

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Chairman:

Terry Rickson

Vice Chairman:

Vacant

Membership Secretary:

Joan M Lewis
17 The Green
Corby Glen
GRANTHAM
NG33 4NP
membership@scpsw.co.uk

Meetings Secretary:

Ethel Corduff
10 Malcolm Road
Woodside
South Norwood
LONDON
SE25 5HG
meetings@scpsw.co.uk

Treasurer:

Beryl Jones
37 Lingham Lane
Moreton
WIRRAL
CH46 7SA

Competition Secretary:

Nina Mattar
4 Redruth House
Grange Road
Sutton
SM6 6RT

Publicity Officer:

Jenny Chamier-Grove
jchamiergrove@hotmail.com

Diary

Annual Luncheon, Civil Service
Club:

Saturday 23rd October 2010

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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Poetry Editor:

Terry James
1 Thornleigh Park
Bangor
County Down
BT20 4NN

Editor:

Adrian Danson
78 Palace View
Bromley
Kent
BR1 3EL
danson@ntlworld.com

THE SCPSW AUTHOR

NUMBER 190

SUMMER 2010

CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Chairman's Chat
- 4 Member's Successes
- 5 Poetry Workshop
- 7 Gordon Gompers Article Competition 2010
- 8 Herbert Spenser Poetry Competition
Judge's Report
- 13 Lewis Wright Short Story Competition
Judge's Report
- 26 Vincent Brennan Travel Competition
Judge's Report
- 31 Shorter Short Story Competition
Judge's Report
- 36 Poetry Pages
- 38 Bertrand Russell and the Librarian
Angus Livingstone

Editorial

Adrian Danson

When older people forget things this is often referred to as senior moments. I think I am having a senior year. In my mind I remain about twenty five years old, but I cannot deny that it takes me longer to do physical things. Mental things, such as writing, get squeezed into the decreasing moments that remain. Facing the reality of this has persuaded me that my term as your editor should come to an end and I am pleased to announce that our successful author Paul Williams has agreed to take on the role from next year.

By that time I will have driven you to distraction with my moans about modern abuse of our language etc., for ten whole years. Ten years that have allowed me the pleasure of expressing my opinions, to offer questionable words of advice, but above all to be able to publish so much high quality and entertaining work from members. Undoubtedly I will miss this pleasure, although it may provide time to enter competitions and do a little more writing, as it did for our late esteemed editor Iain McIntyre – only time will tell.

I am happy to report that another eight copies of our anniversary anthology have been bought by members, which removes a little of the egg from committee faces, but more orders would be most welcome.

When I was still working I was not alone in criticising frequent resort to outside consultants when the skills and knowledge of those in service was at least equal, if not superior, to these “experts” brought in at great expense. In some cases within my experience these experts were ex-civil servants whose expertise was acquired whilst in service. I was therefore pleased to discover that action is in hand to make better use of in-house skills for such matters as the design of TV advertisements for Government services, e.g. those offering financial assistance, training, etc. To find out more log on to www.amazeproject.co.uk

My computer is in league with the devil. You don't think so? Then how do you explain why everything that I had copied for the next edition of “Author” suddenly vanished from my computer memory. That's not all. I changed my old computer desk for a new one and my copier suddenly refused to copy. Only after visiting the Mosque, Synagogue and Methodist, Baptist and Catholic churches were my problems resolved, but all this took time and I doubt that there is enough of it left for Alan to do his thing. My computer and I humbly apologise.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

To any members who have been caught up in the recent travel difficulties, I do hope you are now home, settled and have put the experience behind you. I know how relieved and glad my wife and I were, when our daughter, son-in-law and the grandchildren were home again after a long and tiring journey, following their holiday in California.

My attention was caught recently by a report that the President of the EU, Herman van Rompuy, has the reputation as a poet - this must be a welcome change from the difficulties of his job and dealing with the disparate groups within the Organisation. Mr. van Rompuy has earned the soubriquet of 'Haiku Herman' for his love of the form. The first volume of his work was published in April of this year and launched at a book-signing at the Belgian Parliament. True to the form, the poet's haiku reflect the seasons and the natural world.

Now, I'm, aware there are members whose opinion of haiku does not rate very highly - mere 'Japonica' along with other Japanese verse forms! Even so, haiku is quite a good exercise for the writer, as it requires setting-down ideas and thoughts to meet the demands of the 5-7-5 syllables of the poem's three lines. Well worth a try.

Oh, and by the way, van Rompuy's verse has been translated into English but to gain it's full flavour, it helps if you can read and have some understanding of Flemish!

Member's Successes

New Theatre Publications (www.plays4theatre.com) sent member Graham Andrews an advance copy of his one-act science-fiction play entitled *The Last Pixel Show* (ISBN 9781840947588). The back-cover blurb reads:

"This play was written inside a capsule, travelling through the space-time continuum to a realm where humanity still uses materialistic symbols to enforce its will, but in a dimension we should never hope to know. More to the point, perhaps, computer scientist Bruce Conover becomes aware of a secret cybernetic plot to take over the world. He struggles to prevent it, with a little help and a whole lot of hindrance from fellow human beings who are not quite what they seem - especially the beautiful Hungarian concert pianist. "Bastards,"

warned Philip K. Dick, back in 1969. “All robot servo-mechanisms and all computers are bastards.”

Who wrote that blurb, I wonder? Graham asks. (Well someone’s got to do it – Ed)

(I have again failed to find the time to copy several other successes to this column and can only say that I have not forgotten and, if my computer allows, I will do so shortly. –Ed)

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Barbara Stewart, The Old Malthouse, Brockhampton
Mews, Bringsty, WR6 5TB

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

PW Weekend 2010

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 **16th to 18th July 2010** at the Hillscourt Conference Centre, Rednal, Birmingham. The cost of the Weekend is £210 per person, which includes all meals, en-suite accommodation and meeting room.

A Booking Form was enclosed with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. This should be returned with your deposit to **Terry Rickson** at the address given above. 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 Terry.

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 **Barbara Stewart** at the address above.

Bill Barnes Competition 2010

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 2010

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2010. 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 2010 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
- Access to the new e-folio scheme (see **wavelengths** for details)
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend

Dates to Remember

1 July 2010	deadline for motions for the AGM
16 - 18 July 2010	Poetry Workshop Weekend
1 August 2010	deadline for wavelengths # 24 (autumn issue)
September 2010	publication of wavelengths # 24
30 September 2010	closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition 2010
1 November 2010	deadline for wavelengths # 25
December 2010	publication of wavelengths # 25

Gordon Gompers Article Competition 2010

Any topic, maximum 200 words, prize £50, closing date 31st July 2010.

£3 per entry, double spaced, identified by nom de plume with name and address on a separate sheet. If you wish to have your entry returned after judging, please enclose s.a.e. and a further s.a.e. if you wish to have receipt of your entry acknowledged.

Entries should be sent to our Competition Secretary, Nina Mattar, at 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey SM6 6RT.

Flair For Words – ‘You’ve got have a dream’

I’m just joining the above, a service run by Cass and Janie Jackson. For an annual fee of twenty pounds one receives Flair News, the official journal published six times a year. Cass and Janie launched the service in 1988 and were well known to the Society at that time. In 1993 they acted as judges for one of our annual competitions. They are writers and teachers, with lots of experience.

One may seek advice on any writing problem six times a year and also have a free critique of one piece of work (up to 3000) words in each year of membership. There is a competition in each issue, plus articles and reviews, and a successes page.

The journal seems to me to be manageable – good as some other Writing glossies are, the subs are expensive and I never found time to read them all.

