

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

AGM

Saturday 11 May 2013

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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CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 3 Chairman's Chat
- 5 Competitions
- 5 New Year Party 2013 Report *Ethel Corduff*
- 6 AGM 2013
- 6 Literary Quiz Answers
- 7 Author Online *Paul Williams*
- 9 Market Profile *Ethel Corduff*
- 10 Annual Children's Short Story Competition 2012 results
- 11 Poetry Workshop *Mike Boland*
- 13 Poetry Pages *Edited by Terry James*
- 18 The Ridge *Dermot McKeone*
- 23 Brave New Universe *Douglas Fulthorpe*
- 25 Mr Jakende's Book *Tony Oswick*
- 27 A Case of Shared Identity *Gordon Thynne*
- 34 Overground Overture *Vivienne Orr*
- 35 Interpol *Bernie Bickerton*
- 38 The Rhubarb Challenge *Reported by Chester Guttridge*
- 39 Travellers' Tales *Helen Jackson*

Editorial

Paul Williams

I hope that by the time you are reading this the sun will be shining and the first flowers of the spring will be making their appearance. On the other hand, one advantage of a long cold winter is that it gives us the chance to stay indoors writing, so maybe by the time those flowers are in bloom I will have received a good few works of genius.

A couple of brief points that don't have an obvious home elsewhere.

Answers to the Christmas literary quiz are in this edition. Please let me know if you would like a quiz of some sort to be a regular feature.

The question has been raised as to whether members may enter stories or articles to the Society's competitions if they have appeared in *Author*. The answer has to be 'no', primarily because anonymity would be lost, given that many of our competitions are judged by members who will most likely have read the story and know who wrote it. Furthermore, winning entries are published in *Author*, which would mean publishing the same story twice. I understand the Poetry Workshop has slightly different rules for *wavelengths* but please bear in mind that *wavelengths* and *Author* are totally separate magazines.

I am making this editorial relatively brief because I have written a separate piece about the proposal to put *Author* online. I do hope you read this and let me have your opinions.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

I found the recent winter *Author* made a good read, and thanks to the Editor for his compilation.

Stephen Bibby's piece, *A Dramatic Revival*, brought back memories. As a new entrant into the Civil Service and in my first post, I found myself recruited by the head of the department into its amateur dramatic group, of which he was the enthusiastic director and organiser; at age 17 and finding your feet, you don't have the nerve to decline such an invitation!

I'm sure quite a number of our members take *The Radio Times* and noted the article written by Owen Sheers, the fine Welsh poet, about rugby, of which he is a great fan – once a four- times-a-week player and later doing a stint with Pontypool. His writing is noted for his talent for observation and insight, which is reflected in his poetry, novels and

plays. I can recommend reading Sheers, should you have not done so already.

January of this year saw the 200th anniversary of the publication of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a work, I understand, that has never been out of print. The work had been rejected out of hand by a publisher sixteen years earlier, unimpressed by its unknown author. To think, some two hundred years later, so many ladies would have the pleasure of witnessing Colin Firth's wet-shirted Mr Darcy meeting Lizzie Bennett following his swim in the lake!

January also saw the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Metropolitan Railway, London and the world's first underground railway. It was a great success, carrying some 30,000 passengers a day who flocked to engage in the novelty. There has been coverage in the national press about the event and the running of a steam-hauled train, complete with period carriages and a Victorian locomotive, during the course of this year. The event, I'm sure, would have delighted John Betjeman, many of whose poems celebrate or comment on aspects of railways, for example *The Metropolitan Railway* and *Monody on the Death of Aldersgate Street Station*. Hardy, too, was fascinated by railways and they appear in some of his poems, *Midnight on the Great Western*, for example. Then, of course, there is Auden's classic, *Night Mail*.

So, plenty here for members to 'get their teeth into,' rugby, swimming (or even skinny dipping!) and railways, by way of poems, stories or articles.

My limited venture into amateur dramatics, following my return from National Service, led to meeting my wife; she didn't think much of my acting ability but quite liked me!

Subscriptions

Members will have noticed that the membership renewal form was not sent with the winter edition. Thanks to those who sent their subscriptions anyway. Those who have not done so should send them to the Treasurer, Beryl Jones, 37 Lingham Lane, Moreton, WIRRAL, CH46 7SA, with a brief note giving their name and address.

Membership remains at £15, though I have been asked to point out that the combined SCPSW and Poetry Workshop subscription is £22.

Gordon Gompers Competition. Closing Date 31 July 2013

This is for any non-fiction piece, including travel articles. Maximum 2,000 words. Prize £50, entry fee £3. Entries should not have been published before, either in *Author* or elsewhere, be clearly typed with word count, and entered under a pen name with real name and address on a separate sheet. Closing date 31 July 2013. Entries should be sent to Nina Mattar, Competitions Secretary, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM2 6RT.

Vee Bradley Humorous Poetry Competition 2012 Closing Date 31 July 2013

The poem should be humorous, no longer than 30 lines, typed using a pen name with name and address on a separate paper. Entries should not have been published before in either *Author* or elsewhere. Include SAE if you would like your entry returned. There is no entry fee and the prize is £30. Closing Date is 31 July 2013. Entries should be sent to Nina Mattar, Competitions Secretary, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM2 6RT.

New Year Party

Ethel Corduff

The New Year party was held in the Civil Service Club on Saturday, 26 January. We missed our treasurer Beryl Jones this year. Her daughter Nicola passed away suddenly before Christmas. Our sympathy goes to Beryl and her family on their sad loss.

It was great that Chairman Terry Rickson was well enough to attend the party. The winners of the children's short story competition were announced. They were 1st prize Dermot McKeon for *The Ridge* and member Alan Jones, 2nd prize for *The Lonely Coconut*. Both had prior engagements and were unable to attend. The judge's comments and the winning story were read out.

We were pleased to meet Vivien Orr for the first time. The competition for those present, with the theme *Turning Point*, had a very interesting mix of entries.

The Short story first prize went to Val Tidwell; second prize-winner was Paul Williams. The poetry prize was won by Bernie Bickerton and second was a tie between Terry Rickson and Ethel Corduff.

Annual General Meeting, 11 May 2013

The AGM will take place on Saturday, 11 May 2013 at 1.30 pm, refreshments at 1 pm. I do hope as many as possible can attend, and I would remind members that reasonably priced train fares are often available for those who book in advance. The venue, as ever, will be the Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, Whitehall. A form is enclosed for those who wish to order refreshments, which are of a very good quality and include wine and soft drinks.

