend upon member's assistance.)

Editor reported receiving plenty of material, most through competitions but some individual contributions that are most welcome, with even a few spare poems. A nice position to be in.

Competition Secretary Ron Jeffreys is unable to continue, but Nina Mattar kindly agreed to take over. Terry to write a letter of thanks to Ron, who has been secretary for nearly 40 years.

Poetry Workshop Report The poetry workshop continues its activities through a lively magazine 'Wavelengths,' competitions, postal folios and the annual workshop Weekend. The 2008 edition of 'Waves' was published in July. It was good to see poems from several names new to the publication. Annual Bill Barnes competition was judged by Enid Zaid. The theme this year was for poems of rhyme and metre, which may have accounted for a lower number of entries than usual; perhaps would be entrants fought shy of writing in rhyme! The winner was Sylvia Neumann with 'Dreaming in Stone' In second place, 'From a Boy in 2050' by Shellie Nichols with Norman Bissett's 'Mearns Idyll' in third place. Winning poems were published in 'Wavelengths' Herbert Spencer Competition attracted 20 entries and was judged by Angus Livingstone. Winning entries 'Pits' by Norman Bissett and runner-up 'Off Guinea' by Don Nixon were published in 'Author'. A survey of members resulted in a number of ideas being considered. The postal folios reorganisation is being undertaken. The Annual Poetry Workshop Weekend was held at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, from 18th-20th July, The usual good mix of readings, talks, discussions and competition was enjoyed

by those attending. Mini-competition theme 'This House', set by Ivy Hudson, was won by Mike Boland's '42 days'; expressing some caustic views on Parliament.

AG.M, agreed increase of annual subscription from £3 to £5 p.a. w.e.f. 1st Jan. 2009, the first increase for many years. Liz Rowland announced her intention to stand down as Chairman and editor of 'Waves'. Barbara Stewart agreed to take chairmanship and Angus Livingstone to edit 'Waves'. Terry Rickson and Mike Boland agreed to continue as Treasurer and Co-ordinator respectively and were re elected.

Members attending were pleased to see Roger De Boeur, who had made a good recovery from surgery, remarking on the apparent skill and no small speed with which he navigated his wheelchair. The 2009 weekend will be held at the Hillscourt Conference Centre, Rednal, Birmingham between 31st July and 2nd August. 59 Society members subscribe to P/W.

Annual lunch Menu was selected and is included in this issue of 'Author'.

Writer of the year It was agreed to award this title to Alan Watts our President, who has just self published his first fiction book 'The North Wind Doth Blow' in his ninetieth year. His book of poetry "Various Verses" was also published this year

Anthology Committee are continuing selection from past Authors to offer to our sponsors, the Civil Service Insurance Society. Final details have yet to be confirmed.

W.F & F.G Froud Competition 2009 Roy Froud said that he will ask Ian Burnam, a local author who runs a writing school, if he will judge it.

Election of President and Vice Presidents All re elected.

Election of Committee. Nina Mattar agreed to become Competition Secretary, from Ron Jeffreys, who retired after nearly 40 years. Brian Scott seconded by Mike Smith, proposed that Nina Matter and all remaining committee members be re-elected. Agreed nem. con.

SCPSW Annual Statement of Income & Expenditure April 1st 2008 – 31st March 2009

INCOME	2008-09 £	2007-08 £
Subscriptions	2004.50	2197.00
AGM Receipts	132.00	60.00
NY Party Receipts	170.00	168.00
Luncheon Receipts	698.00	528.00
Competition	361.00	336.00
Sponsorship	175.00	150.00
Donations	218.00	1336.50
Bank Interest	-	-
Bank Charges Reimbursed	-	-
Author Sales	-	-
Poetry Workshop	165.00	162.00
Sundry Income	98.00	30.90
TOTAL INCOME	3919.50	4970.40
EXPENDITURE		
Author Printing & Dist	2261.85	2231.10
Sub. Refunds/Transfer	66.00	1000.00
Subs to P/W	169.00	159.00
Room Hire/Refreshments	1069.80	924.66
Committee Expenses	13.60	28.27
Competition Prizes	365.00	310.00
Bank Charges/Unpaid Cheques	-	-
Loan Repayment	-	150.00
Misc	60.00	-
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	4005.25	4803.03
Income less Expenditure MINUS	85.75	167.37
Balance b/f 1st April:	2376.17	2208.80
Receipts	<u>3919.50</u>	<u>4970.40</u>
	6295.67	7179.20
		<u>4803.03</u>
Payments	<u>4005.25</u>	2376.17
Balance b/f 31st March	2290.42	
TREASURER ACCOUNT		
Bank Statement	2325.42	2376.17
Unrepaid cheques	35.00	-
Available Cash	2290.42	2376.17
BUS: MONEY MANAGER		
Opening Balance	1080.50	68.80
Closing Balance	1061.35	1080.50
Signed as being correct statement for period.Allan Ward ACMA 20/7/09		