Joan Lewis

(I have been sitting on this advice from Joan for more than a year, but it remains valid. We do not normally publicise other magazines, but Cass and Janie Jackson have been very helpful to us in judging the Froud Memorial competitions, so we owe them a mention – Ed)

Herbert Spenser Poetry Competition

Judges Report by Ivy Hudson

I found an interesting range of subjects from eagles to Peter Schmiechal to depression, various verse forms, mostly free verse, ballad style and rhyming alternate lines. Some really enjoyable poems fell down on the odd line ending, repetition of rhyming words, or inverted word order.

Others based on rhyming couplets would have improved had a form been used e.g. sonnet, villanelle - this would have helped contain some of the raw emotions expressed. On the whole I found it difficult to discard many poems (total of 37)- but someone had to win so I had to be brutal. Thus I found myself being really picky, the only way I could complete the task. The standard throughout was high, altogether a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

Envy by Cynthia Blaker - 1st Prize

Inventive rhyme scheme - always a good idea, either to think one up or base a poem on one of another poet e.g. Thomas Hardy, Simon Armitage, and use it to the full. It is useful to read a wide range of poetry, especially the more accessible modern poets e.g. Carol Anne Duffy, as it does extend one's ideas. For me the rhyme scheme carried the poem along, making it stand head and shoulders above the rest. Congratulations to the poet.

Clash Andrew Millican - 2nd Prize

Ballad rhyming style, but bang up to date, topical, easy to read aloud. Flows well, technically competent and relevant to 2010.

Highly Commended:

Concrete and Cars by Marcus Turner - hugely enjoyable - repetition of rhyme endings in last two verses let it down.

On the Silk Road by Don Nixon - extremely competent, interesting blank verse but did not have the immediate appeal of the winning two.

Commended:

The Theatre of Dreams by Andrew Millican - entertaining, original and fun.

Wartime Lullaby by D Stevens- Insomnia is something everyone can identify with, a vivid picture, well expressed.

Envy

Cynthia Blaker

(Herbert Spenser Poetry Competition Winning entry.)

An eagle soared up high
And I
Stood still to watch his flight,
Longing to gain that height.
And watching with a narrow eye
I wished for wings so that I too might fly,
And hang, as he
In blue eternity.

A fish lay in a stream,
A gleam
Of light in flickering shade,
In a land of shadows made.
And as I watched a feeling fierce as fire
Assailed me, and I yearned with deep desire
To live, as he,
In dim translucency.

Clash

Andrew Millican

(Herbert Spenser Poetry Competition Runner-up.)

She limped along Old Trafford road
her helping hand a stick of ash,
two Tesco bags increased her load,
her costume emphasised the clash

of cultures on a bright Spring day
when European arms and legs
in ghastly white are on display
by Boots and Claire's and Next and Greggs.

Her jet black burqa stole the eye,
its out-of-placeness seemed acute
to most Caucasian passers by
whilst some thought it brought disrepute.

Her face looked tired her eyes so sad,
life seemed to be for her too hard,
as if the burqa made her bad
and she and all her kind were tarred

with health and public warning signs
for their extremist Muslim views
and stigmatised in peoples' minds
like Swastikas and stars and Jews.

Concrete and Cars

Marcus Turner

Concrete and cars, concrete and cars
Have conquered our hearts and the land that was ours;
Freedom to roam close to one's home
Is gone in a snarl-up of rubber and chrome.
And motorway roads cross the landscape like scars,
To whisk us past nature to concrete and cars.

Entrepreneurs, winning their spurs,
Erect lumps of concrete and then get called sirs:
Car fumes attack, concrete turns black,
And soon demolition contractors are back.
But profit is foremost and beauty comes last,
And so the new buildings are concrete and glass.

Driving to work, working to drive:
The business that's Me must continue to thrive;
Must use my nous, keyboard and mouse,
To generate wealth, a new car and a house.
In concrete we toil, and when leisure is ours,
We drive to a place with more concrete and cars.

Progress and goals trample our souls:
Ideals are flattened as steamrollers roll.
Businessmen wheel, businessmen deal,
In facts that are concrete, and not what we feel.
"Invest in the future - success will be ours,
For we'll have constructed more concrete and cars."

On the Silk Road

Don Nixon

The journey has been hard, hair coarsened
by winds that pincer our burnt cheeks and eyes,
our beards sand threaded, skin thimble pitted.
Saddle sore, we wince from side to side,
our reflex grasp bunches the camel reins.
The Gobi, stretching grey, gapes endlessly behind.

We were fools, deceived by words.
This is no Golden Road.
The poets in their Persian gardens lied,
deep cushioned in rose scented indolence,
soft bellied spinners of illusion
that have no contact with reality.
What do they know of the lung scouring wind?
“Dunghuang!” croaks our leader’s sand scarred voice.
Excitement ripples like tossed bales of silk.
At last our goal’s in sight.
It rises from the dunes -Dunghuang.
The Town of Silk.
We cheer. No longer will our
dry flesh chafe, chapped inside grime hardened robes.
There, the soft caress of sheer spun silk
is like the touch of girls in some mirage.
A body memory tells us we are men,
still sensitive to beauty.

The tactile rules here on the shimmering streets
where coloured silks float from casement windows,
a sensual rainbow arc for all who finger feel
and fold to load the caravanserai.
My aching body yearns to stay,
safe from the wolf note in the northern wind,
that whines about our yurts and tents,
piercing our minds with Gobi madness.

Too soon we leave.
Our harsh leader’s pick axe voice
shatters the grey shards of the dawn.
Slowly we move off and dream of
our road’s end, salt caked months away,
beyond the fluted domes of Samarkand.

The Theatre of Dreams

Andrew Millican

A hundred balls a week head towards Old Trafford.
From up river and down Ship Canal it doesn't matter.

They crowd together, corralled by water currents like
match day stewards. In all sizes from all backgrounds –
playpen, tennis, soft, leather, plastic, even cricket and basket.

This corner of a hidden lock is their final juncture. They
bob on a carpet of weekly flotsam before being dredged
off, their fantasies punctured, never able to grace the
Theatre of Dreams which stands like the Gates of Elysium
just a Peter Schmiechal kick away.

Wartime Lullaby

D Stevens

Sweltering in my bed,
Late on a stifling summer's eve,
An eight year old boy,
Cheated of sleep,
By Double Summer Time.

Through the open window,
Listlessly,
I hear my father,
Watering his thirsty plants,
In the garden below,

Then, punctuating the still, warm air,
Staccato bursts of fire,
As cannon are tested,
At the Ordnance factory,
A mile down the road.

With the rhythm of the guns,
Permeating my brain,,
And dulling my senses,,,
I'm lulled at last,,
To sleep.

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

Judge's Report by Jenny Chamier Grove

With some difficulty I narrowed down the 36 entries to about a dozen that I thought showed particular promise.

Those that did not make it to the shortlist lost marks for various reasons. Some set up a mystery, then solved it, but failed to show that the outcome mattered deeply to the central character. Others lacked plot development, or raised a dilemma without resolving it. In a story, something has to happen even if it is only a change of attitude.

Other shortcomings included careless spelling or punctuation; unoriginal descriptions such as "beautiful, blond haired, blue eyed"; phrases such as "bringing somebody's mind back to the subject on hand," or "her head was spinning".

In some stories, references to a TV soap character, an unexplained acronym, or a person who played no further part in the plot, would have been better avoided.

First prize goes to **The Rowboat**, by Jane Chelliah-Manning, a moving story tracing the lives of a poor Indian family on a small island in Malaysia. I felt that the delicate but sparing descriptions of feeling gave it a slight edge over the others.