Literary Quiz Answers

1. An old Christmas/New Year custom Hardy featured in his novel, 'The Return of the Native'. A. *Mummers and Mummings Play*.
2. An ancient city site that inspired an ode from a writer who was to become a renowned war poet. A. 'Uriconium' by Wilfred Owen.
3. What is a cinquain and how is it constructed? A. *An unrhymed stanza of five lines comprising 2,4,6,8,2 syllables*.
4. Who was the commander of the Beagle in which Darwin sailed to South America? A. *Captain Robert Fitzroy*.
5. Of whom was it said he could '...make good thick soup and bake a tasty pie?' A. *The Cook in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*.
6. Who had 'A cold coming we had of it.' *The Magi in TS Eliot's Journey of the Magi*.
7. What event is the subject of the poem The Convergence of the Twain? A. *The loss of the Titanic*.
8. In what receptacle did Mr Cratchit cook her Christmas pudding? A. *The kitchen copper*.
9. Who was the author of 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin'? A. *Louis Bernieres*.
10. A poem by Christina Rossetti now familiar as a Christmas Hymn. A. *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*.
11. Witty 1932 novel by Stella Gibbons parodying the rural idyll. A. *Cold Comfort Farm*.
12. She won the Booker Prize in 1984 with 'Hotel du Lac'. A. *Anita Brookner*.
13. Dickens's Christmas story in which John Peerybingle appears. A. *The Cricket on the Hearth*.
14. Wordsworth described this tragic young poet as 'that marvellous boy... that perished in his pride. A. *Thomas Chatterton*.
15. British playwright born in Czechoslovakia whose works include 'Travesties' and 'Jumpers'. A. *Tom Stoppard*.

16. Author of 'Love on the Dole'. *Walter Greenwood*.
17. 19th Century American writer who went to school in Stoke Newington, now in North London. *A. Edgar Allan Poe*.
18. Name of Sebastian Flyte's teddy bear. *A. Aloysius*. (Brideshead Revisited)
19. Narnian castle housing the four thrones. *A. Cair Paravel*
20. The town Thomas Hardy called Casterbridge. *A. Dorchester*.

Author Online

Paul Williams (with Editor's hat on)

Until a few years ago I was one of the most computer illiterate people around, resisting attempts by my friends to get me online and only doing so when the powers that be at work decreed that it should be so. I can remember the fear I had of the electronic media, so different it seemed from my hitherto uncomplicated existence. I would pretend to myself that I could somehow avoid contact with it, that there were ways round the inevitable. Eventually I learned, reluctantly, how to use a word processor (I mean properly, not, for example, using the return key as though it were on a typewriter). Then, despite being quite pleased about what I could do with a word processor, I had to be almost forced to send my first emails.

It was working on a hospital ward that made me realise how I was missing out. The hospital had just introduced internet facilities for patients and I was amazed at the number of quite elderly people who were computer savvy. I began to Google myself when I first started considering moving house and a colleague showed me that a visit to Rightmove's site would allow me to see information and pictures about every house for sale in the country. From there I began doing some research for a History essay and was able to find a level of information that would not have been possible even if I'd tramped to every library and museum in the country. Within days I was having to force myself to get off the computer and go to bed. That particular bad habit passed eventually, though there are still the occasional times when I'm hooked into something for longer than I should be.

You probably know where this is going if only from the title. I mentioned the possibility of an online version of *Author* to Alan Gibb, our designer and the person who updates the Society's website, and he produced an online version as an experiment. He has also offered to

put past editions of the magazine online. I am seeking your views about how far beyond that we go. Do we simply put the magazine online and leave it at that or, in common with many other literary sites, do we offer a discussion page and other facilities?

There are some literary sites that are viewed by a million people or more. While I don't think we are quite ready for that kind of number, it is sobering to think that they started from nothing in the past few years while we are one of the oldest literary societies in the country yet have a membership that hovers between 150 and 200. As things stand it is difficult to see what attraction we can have to young aspiring writers when they can join an online group that enables their work to be seen and commented on by (potentially) limitless numbers. A few days ago I heard a radio discussion about changes in the book trade, during which both a literary agent and publisher said that nowadays they actively look for talent on the internet. Could it be that they may come to our site looking for that talent? I don't know, but what I do know is that none of us can win the lottery unless we buy a ticket! Quite apart from that, I suspect most of us would find writing that bit more exciting if we think our readers may be in the thousands rather than the dozens, and from all over the English-speaking world.

I have also noticed that most societies, literary and otherwise, are on Facebook. A few months ago I knew nothing about Facebook until I was looking for information about pub quiz nights in my area. 'Updates of coming events can be found on our Facebook page' seemed to be an almost universal response to enquiries. In order to access the information I had to join (it took all of one minute, though other information can be added later), and I soon came to realise what an invaluable tool it is for any business or society. I also belong to the Suffolk Book League, a group that in many ways approximates to our own, and I saw that they have quite an active Facebook page, with members exchanging information and ideas. It makes an excellent (free!) forum for discussion and for maintaining contact with other members. A search in the Facebook search box (a few key words can reveal much) showed that there are very many other writers' groups and book clubs there.

I hope that as many members as possible let me know their views on this and/or show up for the AGM on 11 May. Those with some knowledge of managing or even using online literary, History or general discussion sites (I mean respectable ones, of course!) are particularly welcome.

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

Why not make some money out of austerity! As I mentioned before some magazines publish tips. A very good one is *Prima* magazine, which surprisingly focuses on thrift, and in this time of belt tightening it is a good subject to make a little money from too. *Reader's tips* are dotted throughout the magazine – each one receiving £25. Plus the best tip receives £50. Readers are encouraged to write for *Prima* in other sections too such as:-

Letters page. Each month the published letters wins a year's subscription to the magazine and the star letter wins a Kenwood Blender. Each month the letters page also features a poem. In my issue it was on summer holidays.

The **Home Life** page pays £25 if your tip, photo or idea is published. Examples I read were about a favourite shop, favourite things, bargain hunt, household tips and a photo of nephews at the seaside.

The **Readers' Kitchen** page wants your recipes and tips, plus recommendations for a favourite cafe, food shop or gadget. Recipes receive a year's subscription to the magazine, other recommendations earn £25.

Picture Perfect. £25 for each photo printed on this page.

A winning story. This section pays very well and asks for 400 word stories: either fiction or real life experiences can be submitted. The winner in my issue wins a Kobo E-Reader and two runners-up each receive a year's subscription to *Prima*. The story can be posted or emailed with name, age, address, phone number and recent photo. yourwinningstory@hearst.co.uk.