Second prize goes to **Conspiracy**, by Graham Creedy, the story of a carefully planned murder with an unexpected outcome, told with military precision.

The following stories are highly commended:

Night Out by Rothna Der-Moduk is a powerful story in which spoken exchanges and lively inner monologues in a Pakistani family heighten suspense as a well-meaning man stumbles into a violent confrontation.

Brief Interview by Don Nixon offers an unexpected glimpse into the criminal mind when a solicitor is called on by a small-time crook facing a murder charge.

Hoisted by his own Petard by Beryl Jones starts with a body in a wheelie bin and ends with a clever denouement.

Voices Off by Tony Oswick keeps the reader guessing as a show business couple on a first date try to repair the damage done by ill-chosen words.

A Disturbing Woman by Sheridan Brenchley is a well-crafted whodunit about a mountain walking accident in Switzerland.

Money Down the Drain by Ethel Corduff is an entertaining tale about the perplexity of a plumbing firm's boss when parts unaccountably start to go missing.

The Rowboat

Jane Chelliah-Manning

(Lewis Wight Short Story Competition winning entry)

Forty years ago the island that my mother went to live on was only accessible by a rowboat. Amma, as I called her, had this enduring wish for a bridge to be built linking the island to the mainland. Her fellow islanders laughed at her for imagining such 'wild ideas'. If she were still alive she would be having the last laugh because the island, as of today, has a bridge.

Amma was a feisty old Indian woman who was married off at the age of 16 to my father whom she had not met before their wedding day. Appa was working in Malaysia and desired a traditional woman for a wife. His family arranged for him to visit India where they were sure he would find a woman worthy of keeping a good home and producing healthy children. My father chose Amma after being shown twenty photographs of brides in waiting. They were married within weeks and Amma left India the next day knowing she would never see her family or homeland again.

She didn't know what to expect but her heartbreak wasn't as searing as when she discovered that my father had a lowly paid job as a chauffeur to a British Colonel or that her parents had happily shipped her off knowing they would never see her again. Instead, the raw heartbreak came when she arrived in Malaysia and discovered that she had to climb into a rowboat to reach an island that her husband called home. An island that she could not even see because of the permanent grey misty cloud that sat over it.

I knew then,' she told me, 'that I had been cast adrift'.

In India noise was as crucial to life as breathing was. Noise was generated from people dropping into each other's homes, children playing together in open fields till they were too tired to run, the village elders sitting in the local square playing their sitars and drums on pleasant evenings and women standing around the kitchen stoves gossiping about their mundane lives. Life on the island, by contrast, was a suffocating silence for Amma.

To make things worse the man in charge of the rowboat was cranky and surly. He made rules up on the spur of the moment and was mainly guided by his temperament on any particular day. However, there was one rule that he was consistent about - a woman had to be accompanied by a man. This meant that Amma had to wait till Sundays when Appa was not working to cross over to the mainland to get their shopping. Quite often the Colonel required Appa to work on a Sunday. During the monsoon season it would be unsafe for the rowboat to be used and Amma was not able to leave the island for more than a month.

The inhabitants of the island referred to her as the 'Bridge Woman' because she told them about the dream she had one night that a bridge had been built.

'Whoever heard of money being spent on an island as small as this? You must have been ... dreaming?' one man jeered.

One day it all got to Amma and she decided to run away on the spur of the moment. She found the rowboat tied to a coconut tree and untied it, dragged it down to the river but she jumped into it rather too fast. The boat swayed and capsized. Amma couldn't turn the boat over and she had to swim back to shore. People spent days looking for the boat without suspecting that she had anything to do with it. The boat was finally found in a neighbouring village where it had drifted downstream.

Amma never attempted to escape again because she gave birth to three children in the years after. To each of her sons she imparted the dream she had about the bridge.

'How big was the bridge? Was it as big as a dinosaur?' I would ask.

'Even bigger,' she replied each time.

The bridge assumed the magnitude and proportions to become the answer to all our problems. Once I failed my spelling test and I told Amma that it would not have happened if the bridge had been in place. When my brothers and I fought with each other a certain way for one to gain the moral high ground was to issue a threat along the lines of ‘when we have the bridge they won’t let you cross it’.

The rowboat gradually became full of holes and the cranky old man was too old to keep repairing it. The Colonel called a meeting of the residents of the island and surprised them by telling them that he had ordered a motorboat as a replacement. The Colonel even brought photos along of motorboats to show the islanders because not everyone had heard of such a marvellous vehicle.

At the meeting Amma put her hand up and asked who would be in charge of the motorboat. The cranky old man threw one of the photos at her and this act of vengeance worked against him because the Colonel decided that a young man was needed to steer something so powerful.

The motorboat was delivered to the island on the back of a tugboat. Everyone gathered around to watch it being unloaded and they clapped and threw hibiscus flowers into the river when the motorboat was started up for the first time. The rotary blades sliced through the flowers and there were millions of pieces of colourful petals which parted the way for those lucky enough to get the first ride.

Amma took the three of us down to the river to witness all this and we had a picnic while watching the islanders queue up for their ride. She could not stop smiling and my brothers and I did not fight with each other for the whole day. When the queue had dwindled down to a few people we packed away our cups and plates and fed the remnants of our food to the birds before getting on the motorboat.

The white sari with a bright blue border that Amma wore that day billowed up in the wind making her look like a cloud floating in a blue sky with a smiling face. My brother dropped his toy frog on the floor and we laughed at the way it hopped up and down from the vibrations of the motor. We screamed and squealed with exaggeration and I couldn’t tell if it was the spray of the water or our tears that ran down our faces for the duration of the 30 minute ride. It didn’t matter either way because Amma had finally gained some of the freedom she

wanted. The young man in charge was always willing to take her across to the mainland and the journey took half the time it used to.

There were still some problems though. When the engine broke down it would sometimes take weeks before spare parts could be brought in from the mainland.

‘If we had a bridge we would be able to see the world,’ Amma carried on saying.

People still thought of her as being crazy for imagining that a bridge would ever be built for them. Amma had many arguments about how they weren’t a lost tribe of islanders but people who deserved as much right as those who lived on the mainland.

In the coming years after that the three of us won scholarships to university. None of us had ever travelled beyond the small town on the mainland which provided us with our supplies. Amma was so excited at the thought of her children breaking boundaries and venturing into the outside world.

Unfortunately Appa was bed ridden and had contracted Alzheimer’s disease. Amma could not leave him alone. Instead she came down to the pier each time one of us left and waved till she could not see the motorboat anymore. It took 20 minutes for the motorboat to disappear from her sight and I would watch her become smaller and smaller as I travelled further away from home.

Our university holidays often coincided with the monsoon season and my brothers and I were unable to visit for long periods at a time but we returned with our wives and, later, our children whenever we could.

I wish one of us had been there the night Appa started gasping for breath. Amma ran to the neighbours crying but nobody had medical skills to assist. The island did not have a resident doctor. Unfortunately, the motorboat had run out of petrol and the island was waiting delivery. She must have been desperate because she went down to the pier and dragged the old rowboat down to the water. The neighbours begged her not to attempt the journey to the mainland on her own in the dark but she was adamant she needed to get a doctor. Of course, she didn’t make it and her body was found a few days later. Appa died within an hour of her setting off and, according to the

doctor, he would never have lived even if he had been taken to a hospital earlier.

Amma's death was the spark that turned her burning dream into a reality.

People sat around in coffee shops talking about how a bridge would improve the quality of their lives and began to realise how their lives were in jeopardy from being cut off. The Colonel had retired some years before and had gone back to the UK but his son had bought land on the island. A bridge would turn his investment into a financial success so he commissioned architects and engineers to undertake the project.

When construction work started I took my children to watch it being built. I even bought a special high-speed camera to record the various stages of the bridge going up. Family friends who still lived on the island sent me letters telling me how their lives were going to change as a result of my mother's dream, long after her death.

Fifteen years after Amma's death the bridge was finally opened today. My brothers and I drove in a convoy across it with our children. The water on our faces was as a result of our tears.

Conspiracy

Graham Creedy

(Lewis Wight Short Story Competition – Second Place)

Murder was the last thing on my mind when I stopped at an attractive, thatched inn that Saturday; I was simply looking forward to a long drink and something to eat after a day in the open air. The pub was crowded and I had to elbow my way to the bar. When I had finally been served, I edged back through the press of people and looked for somewhere to sit down. The only place was at a small table in a recess, where there were three stools, two of which were occupied. One of the men sitting at the table caught my eye, and gestured an invitation to join them.

“Thanks very much,” I said, depositing my shandy and ham-and-pickle sandwiches on the table. This is evidently a popular place.”

It certainly is,” replied one and then added, with a quizzical look, “I’ve seen you before somewhere - not here?”

“Now you mention it, your face looks slightly familiar, but I’ve never been here before.” We went through the usual exchange of suggestions, eliminating various possible meeting places: golf club, supermarket, Rotary Club, until something clicked, and I said, “Did you go to the dentist about ten days ago?”

We established that we had passed the time of day in the waiting room. Having solved that small mystery, we had some common ground, and my fellow dental patient introduced himself.

“I’m Tom,” he said, “and this is my brother Dick - and before you ask, no, we don’t have another brother called Harry.”

I laughed and said, “You don’t need to - I’m Harry.” We shook hands. I appraised the brothers; the family resemblance was visible on closer scrutiny. I guessed Tom was the older, with greying, straight hair and a lean face. Dick was plumper and his hair was slightly wavy and dark brown. Both had a mean look about the eyes. Dick asked if I was passing through the village, and I explained, “Yes. I’m on my way home to Lower Barton after a day’s shooting a few miles up the road.”

“Oh, been on Lord Sefton’s estate have you?”

“No, just helping a local farmer reduce the pigeon population.” The lie came easily; I sensed that admitting Dick’s guess was absolutely right would destroy the rapport which was developing. Seeing a shadow of doubt flicker across their eyes, I recounted a day which I had spent some months earlier. “I’ve been sitting with a shotgun for hours up against a hedge with a camouflage net over me and a lure in the field. I got a dozen, so I’ll be having pigeon pie for a while, and so will the farmer.”

“Do the birds not see you?”

“No. I sit very still, and make sure I’m well camouflaged. This morning a woman and her dog walked past me no more than fifteen feet away and didn’t see me. Mind you, the dog was after a rabbit, otherwise it would have smelt me, no doubt.”

“Where did you learn that trick?”

In the army. I was trained by the SAW' Actually, I was in the SAS, but one doesn't admit to that if one can help it, even after fifteen years.

Tom was impressed. "Did you ever shoot anyone? What does it feel like?"

"It's your job when you're in the army." I shrugged. "It's what you're trained to do, so it feels good when you succeed."

"What about since you left the army?"

I ignored that. "Can I get you chaps another drink?"

I hoped that when I returned with pints of lager for them and an orange juice for me the subject would be changed. However, I noticed Tom and Dick talking earnestly while I was at the bar, and as soon as I sat down Tom returned to the subject of killing. I found that intriguing, so when he repeated his question I grinned and said, "I'm not admitting to anything." I was curious to see where this might lead.

The brothers exchanged a look, and Dick took a deep breath. Leaning forward, he asked quietly, "Would you be interested in a contract?"

"Damn," I said, taking my telephone out of an inside pocket. Glancing at the screen, I added apologetically, "this won't take a minute, it's the missus ... Yes, dear ... I'm having something to eat, so don't wait for me ... Two pints, green top milk. OK, see you later." Apologising again, I put the telephone down and picked up my drink. "You said something about a contract. Tell me more."

Dick responded. He seemed to be the spokesman in this matter. "It's our father, Bernard Logan. He's worth at least a couple of million and he hasn't made a will. Our mother died three years ago, so we stood to inherit everything between us until he got involved with a rotten little gold-digger called Debbie. He's always been pretty tight with his money; he made it in the building trade, and he's never passed anything our way when we could have done with a helping hand. He told us this morning that he plans to marry his fancy woman in three weeks time and leave the lot to her. We've tried to talk sense into him, but he's besotted with her." Dick took a long draught of beer and continued, "So it's obvious that the only way we're going to get our hands on his money is to waste him before the wedding. How about it?"

I had half expected something like this, but the stark words were a shock.

After some thought, I said, “A hundred grand. Ten in advance and ninety to follow a successful hit.” Tom pursed his lips and looked at his brother. Since he seemed to consider the price too much, I added, “That’s only five percent of what you stand to gain. Take it or leave it.”

After a brief, whispered consultation Dick agreed. “OK, a hundred thou’ it is.”

We were plotting in earnest now, so I moved on to the practicalities. “Where and when can I catch him on his own?”

“Next Saturday morning is your best opportunity. Debbie’s going away for a week, and he’ll go walking in the Dales. He invariably walks along the Bermuda Track, d’you know it?”

“Yes, I know it.” The path was called locally after the Bermuda Triangle because centuries ago, people were believed to have disappeared somewhere along it. It was dangerous in places, with some steep gullies. The County Council had fenced it off and placed warning signs, but a few intrepid walkers still managed to use it.

“I’ll need a photograph of the target, and the ten thousand in used fifties, on Wednesday evening.” Dick nodded. I continued, “Top floor of the multi-storey car park in Wetherby at nine o’clock. Both of you in the car, and no-one else.”

“How can we contact you before that?” asked Tom.

“You don’t. I’ll tell you then how you pay the other ninety. The less we’re seen together the better, so I’m off now.”

Next day I bought three basic mobile telephones in different shops, each on a different network so that there would be no connection between them. I paid cash and loaded them all with the minimum amount of time on a pay-as-you-go basis. There was no need to give a name or any other details. I also bought an audiotape cassette, and a latex mask resembling Gordon Brown. It amused me to think that his likeness was to be involved in the perfect crime.

On Monday morning, I strolled round my Headquarters, as I often do, pausing to chat with people here and there. When I entered Jim

Calloway's office, he stood up to greet me, "Good morning, Chief Constable."

I discussed several of his Division's responsibilities, before mentioning CCTV cameras in multi-storey car parks. "Do they provide much of interest?"

"The occasional fight. We had a bit of drug trafficking a month ago; got a nice clear ID, thanks to the upgrade they all had last year. The new wide-angle lens doesn't miss much, and we can enlarge the picture without losing definition."

"Well done, Jim. Make sure they're all kept in working order," I said, and left him.

At home that evening I played back my conversation with Tom and Dick on my mobile telephone's recorder. I then made a copy on a tape recorder, pressing the Pause button so as to leave out my own voice. The cassette provided prima facie evidence of conspiracy to murder, but it was going to be a few days before it was presented to my own CID.

On Wednesday afternoon I took a bus to the next county and hired a silver Nissan Micra for cash, using a stolen Driving Licence which I had pocketed long ago when in charge of that department at HQ. I arrived in the car park in the Micra over half an hour early for the rendezvous; as I expected, the top floor was deserted at this time of the evening. I stopped in a corner out of sight of any CCTV camera and taped a piece of brown paper over the front number-plate. Then I donned the Gordon Brown mask and drove to a spot squarely in front of a camera. Now I only had to wait to see whether the Logan brothers would keep our appointment.