What's it worth. If you have an antique item you want valued email a clear photo with a white background description and history of item plus your details to: sue.mcneill@hearst.co.uk or by post. The item of most value wins £50.

It is worth buying a copy to study the style of your chosen section and then compose your contribution to fit.

Submissions can be posted to *Prima*, 72 Broadwick Street, London, W1F 9EP, naming the appropriate section on the envelope, or by email to prima@hearst.co.uk

Annual Children's Short Story Competition 2012 results

The competition this year attracted 43 entries. Thank you to all who entered. The judge was children's author Jillian Henderson-Long. This is a summary of her report.

First Prize £75 - *The Ridge* by Dermot McKeon from Eastleigh.

Second Prize £40 - *The Lonely Coconut* by Alan Jones from Solihull.

Highly Commended - *Peaches* by Austin S Chater from Market Rasen.

Generally speaking, the standard of entries was pretty high with most of them achieving 7/10 or above. There were some original ideas and clever deliveries. Where some fell down however, was in something as remedial as presentation. Another major problem was the length of some of the entries in relation to their target age group. Most three-year-olds have the attention span of a gnat and would not spare long descriptive passages a second glance. They want something short, snappy and exciting with a happy outcome so they go to sleep contented - and much of this applies to work for older readers, too. At the other end of the scale, some of the stories intended for older children and teenagers featured totally inappropriate language being either too young or too adult in their delivery.

In the end, I placed *The Ridge* in First Place. It is beautifully written with totally believable characters and a nice twist and it was delivered in an age-appropriate, interesting and clever way. This has all the making of a classic; the kind of story one turns to again and again. It is told on the good old fashioned way, with a beginning that hooks you in, a middle that flows seamlessly, word to word, a penultimate and unexpected twist and a satisfying end that just makes you smile. The author had clearly done their homework. The length and content were spot on for the target age-group and the two main characters, Ulbrecht and Otto, come over as real boys and their relationship is beautifully portrayed. The whole thing has the reader fully involved right from the first word. Will the boys make it past the soldiers without been seen? Is Ulbrecht seriously injured in his fall? What should Otto do – stay or go?

Second Place goes to *The Lonely Coconut*. What an enchanting and original place this was! It is never easy to find a totally new idea but the author had certainly managed it here! Who would suspect that a coconut could have such an interesting series of adventures? I particularly loved the almost paternal whispering of its parent tree early in the story and the ocean-bound journey that the coconut embarks on is refreshingly told; one can almost hear, see, smell and feel the swell of the sea and it is that originality and vitality which won this tale second place. It is told in a way

that is wholly appropriate for its target age-group, does not feature long descriptive passages (nor does it need to for the actual story reveals everything the reader needs to know) and it draws to a comforting and reassuring conclusion. My only niggle, and it *is* just a niggle, is that it might be just a bit too long. If the author can get it down to 1,000 words without losing any of the magical ingredients, I think it would be an absolute winner.

Finally, I can't resist giving a Highly Commended to *Peaches*. This lovely tale would have been a winner if all the presentation criteria had been met and was a well-written piece that was a joy to read.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Bill Barnes Competition Results

The results of the 2012 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition are :-

First Prize: Norman Bissett

Second Prize: Andy Millican

Third Prize: Norman Bissett

All Winning and Commended poems appear in the current (spring) issue of **wavelengths**.

Congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to Angus Livingstone for judging the 2012 competition. Details of this year's Competition and how to enter will be given in the summer issue of **wavelengths**.

Waves 2013

PW members are reminded that the deadline for this year's edition of **Waves**, the annual anthology of PW members' work, is **31 March**. This year **Waves** will be co-edited by Val Tigwell and Ivy Hudson. Send up to six poems, preferably 3 or more to give the editors a selection to choose from. There are no restrictions on theme or form. Entries should be no more than **37** lines including stanza breaks and should not have been published previously, apart from in **wavelengths** and **The Author**.

Contributions preferably by email as an attachment to valerie.tigwell@ic24.net, or by post to Val Tigwell, 155 Rectory Road, Farnborough, Hants GU14 7HS.

wavelengths

As well as the annual anthology **Waves**, the Poetry Workshop also produces a quarterly magazine called **wavelengths**, issued free to all its members. The spring edition is out now. This edition of the magazine is traditionally devoted to the Bill Barnes Competition and this year is no exception. It contains the Judge's Report, all three prize winning poems plus those that the judge, Angus Livingstone, considered as worthy of Commendation. Running to 20 pages, it also contains articles and poems by PW members and finishes with the Newsletter section.

PW Weekend 2013

The annual weekend get-together of the Poetry Workshop will be held from **Friday 26 July to Sunday 28 July 2013**. For the second year running the venue will be Launde Abbey, East Norton, Leicester. Full details of the Weekend, including costs etc., plus a booking form were included in the winter issue of **wavelengths**.

Subscriptions 2013

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2013. Please note that the cost of membership has been increased and is now £7 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. A Renewal Form was enclosed with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. Please complete and send it with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

Prospective new members should contact Terry Rickson at the address given above.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year
- 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 efolio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend

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.

Dates to Remember

1 March 2013	wavelengths spring issue published
31 March 2013	Closing date for Waves 2013
June 2013	wavelengths summer issue published
26-28 July 2013	PW Weekend

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Zacodover Plaza

Norman Bissett

A cold country of oppressive heat,
with, at its core, the endless plateau
of La Mancha, burnt umber by last summer's sun,
el hogar de los pobres,
wearing today a turquoise canopy.

The Imperial City of Three Cultures
stands on a plate that tilts towards the river,
looping around it in a deeply incised gorge:
the former capital more ancient and more venerable
than the recent upstart, with its room for growth.

If you are fortunate, you may walk down, as we walked down,
one fine, serene, crisp, January morning
towards the Tajo from the Parador. Walked down
into the gorge, to enter the city, as if for the first time,
on that glorious first morning of the year,

broom glistening with dew, a sufficient sun
warming our backs. Across the gorge's rushing river,
the city scrambles up the slope, a jumble of red roofs,
stone towers and crooked lanes with, dominating all,
the stark Alcazar and the cathedral's spiky spire.

The entrance to this labyrinth of intricate passageways?
Ignore the new bridge used by motor cars. Continue

to the old Alcantara with its high stone arch,
its horseshoe gate and flight of zigzag steps
mounting the city's rocky, mediaeval flanks.

Go past the Hospital de Santa Cruz, climb up
another flight of steps, pass through a second horseshoe gate,
the Arch of Blood, to reach Zocodover, still echoing
from the siege of the Alcazar, looming adjacent.
In this triangle beats Toledo's heart.

Here you may rest from your exertions
in the January sun, and join the Toledans sitting
where they have always sat, beneath umbrellas.
A dish of hot tortilla, crusty bread, a caña of ice-cold beer:
manna with which to consecrate the day.

Exclusive

Andy Millican

The prophet had
misprophesied.

Two reporters
waited outside.

A wicked scoop
materialized.

The prophet spat
and cursed inside.

His precious god
had told him lies.

Coffee Stop, Assynt

Norman Bissett

We sit in front of the Elphin Tea Rooms
At a glistening, rain-damp picnic bench
And raise a toast to Achiltibuie.
The whitewashed wall behind us is adorned
With antlers and wagon wheels with red spokes.

Looming in front of us, wreathed in Scotch mist,
Four antediluvian pachyderms,
Denizens since time immemorial,
Squat on the skyline beyond peat-black bogs.
Cul Beag, Cul Mor, Suilven and Canisp slouch
Through eternity, their skulls among clouds,
Indifferent to sun, sleet, wind and snow.
Their granite flanks are perdurable.
Aristocrats, they lounge, lords of the land.

Lugworm

Norman Bissett

Pink or black in its narrow grave
inches below the surface of the sand,
king-lug, the gulley worm, beds down,
beloved of godwits, avocets and fishermen.
Between its silty, untidy worm-cast
like a Walnut Whip, and two concentric circles
dimpling the sand a foot away as targets,
perfect spheres from an RAF fuselage,
its sepulchre is easy to identify.
The resurrectionists have it easy.
All that is needed is a broad-tined fork,
a bucketful of clean salt water, for rinsing,
and a pail, for portability. Six decades ago, my Dad
and I, mackerel-men, played Burke and Hare.

Jellyfish

Norman Bissett

Delicately beautiful,
snake-haired, translucent
parachutes of gelatin,
blood-red or pallid
blue albinos, they
go with the flow,
drift with the currents,
backwards, forwards,

mindless aliens,
in gang-like shoals.

They don't swim but move
by pulsating water
from pale canopies.
Contemporary, feckless,
passive and lacking
backbones, brains,
ears, eyes, hearts, minds,
souls and ambition, they are
vacuous, their lives
devoid of interest.

Dented Pride

Alan Jones

(This poem was sent direct to the Editor of *Author*)

Saturday morning began with
An excitable phone call from Sid.
He said "I've had tips for the racing
I think we can win a few quid!"

We got to the racecourse by lunchtime
And Sid was in confident mood
"I've been given three horses" he shouted.
"The bookies are going to get screwed!"

The first horse proved most disappointing
And came trailing home right at the back.
He moved faster around the parade ring
Than he did when he got on the track.

"Don't worry" said Sid not disheartened.
The battle's been lost not the war.
I'm sure we can come out in profit
On our horse in the quarter-to-four.

His weight is the minimum carried

He's got stones in hand – can't be beat.
But instead of him running like clockwork
He ran like he'd stones in his feet.

We've only one chance left, Sid reasoned.
I reckon it's double or quits
We'll have all our money on this one
We'll knock all the bookies for six!

This tip was hot news from the stables
Nautical Archie's his name.
He certainly did look a picture
All black, with a long-flowing mane.
When he came to the last he was cruising
While the favourite was struggling in third
But Archie was still full of running
And flew over the fence like a bird.

With the race and the prize at his mercy
Archie swerved and ran straight off the track.
The rider now thoroughly startled
Came off and fell flat on his back.

The jockey got up in a temper
And ripped off his cap and his silks
The trainer went off to tempt Archie
Back with mints and a saucer of milk.

As we trundled in tears to the car park
It was then that we saw from afar
An enormous great dent in the bonnet
Where Archie had sat on our car!

“Did you win?” my wife called as I got home again
I answered her back with discretion
And said that the horses with Sid and his tips
Had certainly left an impression!

The Ridge

Dermot McKeone

(This story was winner of the 2012 Children's Short Story Competition. It is intended for the 9-11 age range. The Runner-up will be published in a later edition.)

A long time ago in a land many miles from here, there was a farm on which there lived two young cousins. Their names have been lost - they could have been called Gilles and Jacques, or maybe Peter and John. I'm going to call them Otto and Ulbrecht.

The farm was poor and very remote indeed: it was a seven mile walk to the nearest village. Even in the good times the farm wasn't very successful. The weather there was terribly hot and there wasn't much rain. That wasn't the only problem: the soil was so poor that hardly anything would grow there, so all the farmers could do was plant a few vegetables and keep some goats. In some places, nothing would grow and even the goats didn't go to those spots.

The land covered many acres. The rambling old house was in the south next to a well, and this was surrounded by some of the better soil. Further north, the land sloped up and the soil got poorer and poorer until it reached a steep ridge. Ulbrecht's father owned more land above the ridge where some vines grew, but the only way up was a steep path to the west. It was a two mile walk. There was another, steeper path to the top, used by the goats, but more of that later.

Our story starts the day after the soldiers came.

It had been the worst day in the farm's long history. There had been eight of them, in torn grey uniforms, all on horseback and they'd threatened Ulbrecht's father and mother and the mother's half-sister who was Otto's mother. One of them was wounded and the women had done their best to dress the wounds on his arm and chest. Despite this kindness, the soldiers had taken all the dried meat, the corn and all the other stored food. They had drunk much of the rough red wine that the family had put by for the winter, and broken the barrels containing the rest. They had even put some foul substance in the well but that wasn't discovered till the adults all fell ill the next day. Then they had ridden north.

The boys, who were in the habit of taking a flask of water to put by their beds at night, hadn't drunk water from the well, but the others had and it wasn't long before all of them were sick and sweating and incapable of doing anything.

"Whatever will we do?" gasped Ulbrecht's mother as she lay on her straw bed. "We have no water, and we can't go to the village because the soldiers will be there."

"We'll go and get some from the spring at the top of the ridge," said Otto. "It's not far. We'll be back in an hour and a half."

So the boys set off. Now you'd think that living as close as these two did, the boys would be squabbling and fighting all the time. Not a bit of it. Ulbrecht was twelve, with ruddy cheeks and a ready smile, and was as strong as an ox. Otto was a few months younger, still eleven. He was slighter and darker than Ulbrecht and had plenty to say for himself, so most folk reckoned him to be older than he actually was. Otto was the smart one. That they got on so well was probably because Ulbrecht happily accepted Otto's leadership in the things they did together.