They did. Precisely at nine o'clock a car arrived slowly, like someone wary of a trap. Two men were in the car, as I had instructed. I wanted them both implicated in the conspiracy. I flashed my headlights; Tom drove up and stopped their VW beside the Micra just where I needed it - in full view of the camera. I got out of my car and told them to do likewise, explaining that I did not want "any tricks". They were slightly puzzled, but did as I instructed. I held out my hand and Dick passed me a large brown envelope. I opened it and extracted a photograph of Bernard Logan, and two bundles of fifty-pound notes.

I made sure the camera would pick up both. Then I reached into my pocket for a sheet of typescript, which I handed to Dick.

There are your instructions for the final payment. Have the ninety thousand ready by the weekend. Meet me on Platform 2 of York station at eight o'clock on Sunday morning, and I'll show you a photograph of the corpse. He won't be found for weeks. On Monday you make the transfers of cash exactly as I've specified on that sheet. If every penny of the money's not in place by five that afternoon there will be two more corpses joining your father's. Clear?" They nodded, then we all returned to our cars; I let them drive away first. In the same corner of the car park I removed the brown paper from the number-plate and took off my mask, which I binned a couple of miles away.

Next morning I deposited the ten thousand pounds in odd amounts split between five different banks where I had accounts in false names, opened before it became obligatory to provide evidence of identity.

On Saturday morning I was up early and assembled the equipment that I would need. I found a strategic position along the Bermuda Track and concealed myself under the camouflage netting well before there was any possibility that Bernard Logan would appear.

As it happened, Bernard and I were members of the same Masonic Lodge so I knew him quite well, and I had heard him speak of his two sons, who were a great disappointment to him. He once referred to them as "useless, scrounging layabouts"; I now knew that the reality was much worse. I had also met his charming fiancée, Debbie. They were very well suited to each other. While these thoughts were going through my mind a young couple came along the track, hand in hand. They passed without having the slightest inkling of my presence in the bushes.

Finally, Bernard came into sight. I waited until he was within range so that I could get the shot I wanted. I raised my camera and took a good, clear picture of my target. I had switched off the flash, but the picture would be light enough. When he was safely out of earshot I emerged from my hiding place and concealed the camouflage netting in a hollow tree for retrieval later, then I ran along the path until I caught up with him. Panting slightly to make it evident that I had been hurrying, I said, "Thank goodness I've found you. Just stop here while I get my breath back, and I'll explain." We perched on a handy rock,

and I continued, I have had reliable information that there is a contract out on your life. I can't tell you where it came from because it's a snout who will only talk to me and has to be protected - you understand, I'm sure." At first Bernard was disbelieving, and then very shaken, but eventually he nodded, convinced by my air of authority.

I continued, "I believe the hit man knows what you are wearing today, so take that sweater off and have mine. I'll put on my waterproof. We'd better change trousers and hats as well. Quickly - he could be close." When I had all I needed of Bernard's clothes I gave him more instructions. If a man believes his life is under threat he becomes remarkably receptive to orders supposedly designed to eliminate the danger. "Continue along the track as quickly as you can, and go to a hotel for four days." He began to protest but I cut him short. Don't on any account go home, and above all don't contact your sons - I can't tell you any more now."

Returning to where I had hidden my camouflage netting, I laid Bernard's sweater on the ground, made several holes in the front with a sharp stick and rubbed some dirt around the holes, before putting it on. Next I took a make-up set out of my rucksack and painted streaks of "blood" on my face. I had seen several victims of sawn-off shotguns in my time, so I knew what effect I had to create. I was also making sure that it would be hard, even for his own sons, to spot that this was not Bernard's face disfigured by the blast. When I was satisfied with the result, I fixed my camera to a tree pointing at the track and set the timer. I then sprawled on the ground in a suitably death-like pose and waited for the camera to take my picture. I was ready with a story about a photographic competition in case anyone came along. Checking the result on the camera's screen, I found that I was not entirely in the picture, so I did it again and again until I had it just right. Later I would crop the photograph to exclude my shoes since they were clearly different from Bernard's. Everything else was passably similar, and the cap, sweater and trousers would create a strong illusion that the "corpse" was the same person as the walker in the first picture.

Soon after seven o'clock on Sunday morning I was sitting on a strategically placed bench on Platform I of York Station with a newspaper. I turned a page now and again, but I hardly read any of it; I was too busy keeping a watch on Platform 2 opposite. When I saw the

Logans at ten to eight I was quite confident that there was no trap. After another quick check of the platform, I strolled across the footbridge to join them. You learn to be very careful in the SAS. As an added precaution, I took them across to Platform 4, before showing them the photographs of Bernard before the “killing”, and of myself masquerading as his corpse. They were completely taken in; I made sure they didn’t have a chance to study the pictures at length, explaining that I was taking them away to destroy the evidence.

Next evening, using a different mobile for each call, I telephoned three offshore banks to confirm that my accounts had been credited as directed, then I drove into the country and dumped the telephones separately in two litter bins and a lake.

I had conned two villains out of a hundred thousand pounds for just a few hours of creative work. When CID received the anonymous gift of the tape of the conversation in the pub and looked at the CCTV tape from the car park, the sting would be complete. The Logans would be charged with conspiracy to murder, and would be unable to reveal my deception without admitting their own guilt. I had pulled off the perfect crime.

That illusion was short-lived.

I had failed to recognise the former corporal at the garage when I returned the hire car, but he remembered me and told the manager that he felt sure a Micra had been hired under a false name by someone called Harry Scott. Being a good citizen, the manager reported this to the police, and my own CID followed it up with commendable thoroughness. The Logan brothers were not prosecuted because no murder had been attempted, but they and Bernard gave evidence against me on the charge of obtaining money by deception. I was found guilty and given a hefty fine.

Disgraced, I gave the hundred thousand pounds to charity and resigned my post as Chief Constable before the Police Authority could sack me. My trial was eighteen months ago and I have not worked since. That is why I am now making this application for financial support from the Army Benevolent Fund.

Vincent Brennan Travel Competition

Judge's Report by Alan S. Watts

There were 14 entries for this competition, the most we have had for a while, and the content was of a high quality. This has made judging a winner very difficult. However, Josephine Shore's entry about her visit to Kerala in the south of India, is an outstanding winner. It certainly captured the feel of the Kerala country; the sights and smells; the people and the luxuriant scenery, as well as the crowds, the noise and the chaos of the large towns. It is a pity that there are not more prizes offered, because there are several entries worthy of them. There was a great variety of styles and locations, which were all enjoyable to read and made me hungry to visit these places and share in the delights. These annual competitions are designed to enable members to display their writing skills, and to encourage them. Travel articles could be boring if they do not show some originality of treatment, while avoiding over-blown use of descriptive language. It is a very difficult task to get just right, but several competitors have succeeded, and all entrants deserve to be commended. They have all contributed to produce this year's entries, which have amused and instructed myself as the judge, and for which I thank them."

Impressions of Kerala, India

Josephine Shore

(Vincent Brennan Travel Competition Winning Entry)

India assaults the senses the instant you alight from the plane. We stepped out of the glass doors at the airport in Kerala and were at once enveloped by the heat, heavy and sweet as a steam-warmed blanket. It sinks deep into your bones and into your spirit. A colourful crowd was gathered to greet relatives or friends and a great hubbub of chattering noise swept towards us. A hundred pairs of eyes, as soft and dark as cocoa beans, turned our way as we followed our driver out to the car. There it stood, a piece of 1950's glamour, a pristine white Ambassador with polished chrome gleaming in the brilliant sunshine, waiting to whisk us away. Leaving the airport we plunged straight into the jungle, which is everywhere dominant. There is no let up, no break or pause. It flows endlessly, a rich, verdant tangle of palms, bananas, giant ferns and waxen-leaved shrubs of a dozen varieties unknown to me. The road weaves through, a red sinew flanked by houses built in differing styles, some no more than sorrowful wooden shacks, others modest

bungalows or opulent villas painted in vivid, jolting colours. All are surrounded by jungle, which at no point retreats but rather shifts aside just enough to allow them space.

Kerala is an affluent state by Indian standards. Employment is high and many families have at least one member working abroad, often in the Gulf States. The locals call it ‘God’s own country’ and it is indeed staggeringly beautiful. It is utterly different to any place I have visited. A narrow state in the far south of India, it is lapped by the Arabian Sea to the west and backed to the east by high mountains, The Western Ghats, home to the old hill stations of the British Empire.

Kerala intoxicates as it captivates. Its beauty is unique. My partner and I visited as independent travellers and it was my first experience of India, but most certainly not my last. It is easy to get around using public transport, the trains in particular are simple to use and have the advantage of running on time. For the less adventurous a car and driver is easily arranged through your hotel to take you almost anywhere for a very reasonable fee. Or take a ‘tuk-tuk’, one of the hundreds of yellow and black rickshaws that zip around the villages and cities like giant bumblebees. Great for feeling at one with the jungle as they tootle you home through the incense filled night after dinner.

Our first stop was a hotel on the coast, set at the mouth of a river estuary where the jungle meets the beach and accessible only by boat. It was a perfect retreat to unwind after the long flight. When we arrived scores of ravens were kicking up a fuss in the coconut palms, squabbling like sulky teenagers and we soon discovered they were constant visitors to the gardens.

Ayurvedic treatment is a big thing in India and it is deeply relaxing and uplifting, if a little shocking. It takes place naked, which can be a surprise if not forewarned, but within minutes all the rather silly Western inhibitions melt away in the Indian heat. It is all very proper, very correct, with a masseuse of the same gender. It is both rejuvenating and intensely liberating and an experience not to be missed. From our coastal retreat we travelled by train, surely a relic from the Empire with its air of fading splendour and which, despite its name ‘Super-fast to Delhi’, was no such thing. It swayed ponderously northeast to the inland town of Kottayam, three and a half hours away, where we were met by another driver who took us high into the mountains.

The scenery was spectacular. Leaving the town it was clear the environs are prosperous. The villas grow ever more lavish and more garish in style and colour. For the Keralans it appears more is definitely more! And surrounding the houses are gardens filled with exotic flowering plants. The colours beneath the intense Keralan sun are brighter than you can imagine and the gardens so gloriously overplanted with swathes of bougainvillea, orchids and vast Angel's Trumpets.

Poinsettias grow in wild abundance. Tulip trees thrust up through the palms and velvet-blue Morning Glory rampages at the roadsides. Our car climbed higher and higher until we were level with wisps of cloud which float in and out of the folds of the mountains. And here the tea plantations begin, stretching in all directions, planted row after row, layer upon layer, neat, low-growing bright green bushes.

Kerala is a state bursting at the seams with natural resources. It has coconuts, pineapples, tea and coffee, mangoes, bananas and vanilla, rubber and teak - the list is endless and they are all expensive commodities in the West. They are harvested using traditional methods and manual labour, so employment is high. And yet India is a poor country and if you travel around, even in Kerala you will witness poverty, it is unavoidable.

But whatever the Keralans have, however little, they are happy to share it. They have a great joie de vivre, which is infectious. They are a warm and friendly people, diffident and unassuming. Their values are inherently Victorian and they are utterly charming for it.

In the mountains a visit to a spice plantation is inevitable and also well-worth the effort. For a plant-lover it is essential and completely fascinating. So many commodities we take for granted - pepper being a prime example. And yet I had no idea that it grows on trees, the pepper corns hanging like long strings of green beads. From the mountains we retraced our route almost as far as Kottayam, once again with a car and driver as the only sensible option, and then turned northwest towards the coast and the ancient port of Fort Cochin. Cochin is a big city built on several islands and the Fort is the old Dutch quarter lined with Colonial houses in the Dutch style. It is busy and teeming but also rather laid back and picture-postcard pretty.

We stayed in the charming Old Harbour Hotel right opposite the Chinese fishing nets, situated in leafy splendour behind a small park. Our room here was enchanting. Comfortable, tastefully elegant and blissfully

cool. The garden was totally private and filled with enormous banks of exquisite white orchids.

Jew Town, within the Fort, is billed as a big tourist attraction, an area of Cochin given to the Jews by the Travencore Maharajas in 70AD, as a safe haven from persecution by the Syrian Christians. That is as may be but, visiting at dusk we found little to admire; a labyrinth of narrow alleys, grimy and squalid with open sewers and street traders selling wall-to-wall tourist trash.

However, the rest of the Fort is a joyous blend of noise and people and clamour and colour. There is a reminiscent hint of Europe here but the overriding atmosphere is Keralan. The street hawkers are constant in their assault, yet it's all very friendly. Usually a headshake and polite but firm 'no thanks' does the trick.

The inhabitants of Fort Cochin are motivated in their upkeep of the buildings, although they are constantly battling the climate. Hot and humid as it is, fresh paintwork never gets the chance to dry out properly. Timbers absorb moisture like a sponge and rot sets in fast. Dark green lichens and algae form rapidly within a season and creep over walls, eating away at plaster and mortar. And so Fort Cochin with its beautiful, Colonial architecture has a shaggy, unkempt look, an atmosphere of fading grandeur and casual hippy shab.

Ernakulam is the financial and industrial part of Cochin, a ferryboat trip away on another island. The ferries are left over from the Victorian era, like so many things still in current use in India and they belch out black diesel fumes as they chug across the polluted estuaries. Visit Ernakulam for the experience of a big Indian city.

The ferryboat dropped us at the new, main boat jetty, which was a building site with puddles and planks and cement mixers and piles of bricks and copper piping. We trudged across the debris of what would certainly have warranted a dozen hazard signs and the issue of hard hats, at the very least, in Britain and entered the awaiting mayhem.

Nothing can prepare you for the onslaught of an Indian city. It was hurtling noisy chaos, like arriving in the middle of a full scale riot. The volume of traffic was overwhelming. Antiquated buses, cars, motorbikes, mopeds, rickshaws and bicycles all vie for position on the roads. There is no order, no visible traffic sense. Everyone leans on their horn. Everyone overtakes, undertakes, and turns off or on to the roads without warning. Add to this mix very limited pavements, no pedestrian crossings and ten

thousand jay-walkers and it is still nowhere close to describing it. The streets of Ernakulam were a boiling pressure cauldron of heat and humidity. Terrifying, and yet at the same time oddly exhilarating!

Food is one of Kerala's many delightful surprises. If you are sensible and steer clear of salads and food purchased from street vendors for the first few days to allow your stomach to acclimatise then there should be no issue with stomach upsets. For the entire sixteen days of our trip we enjoyed food of exceptional quality, beautifully cooked and presented. Seafood is a Keralan speciality. It is wondrously fresh, and along the coast, caught locally barely hours before it is served to you.

One of the most unusual restaurants we dined in also served some of the best seafood ever tasted. At our first destination on the river estuary overlooking the beach, we stood on the hotel jetty one moonless evening and, like pirates, signalled out into the jasmine-scented darkness. A moment later a torch flashed in answer and our assignation was confirmed. A motorboat spirited us away to the grandly named Stephen's Seaside Floating Restaurant.