It was no different that day. While Ulbrecht went to get two leather buckets, Otto found some of his uncle's gloves as he reckoned the buckets would wear their fingers out by the time they got back with the water in them.

Half way up the side of the ridge, the boys saw a welcome sight. Looking across the slope towards the rising sun (it was still early) they saw, through a gap in the bushes a long way away, the family's goats trotting down their steep path towards the farmhouse. The soldiers had pursued them up the ridge yesterday but the sure-footed creatures had left the horses slithering and sliding on the lower slopes. "At least we'll have some milk tonight!" said Ulbrecht to his cousin.

When they reached the top of the ridge a little later, the cousins saw the soldiers. This was not such a welcome sight. "How can we reach the spring without them seeing us?" asked Ulbrecht.

Otto looked carefully at the soldiers. "I don't think they'll bother us — they had too much wine yesterday!" The horses were hobbled and the soldiers were lying under a tree. None of them were moving, so the boys moved quietly east towards the spring, hiding behind bushes where they could.

The land rose behind the spring and there were dense bushes growing round the little pool beneath it, so the boys were able to hide behind these by crouching down as they got their water. It took a long time for the two buckets to fill up.

Carefully, slowly, the cousins started back down with their full buckets. They weighed so much more than they had imagined! Trying not to make a noise, they edged their way through the bushes towards the top of the path with the rising sun warming their backs.

As they stopped for a brief rest, some crows rose, cawing loudly, from trees further down the path. Otto froze. Crows didn't usually bother about goats or wild pigs, so the noise could only mean one thing — people were coming up the path towards them. As quickly as they could, the boys scrambled back and off towards the precipitous ridge, away from the path.

They could hear them now — not just one or two people but a dozen, muttering to each other, some panting, some cursing with the effort of trudging up the steep slope. Lying on the ground next to his bucket, Otto looked through the branches of a myrtle bush and saw what he knew he would — the boots and grey-clad legs of more soldiers marching up the path, about to join their comrades at the top of the ridge.

“We can't go down the path now with all those soldiers about,” said Otto quietly. “We'll have to go

down the goats' path. The boys looked at each other. The goats' path was murderously steep.

“Have you ever gone down the goats' path?” whispered Ulbrecht. Otto shook his head. Without another word, Ulbrecht seized his bucket and, crouching as low as he could, he half slithered, half walked down the steep slope towards the tiny strip of beaten chalk below them. Otto followed. They were making more noise than they wanted and both were scratched by brambles and twigs as they went down.

A few moments later, the two boys were standing on the goats' path. They could see the farmhouse a hundred metres beneath them to the south — the roof and chimney were quite clearly visible. The ridge between the boys and their destination was nearly as steep as a cliff, but there could be no going back now. The path snaked off to the right, heading down the slope at a frighteningly steep angle.

As they stood there, the path under Ulbrecht's feet gave way, and he could not stop himself from falling. Still trying to hold the bucket with one hand, Ulbrecht grabbed a small branch with the other but all he did was uproot the plant and he plunged down the slope. His fall seemed to last forever. Eventually, with a loud thump, the slithering stopped and there was silence.

Hardly daring to breathe, Otto grasped a stout branch and leaned over the abyss to see what had happened. His cousin seemed to be unconscious and it looked as though he had come to a halt against a tree growing out of a tiny ledge in the chalk, about half way down the steep slope. As he watched, a few stones dislodged themselves and rolled down the ridge towards the farmhouse. The bucket was nowhere to be seen.

Otto didn't know what to do. Should he carry on as best he could down the goats' path to the farmhouse with the remaining water, then come back to see to Ulbrecht? Or should he abandon the much-needed water and slide down to his cousin and hope he could stop himself?

There was only one thing he could do. Taking off his torn and grubby shirt, he spread it over the top of the bucket. He then removed his belt and tied it round the top of the bucket, making a kind of lid out of his shirt. Holding the bucket in his arms and between his knees, he wriggled over to the edge of the path where it had given way. Ulbrecht had made a visible track through the undergrowth as he had fallen and it seemed to Otto that if he started down this track, he'd reach his cousin.

All went well at first. Using one gloved hand to grab branches to slow his progress, Otto negotiated the first few metres satisfactorily. Then his speed increased and it seemed as though he was going to crash into his cousin's unconscious body. He dug the heels of his boots in sharply and just as he was about to collide with his cousin, he managed to grab another branch. He held on to the bucket, but the force of his descent swung him round and much of the water sloshed out through the fabric of his shirt, disappearing immediately into the dry ground. Panting hard from his exertions, he came to an abrupt stop next to Ulbrecht. The bucket still felt about half full.

Otto placed the bucket carefully down on the ledge and turned to his cousin. There was blood on his scalp, but he was still breathing normally. Otto breathed a sigh of relief. As he touched his cousin's shoulder, Ulbrecht stirred and his eyelids flickered open.

“Wh... What happened, Otto? Where are we?”

“You fell down the ridge, Ulbrecht. But you seem to be OK,” Otto replied, trying to sound more optimistic than he felt.

Then Ulbrecht gasped. It was all coming back to him. “What happened about the soldiers? Where are they? What happened to your shirt?”

“They are up there and I don't think they saw us. The shirt is over the bucket and now we have to get the water back to the farm.”

They decided to form a kind of sledge with Otto in front and Ulbrecht holding on to Otto with the half-full bucket between them. It was part slide, part tumble, a bit like their earlier descent, but there were fewer bushes here and the tussocks at the bottom slowed them down. They slid over another little ledge and down as far as a huge boulder near the bottom of the slope, just 200 metres from the farmhouse.

Much to their surprise, they came to a stop right next to Ulbrecht's bucket. But the biggest surprise of all awaited them as they stood up and dusted themselves down.

Now, I cannot give any explanation how this occurred. The priest in the village church later said it was a miracle. An old lady in the village said it was magic. But here's the truth of it: Ulbrecht's bucket was full to the brim of pure, clear water.

Carrying the two buckets with their precious loads, the boys walked to the farmhouse in silence. The water lasted the family a day or two, during which time the adults slowly recovered. After the soldiers had all gone, a kind neighbour lent the family a mule for journeys up the ridge and that solved the water problem until the well was producing clean water again.

And the cousins became a legend when their story was told, not just in their own land but in ours too!