This ramshackle establishment really did float. An impossible construction of wood and corrugated plastic and reclaimed banister rails it was held together who knows how and built a-top half a dozen canoes lashed together with ropes and a promise. Half boat, half shack it was moored some thirty feet out in the estuary and by day, ill-matched and tumbledown, transformed by night with the aid of coloured lanterns into a place of romantic enchantment. To start we ate jumbo prawns the size of lobsters, tossed in garlic and butter with a hint of ginger and served with wedges of lime. They were sublime. To follow we had succulent red snapper baked whole in subtle Tandoori spices. Both dishes were of outstanding quality, a precursor of the standard of cooking we found in every restaurant we tried.

Kerala is a place of scents and brilliant colour, of warm welcoming smiles where nothing is too much trouble. It is a place in which to linger and lose yourself, and a place of very special magic. To anyone who has never considered India as a holiday destination I would urge you to go. Go to Kerala and explore, expect the unexpected and beware, it will steal your heart as it has stolen mine.

Shorter Short Story Competition

The entry of nineteen shorter short stories for my mini-competition was gratifying. I asked a writing friend of mine, Rose Bakker, who goes with me to Grantham Writers, to judge the competition. Her comments were:-

‘I’m not sure people understand *story* – most of the entries were memoirs, reminiscences and other things than stories. Also the concept of ‘beginning, middle and end’ seemed not to be understood. Several endings were poorly prepared and far too much writing was ‘vanity writing’. Most needed better explanation (but not necessarily more).

The winner was ‘Mrs Feather sees more clearly’ by Maureen Mills, who will receive the ten pounds prize. Of her entry, Rose wrote: ‘This was the best story – a clear beginning, confident characterisation and conversation, good attention to detail and proper follow-through to the sting ending. ‘Jean’s Story’ by Tony Oswick and ‘Early Bath’ by Carol Carpenter were runners-up.

Rose made brief pencilled comments on all the entries. If any entrant would like their piece back please send me the appropriate envelope to take A4 folded in half, with correct postage.

Joan Lewis

Mrs Feather Sees More Clearly

Maureen Mills

(Winning entry)

Gary Bucket was not a happy man. He had debts all over the place and his one man business was about to go under but when Mrs Feather rang his bell he thought his luck was about to change.

The elderly lady in a tweed suit and sensible shoes wanted his advice about windows.

“You’ll get a better deal if you have several done,” he said confidently.

Well, if you think so dear. I only have sight in one eye and that’s blurred. I can’t see how bad the windows are.”

That’s what I like to hear, thought Gary, for once thankful he’d been stuck indoors with no money for a bet. This sounded like an opportunity too good to miss.

“I’ll be along to measure up and give you a price. Tomorrow do you?” he asked, smiling broadly.

“Oh yes dear,” replied Mrs Feather, “I don’t go out much these days and I’m not too bothered about cost, as long as the job is well done. That’s what my late husband used to say. He never trusted big firms, bless him.”

Feigning agreement Gary grunted, as Mrs Feather continued,

“My taxi driver takes a short cut along your road and I often see your van parked outside. That’s how I found you.”

The following day Gary agreed a price with his grateful customer over a cup of Earl Grey. He’d quoted for several replacement windows, ensuring a healthy profit margin, which most would call extortionate but Mrs Feather didn’t quibble.

“I’ll need payment in advance. The suppliers insist I’m afraid. A cheque will do.”

“Of course dear. You write it and show me where to sign.”

This was Gary’s big chance, he’d be a fool to let it go. He quickly wrote the cheque for six ‘ thousand pounds, and after guiding Mrs Feather’s hand, enabling her to make some sort of signature at the bottom, he issued a receipt for that sum and left, feeling triumphant.

Piece of cake he thought, as he climbed into the van. He then promptly altered the figures and wording on the cheque to read *sixteen* thousand pounds. Robin Hood got it right, he decided. That old girl is loaded. Must be, living in a pad like that. I need the dosh, she won’t miss it, so where’s the harm?

A few weeks later Gary had almost completed replacing the windows, when he noticed Mrs Feather was about to go out.

“I won’t be long. The bank telephoned, they want to see me. Seems there’s a query over my signature. Tiresome but they mean well. Still, at least now I can manage my affairs better.”

“How’s that?” Gary asked, suddenly going pale.

“Something wonderful has happened. I’ve just had a cataract operation and I can read again. My neighbour will see to you as no doubt you’ll be finished when I return, dear,” she said with a knowing smile.

How right she was.

Jean's Story

Tony Oswick

(Equal second place)

They say when you drown your whole life passes before you. I'm not sure about that but, lying in this hospital bed, I've had time to think. And I suppose I wouldn't be here now if Charlie hadn't left.

Richard's parishioners would call it divine retribution. But I never meant to cause harm to anyone, Richard in particular. For thirty years I'd done my duty. I was Jean, the Vicar's wife, a pillar of the community. Then I met Charlie - young, thirty-ish, beautiful blue eyes, short blond hair and a smile to die for.

After the children left home, I'd gone back to work at the local school. It kept me involved in the community and helped boost our finances. Charlie was a social worker. We both went to a childcare seminar - that's when we first met. Then Richard and I were invited to a retirement party for the Head of Social Services. Charlie was there too. Richard got talking to the big-wigs so Charlie and I spent most of the evening together, just chatting.

I knew from the start there was an attraction but I couldn't understand or explain it. I started to psycho-analyse myself. Was I repressed? Was I unhappy? Or was it all to do with my school-girl infatuation with Miss Wardell, the English mistress, all those years ago? No, this was something different. Here was a warmth I thought had gone forever. But did Charlie feel the same, feel attracted to this staid, middle-aged woman?

Charlie did. We would meet at lunch-times, sometimes in town, sometimes in Charlie's flat. And then it happened. Charlie was so gentle, not pushy, but that was Charlie. Just told me all about feelings and love and affection. And I responded. Me, the Vicar's wife! We started an affair. I felt terrible. It was un-Christian. But you can't help your feelings, can you?

I knew it could never last and, one evening, I just blurted it out to Richard. Confession is good for the soul they say but Richard found it hard to accept this particular confession. Impossible, in fact. He said it was unnatural. I said something like "But how can love be unnatural?"

Richard was an understanding man but he couldn't understand this. And he couldn't forgive.

Then someone at Charlie's work found out and Charlie got called before a tribunal. They suggested resignation would be preferable to dismissal so Charlie went back home to Brighton. My head said it was my duty to stay with Richard - but I loved Charlie. I took an overdose. It was stupid, I know, but I thought it was the only way out. But now I see it was just a cry for help. Anyway, I'm glad they found me in time because I've decided what to do.

I'm expecting a visitor this afternoon. The caller didn't leave a name but the nurse said it was a woman's voice. A young woman's voice. I do hope it's Charlie.

Early Bath

Carol Carpenter

(Equal second place)

Sam woke from a restful sleep, stretched his aching muscles then rolled on to his side to look at her. He glanced across at the clock. With a shock he saw that it was already nearly seven. He leant across and kissed her on the forehead so that she stirred and opened her eyes.

'Is it time to move?' she asked sleepily.

'It certainly is. I have to be at the course by nine sharp. As there's no shower I'll run a quick bath and you can have a few more minutes in bed.' She smiled and snuggled under the covers. 'What are you going to do today?' he called from the bathroom.

'Not sure yet. I'll see what I feel like after breakfast.'

'I fancy a Full English. They give you the works here, I'm told, sausages, fried bread, the lot.'

They were downstairs by eight o' clock and walked into the breakfast room holding hands.

'They were dead right about this place,' Sam commented.

'Who were?' she asked.