Brave New Universe

Douglas Fulthorpe

Early last Saturday afternoon I travelled on the Metro. I was fortunate enough to get a double seat at the back, where I could imagine I was in the Club Car of an American commuter train from a bygone age, watching the receding track, and indulging my juvenile fantasies.

A few stops further on a young woman boarded the train and sat beside me. She immediately took an object from a carrier-bag, then studied it with interest. It was a clear, plastic vase containing three pale blue flowers, also plastic. She was evidently very pleased with her ornament.

That looks nice, I ventured.

She said, I got it from a shop, one pound-fifty reduced to fifty pence. I'm living in a hostel, and it will go in my room until I get my own house. The label bore the name of a local charity. I had never knowingly spoken to anyone living in a hostel. I asked, how was it she was living in a hostel?

My mother threw me out because of my drinking and bad behaviour. I'm a drinker, she added. She opened another bag and took out a bottle of QC Cream Sherry, unscrewed the cap, then politely offered me a drink. I said no thank you, triggering the thought that, as it was Saturday, it would be several hours before I would have my first drink of the week. She took a nip, then replaced the bottle in her bag.

I wondered how much she drank.

A bottle a day. Simple arithmetic showed that that was equivalent to just over five pints of pub beer daily, which by medical standards is heavy drinking, particularly for a woman.

How old are you? I asked, my curiosity whetted. Twenty-two. In return I told her my age, since it seemed a bit much to ask for personal information while withholding my own. She looked at me and said, you mustn't smoke or drink. Did she smoke? Yes.

What sort of house would she get? Probably a flat or a bungalow.

After a few more stops she bade me goodbye. Clutching her little treasure, she departed for her room in the hostel, leaving me and, I

suspected, a few others, who had been surreptitiously eavesdropping, quietly reflective.

My mood was sober, if not sombre, until I reached my destination two stops further, and afterwards. Although she was friendly, I hadn't asked her name. That would have been too much. What, I wondered, did she have to look forward to? Alcoholism, prostitution, freezing in a gutter? Too easy to say she should be motivated; she should get a job. What job? Easy to be smug, with our comfortable homes, adequate income, and emotional ties, while she has her bottle of sherry and her vase of plastic flowers. Easy to condemn, without knowing her previous history and what had caused her bad behaviour.

Like the man in the Bible, you are tempted to thank God that you are not like other men. It is human, very human, to be grateful for our good fortune, but surely not condescending. The impression I had gained during my short conversation with her was that, apart from her drinking, she would struggle to obtain other than fairly menial employment. Of course she should be motivated to help herself. How? Presumably she has already received help from various quarters, and has perhaps tried hard, within her apparently limited abilities. The seeds of help, whether from within or without, seem to have fallen on fallow ground.

After shopping in the city, my thoughts returned to the young woman and her misfortune. Was it misfortune? The concept of fortune, even at the level of which seat you get on the train, good or bad, implies a special personal quality inviting one or the other, or possibly the intervention or non-intervention of a higher power.

An alternative and at least arguable explanation is that each of us is the product of two factors: our genetic make-up and our lifelong, continuing and constantly changing environment following conception. Our physical and mental strengths and weaknesses and precise circumstances; all were determined to the most minute detail aeons before our remote ancestors flopped gasping from a warm ocean. The subsequent history of the Universe was defined at the instant of its creation. The complex physical and chemical changes which followed, which were themselves initiated and defined at the very beginning, charted the course of the next twelve thousand million years, and were responsible for our current Universe in its entirety.

It follows that what we regard as our free will, our choice between

good and evil, the very concept of good and evil, our actions, voluntary or otherwise, stemmed from the ancient, cataclysmic event, then evolved over millennia.

Saint or sinner, gifted or impaired; each has no more control over his destiny than the smallest microbe on the most distant planet. My thoughts and the words I write, my pencil and the paper on which they appear, all owe their existence to an unexplained event.

These thoughts occupied me as I returned to my home and my Saturday night video and refreshment. She, with her own pleasures and activities, is, like me and all humankind, a mote in a cosmic maelstrom. I felt sad.

Mr Jakende's Book

Tony Oswick

The boy strode forward, kicking at loose pebbles as he walked along the dusty track. The pebbles fell among scrub bushes that lined the side of the track, disturbing arid soil which had not seen rain for two months. Three scrawny chickens pecked at loose corn. The boy knew he was close to the village now.

He'd started from home an hour ago. The village was just half-a-mile away, beyond the three bushwillows and over the ridge. He sang as he walked, his high-pitched voice competing with the wail of squawking kestrels as they searched out lizards for breakfast. Eager to reach school, the boy began to run. A book, crudely attached to his belt by a piece of string, thumped against his spindly thigh. He looked skywards beyond the ridge and saw a plume of smoke.

As he reached the three bushwillows, he noticed a man sitting cross-legged by the side of the track. He was wearing a soldier's uniform, a rifle slung across his shoulder, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. The boy halted his run but his foot-steps had disturbed the soldier's reverie.

The soldier leapt to his feet, discarded the cigarette and pointed his rifle at the boy. "What you doing, boy?"

“I’m going to school,” replied the boy, his outstretched arm pointing over the ridge.

The soldier looked over his shoulder. “No-one ain’t going nowhere today.”

“But why not?” The boy enjoyed school. The reading, the writing, the companionship of the other boys. And kind Mr Jakende, his teacher.

“Because the Captain says so. The Captain says no-one goes to the village. If they try, I shoots them. That’s what the Captain says. Understand?”

The boy looked down at the floor and kicked at the dusty track. For a moment there was silence.

“What’s that?” The soldier pointed to the book hanging from the boy’s belt.

“This? It’s a book of poetry.”

The soldier beckoned the boy with a cupped hand, took the book and opened it. The boy watched the soldier’s face as it moved from left to right and back again. With a grunt, he thrust the book into the boy’s chest. “Books. Huh! Off you go, boy. Take your book with you.”

“But it’s not mine. I borrowed it from Mr Jakende. I’ve got to give it back.”

“Then Mr Jakende will have to do without it. Anyways, who’s Mr Jakende?”

“Mr Jakende? He’s my teacher. At the school.”

The soldier stared down at the boy. “Mr Jakende? You mean *he’s* the teacher-man?” And he let out a laugh so loud that the swirling kestrels above took fright. “Well boy, Mr Jakende won’t have no need of that book no more. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not any day. Keep it, boy. It’s yours now.”

The soldier pointed the muzzle of his rifle down the track from where the boy had come. The boy did not understand the soldier’s words but he understood he would not be able to go to school today.

With Mr Jakende’s book grasped in his hand, the boy turned to begin the long journey home.

A Case of Shared Identity

Gordon Thynne

The face haunts me still. I stare at myself in a mirror. My hair recedes, my brow wrinkles. I am that other person whom I nearly was.

Our meeting was the purest chance, unless you believe in a destiny that directs our lives. His was the face at the far end of a crowded carriage on the Bakerloo Line. Something about it transfixed me. It was so familiar. He caught me staring at him, and stared back until, perhaps embarrassed or annoyed, he turned his back to me.

We both got out at Oxford Circus. I followed him down the platform. He looked back and caught my gaze, before being swept along with the crowd to the foot of an escalator.

The following morning, whilst shaving, it dawned on me why his face was familiar. It was the image of mine, apart from his head being bald. Famous people like Stalin and Churchill were reckoned to have used doubles for security. There was no reason why ordinary folk should not have doubles, too. I both hoped and feared to see the man again.

Six months later, when the encounter had slipped to the back of my mind, we met. With a minute to spare, I got on the Oxford train at Paddington. I moved down the carriage looking for a vacant window seat. I was conscious of a head raised from a newspaper. I looked down at the face of my double. A slight smile appeared.

‘We meet again, it seems,’ he said. Without being aware of deciding to do so, I took the seat on the other side of the table.

‘This is extraordinary!’ I exclaimed. ‘Such a similarity! I wouldn’t have believed it possible!’

‘Nor me,’ he replied. ‘But I envy your hair!’

I was, in fact, rather proud of the fact that, although sixty, I still had a respectable covering, albeit white. As we took each other in, I noticed, with some satisfaction, that his forehead was more wrinkled than mine. Perhaps he was older, or had been through the mill.

‘I’m Jack Collins,’ he said, offering his hand.

‘I’m John Bryant,’ I responded, taking his hand in a grip which was stronger than his.

‘Did you say, “John Bryant”?’ he asked, his brow furrowing.

‘That’s right. Captain Bryant, retired Royal Navy.’

‘But John Bryant’s *my* name – my real name!’

‘What do you mean? You said you were Jack Collins.’

‘Yes, but I changed my name.’

‘Look,’ I said, becoming disturbed. ‘I don’t mind meeting my double, but I’m not going to put up with someone pretending to be me.’

‘I’m not pretending. John Bryant is my real name.’

‘So why did you change it?’

‘I’d prefer not to go into that. It’s very personal.’

I looked out of the window. The untidy suburbs were giving way to the pleasant countryside. I calmed down.

‘I’m sorry if I seemed uptight,’ I said. ‘But the situation is very odd, to say the least. May I ask how old you are?’

‘I’m sixty.’

‘When is your birthday?’

‘The sixth of June.’

‘You’re going to tell me next that you were born in Hathersage, Derbyshire.’

‘That’s right. How did you know?’

‘So was I, on the very same day!’

We stared at each other. The ticket inspector came along. My double had to ferret in a coat pocket, and I noticed that the lining was torn. That was another difference between us: his clothes were well-worn, almost shabby. I’ve always prided myself on being smart.

I felt a distinct reluctance to pursue the baffling coincidence of our birthdays and birthplaces. I had a feeling that I was on the verge of something that should, for both our peace of minds, remain hidden.

We smiled at each other wanly. The train was approaching Reading

‘I get out here,’ he said. ‘Suppose we meet up to explore our origins further.’

I agreed reluctantly. He gave me his phone number.

I was averse to inviting him to my home. I didn’t want my wife to see my double and be troubled by these strange coincidences. So we met at a pub in Didcot, roughly half way between Oxford and Reading.

‘People will think we’re twins!’ he remarked.

I didn’t welcome this idea. We took our coats off and settled down. Another difference between us was that he was thinner than me – perhaps another indication of a harder life.

After some desultory chat, with each of us skirting the thing that interested us most, I took the plunge. Suppose that I hadn’t done so – suppose that we had continued to chat as near strangers, leaving the mystery of coincident births unexamined: the eventual tragedy would have been averted. But heedless, I plunged in.

‘Who were your parents?’ I asked.

‘Ronald and Alice Bryant’, he said.

Somehow, I had known he would say that, but my head swam nevertheless. Were we still on terra firma?

‘They were my parents, too,’ I said with a calmness that belied the turmoil in my mind.

A waitress arrived to ask what we wanted to drink. I opted for one of my favourite drinks in the Service: a brandy and ginger ale. My double ordered a soft drink. We were at a window seat, and I noticed that it had begun to snow. The mock coal fire gave the pub a cosy appearance. But ‘cosy’ was far from how I felt.

My drink spurred me on to probe further. ‘Either you are perpetrating the most tremendous “con” that I’ve ever come across,’ I said. ‘Or there’s a mystery here that defies reason.’

‘You can say that again!’ He replied, adding ‘But if there’s a “con”, it’s you who’s trying it on.’

I suppressed my feeling of annoyance. ‘What do you know of my early life?’ I asked.

‘Or you of mine?’ he riposted.

Over the next half hour we each put questions about our early past: schools, schoolmates, teachers, Church, family life. It was uncanny. I could hardly fault him. Occasionally, he would say he couldn’t remember the name of someone, but he could give a description. What was perhaps more disturbing was that he knew what questions to put to me. After a time, without being aware of it, we moved from interrogation to a more familiar, ‘Do you remember this, do you remember that?’, as though we were old chums going over shared territory.

Looking out of the window, I saw that although there were still some snowflakes, the sky was lit up by a westerly sun. There was probably a rainbow somewhere. I had a presentiment that there would be no rainbow at the end of our investigation. It was time to tackle him more bluntly.

‘Do you have your birth certificate?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t. It disappeared, I don’t know how.’

At last, I thought: the first chink in his armour.

‘What about photographs?’

‘That’s one of the things I most regret. Lost in one of my upheavals.’

I thought that very strange.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘We haven’t got to the bottom of this, yet. Your memory, if that’s what it is, is extraordinary. But assiduous researching into my life could have yielded much the same. Suppose we ...’

He interrupted me. ‘I resent your attitude that I’m the suspect. What about you? I’ve got a suggestion: let’s go to Hathersage and test each other’s knowledge of the place. What about a fortnight’s time?’

I reflected. I still had not rid my mind of the reasonable suspicion that he was an impostor. A fortnight would give him time to visit the place and ‘bone’ up on it.

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘But let’s go up tomorrow.’