'I'm blowed if I can remember but no matter,' he said dismissively. They sat at a table by the window.

‘I think it looks a bit shabby, could do with tarting up.’

‘At least it’s cheap,’ he said defensively.

‘Huh!’ she said, frowning at him.

They both had the Full English and afterwards sat enjoying their coffee.

‘I won’t need to buy lunch now after all that. Have you decided where you’re going?’

‘Well the sun is shining so I might go for a walk in Hyde Park first and then spend the rest of the day shopping. Hand it over,’ she urged, grinning.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, looking at her nervously.

‘Well I can’t go shopping without any money. You promised me an exciting trip to London so get me excited!’

Reluctantly he pulled his wallet out and handed over a couple of twenties.

‘That won’t go far,’ she grumbled.

‘I’ll have to go to the bank. Look, tell you what, let’s meet at Starbucks at lunchtime, same one as yesterday. That’s not too far from the conference centre. I’ll buy you coffee and a snack.’

‘Big deal,’ she muttered unenthusiastically.

He tried to change the sour mood by becoming romantic again. He held her hand and stroked it softly.

‘Cheer up, darling.’

It was just at that moment when he felt he was being watched. He could feel eyes pinning him to his seat. Slowly he raised his head and glanced across the room. There in the doorway were the two people he would least like to see, his in-laws, Malcolm and Cynthia. They were standing stock still staring at the ‘loving couple’. Then, like a curtain lifting in his mind he remembered who had praised this hotel, who had frequently stayed here when they were up in town, who were now advancing on him like a pair of vicious Rottweilers. Could he blag his way out? Hardly, he was still holding her hand ...

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

(In view of the inclusion of Herbert Spencer winners, some poems have been held back for a future issue. Terry advises that he has received some work from Brendan McMahon who, as far as we are aware, is not a member. Perhaps word has got out that if you want to become Poet Laureate you must first be published in Author – Ed)

Garden Shed

A E Hobbs

A man's home is his castle,
This quote is often said,
But another prized possession
Is his trusty garden shed.

The interior is inviting,
Contents so exciting,
Workbench and tools to hand.
Tins of paint, a bale of wire, plus cement and sand.

On the shelves are jars filled with screws
And nuts and bolts and a tin of easing oil,
And around the walls are implements
For digging up the soil.

So, if your man is missing,
His paper has been read,
Ten to one you'll find him
Tinkering in his garden shed

The Room Beyond

Ivy Hudson

The open door beckons,
wedged by suspicions, thoughts
it's never quite closed.

Pounded, thrust open
the well-oiled hinged safety chain
gives way -

shadows dance,
nightmares sing
before the chain,

that chain
stretched to its limit,
pulls it to, once again.

The shadows sing
out of sight
and the long, long chain

of hearth and husband,
remains taut,
ever ready to clash.

Dinner Party

Norman Bissett

Dining on dolma, kofte, tapsi and biryani,
roast lamb, roast chicken, kurzi and unleavened bread,
we sat around the four walls of the room,
under the bright acrylics, listening to the oud
and watching the children play. Two non-semites
in that distinguished company of engineers and doctors-
a specialist in Internal Medicine, a Chief Pathologist,
GP's, anaesthetists, some paediatricians. We talked
of Erbil, Kirkuk, Saddam and Suleimaniye
and felt privileged to have been invited.

Orange Pippins

Terry Rickson

- a cinquain -

Fingers
of September
sun, warm Orange Pippins
that sweetly perfume old Kentish
orchards.

Psychological-Drama Making (Screens 7-9)

Christopher Barnes

: “Hamlet, I am thy :
: father’s spirit,” :
: chants Wyko, bowing. :
: A sneak uostairs, :
: latchstring on the :
: door. Clink, then :
: drippy-knock water. :

Water. Mr. Flowers
lengthens to the
top stair.
Ding-a-ling –
Lombard sighs. A
cat’s black follows
- so does gaslight.

Black follows – so
does gaslight. Cut.
Peripherally Wyko
and Bee scuttle
into Fegan’s Café.

(The above verses were contained in illustrated frames that have once again defeated my copier. Ed)

Bertrand Russell and the Librarian

Angus Livingstone

It is a reasonable hypothesis that all professions, as well as having the concomitant day-to-day problems and worries, have an overriding fear attached to them. For example: the surgeon’s fear would be a mistake is made on the operating table causing the patient

to die; the architect's fear may be that the calculations are faulty in some way resulting in the structure collapsing under extreme conditions; a magazine sub-editor's may be that he or she rejects an article by the owner's partner – and so on.

So what is the great fear of professional mathematicians? It is that the more and more specialised branches of mathematics in which they have to work do not live beyond the page - their theorems and equations are purely abstractions, just a series of marks and numbers with no connection to the real world.

So much emphasis in the twentieth century was given to trying to establish this grounding wherever possible and one of the branches which seemed to have excellent grounding was Set Theory and it thereby enjoyed something of a revival. Mathematicians are good at connecting different branches to each other and so the grounding of one branch had implications beyond itself.

Set Theory is one of the easiest areas of mathematics for the layman to comprehend because a set is just a list of things, or elements, which obey a rule.

It could be the set of all positive numbers or the set of all blue items in your room. Pertinent to this story, sets could be members of other sets or of their own set. The set of blue things in your room, for instance, is a member of its own set because it is itself blue whereas the set of all singular unmatched items in your room is not a member of its own set since it would have more than one element in it.

All seemed very promising until Bertrand Russell posed the following question “Is the set of all sets which are not members of themselves, a member of itself or not?”

- a reasonable question, at least to a mathematician.

You will be relieved to hear this is where the analogy of the librarian comes in.

A young and as it turned out rather unfortunate librarian was given the Herculean task of cataloguing all the books in her library into two catalogues. Catalogue A was to contain all the books whose title appeared in the text. i.e. if the book ‘The Cruel Sea’ had the phrase ‘the cruel sea’ in the text then it would go into Catalogue A otherwise

it would go into Catalogue B. That very day she began the task with the enthusiasm of youth.

Many years later, still unmarried, she was working late as usual by herself on the cataloguing when she suddenly found herself holding the last book to be catalogued. So allowing herself a rare smile of satisfaction, she adeptly checked the book and entered it into the appropriate catalogue.

With that, she closed the two catalogues and enjoyed for her the luxury of a long sigh. She carried the hefty tomes through to the reference section where she placed them in a prominent position. At which point she realised that the catalogues were now part of the library and therefore should themselves be catalogued.

So she took down Catalogue A and entered 'Catalogue A' in it – the title was now in the text and so the book was eligible for entry. She closed catalogue A and put it back on the shelf.

She then opened Catalogue B and was about to write 'Catalogue B' in it but stopped herself when she realised that she could not do so. Catalogue B if you remember was only to contain books which did *not* have the title in the body of the text and if she *did* write it in then it *would* have its title in the text.

She then thought that it must go into Catalogue A. So she re-opened Catalogue A but once more had to stop herself because Catalogue B did *not* have its title within its text so was not eligible. In other words, Catalogue B could not be catalogued!

With her smile of satisfaction now replaced with a slightly guilty and perplexed one, she needlessly looked around to make sure no-one was watching her before quietly closing the two catalogues and putting them back on the shelf. Her task now finished, she put out the lights, locked up and went home.

While irked by the cataloguing problem she had encountered, she was unaware that she had demonstrated the logical flaw at the centre of set theory, because the reasonable question that Russell posed could not be answered either by a yes or by a no. The flaw ensured that Set Theory, although still a useful branch of mathematics, perhaps like the librarian, never quite fulfilled the high hopes originally held for it.