He came up to Oxford and we continued by the cross country train to Derby, where I planned to hire a car.

‘Tell me about your career in the Navy,’ he said.

I began describing my National Service in the Supply and Secretariat Branch.

‘I know about that,’ he commented, impatiently. ‘What followed it?’

I explained that I had applied to transfer to the RN. He listened intently as I told him of my various postings, the ships and shore stations, and the culmination of my career on an assignment to NATO. It was not a particularly remarkable career, but it did have some lustre, namely my minor role in the Battle of the Falklands where I’d earned my DSC. It was only when I had finished my recital that I realised that, if he was intent on stealing my identity, I had done a bit of his job for him.

‘I envy you,’ he said. Reciprocating, he gave me an outline of his working life: insurance salesman, bank clerk, librarian, secretary to a minor firm of builders, treasurer of a little-known charity. It was in the last that he ‘came a cropper’ as he put it. There was a matter of a few thousand pounds gone missing. He owned up and got the sack. It was after then he changed his name. His marriage failed. He had no children – something that I sensed he regretted.

Our exploration of the old haunts of Hathersage left me depressed. I had counted on catching him out. I had looked on it as the ultimate test: make or break. Easy to say, but what did I mean by the phrase? ‘Break’ – that was simple: he would be exposed as a clever charlatan. But ‘make’? What would the other side of the coin make him, or me?

In the Holiday Inn where we were putting up for the night, I brought out the other proof of my life, and test of his: albums of photographs. I had hidden the captions. But he was almost a hundred per cent correct. Moreover, the pictures of my parents, aunts and uncles moved him to seemingly honest tears. He blew his nose.

‘Sorry!’ he said. ‘It’s just that I haven’t seen these for so many years. And it brings back to me that Mum and Dad had much higher expectations of me than I ever achieved.’

We stayed up till well past midnight, going over our two lives, or the one which we appeared to share. If there had been a sharing, there had also been a parting of the ways. When and where had that happened? His claims of authenticity led to the conclusion of my – or our - National Service with the Navy. Thereafter, his life branched off. Naturally, I saw mine as a vertical continuation, with his straggling to one side.

In my room, it was hours before I could settle to sleep. My reason still refused to accept anything but a natural explanation. But if he was stealing my identity, he was doing so in the most consummate way imaginable. I thought of the villain in Buchan’s ‘Thirty Nine Steps’ with his photographic memory and capacity for disguise. I thought of espionage agents being trained to adopt a different personality. On the other hand, the almost total apparent recall that he had displayed was beyond belief. It wasn’t just that he claimed to share the same memories: his way of describing them was also mine.

I forced my mind to entertain fully the alternative: that we were, to a point, one and the same person. There was a fascination about it, but also a horror. Schubert’s setting of the poem, *Der Doppelgänger*, portrays the agony of a man seeing his ghostly double. Turning from the awful sublime to the ridiculous, I thought of the two-headed giant in a story of Enid Blyton’s that I had read as a boy. Was I, were we, some such monstrosity? If we were joined at the hip, so to speak, what was our future? Just supposing there was life after death, would we be united? I shuddered at the thought.

Then there was the conundrum of what had provoked a split? When my National Service had been drawing to an end, I had certainly been much exercised over whether I should join the RN. My emotions were involved. I imagined that a career in the Navy would provide further opportunities of being posted to Malta, where there was a girl I was keen on. Nothing came of that, but at the time I was distraught at the thought of severing our attachment. I was torn, and now – it seemed – the tear was more than metaphorical.

At breakfast, my other half, as I had now been obliged to regard him, was moody.

‘Do you still think I’m a “con”?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I conceded. ‘I think you’re genuine. And I feel sorry for you. You made an unwise decision, and life’s not turned out as well for you as for me.’

We set out in the hired car for Derby. After all the mental tussle of the past night, I felt disinclined for conversation. My companion probably felt equally exhausted. We began descending a steep hill.

My double broke the silence. ‘You’ve had all the luck, haven’t you?’ he asked, rhetorically.

‘You mean, I seized the opportunities,’ I replied.

‘I hate your air of superiority. You think I’m not just inferior, but a pale reflection, a wraith. Not fully a man. Well, we’ll see about that.’

Suddenly, he grasped the steering wheel and tried to turn the car to the side of the road. I struggled to keep control. I jammed my elbow in his face. His grip relaxed, but we were approaching a bend. The car crashed through a hedge and came to rest against the stout trunk of an oak tree.

It was three weeks before I recovered consciousness. By that time, my alter ego had been buried. When questioned by the police, I didn’t mention the real cause of the crash. I said I was going too fast and lost control. I was found guilty of causing death by careless driving. In view of my previously blameless driving record, and my injuries, the judge was lenient. Instead of a prison sentence, I was ordered to do service in the community. From a wheelchair, though, that will be difficult.

Three months afterwards, a lady who said she had been a friend of Jack Collins got in touch. She was an executor and had been going through his things. He had left a note saying that, in the event of his death, he wished something to be given to me. She sent me a small package. It contained a piece of wartime shrapnel: the piece that I had found, as a boy, after some bombs had been dropped in the area around Hathersage. Its twisted shape fitted into the palm of my hand. I had thought it lost after some clear-out by my mother whilst I was away. Here, at last, was the proof.

Overground Overture

Vivienne Orr

Boris has announced it. The Overground Circle is now complete. I cannot resist and must give it a try. The aim: to reconnoitre access from Finchley Road and Frognal (wonderful name) to Lords Cricket Ground, shop for supper and buy an 87p stamp. All between 2pm and 4pm after lunch in the City.

Stage I. Embark the orange train at Whitechapel at 2.15pm. The seating configuration is similar to the Tube, with orange predominating. Seven minutes later disembark as train terminates at Dalston Junction. Young man with bicycle exits alongside. He consults the 'Help' machine, I spot a platform indicator alongside showing 'Highbury and Islington. Interchange for Richmond' and casually open a newspaper as one who needs no guidance. In comes the Orange One and we climb aboard.

Then a delay at the next station. The driver's voice apologises. 'You won't believe this,' he says, 'but a man has just walked across the track in front of this train.' Dour faces looked up. Dead-eye Dick becomes Bobby Bright. Eyebrows lift and smiles and chuckles spread around the carriage. The driver, not to be done out of his big moment, gathers us all into his disapproval. 'It is illegal to cross the electrified rails. Please never ever walk across the railway track.' His potential miscreants look suitably admonished, causing more cheerfulness and chatter all around.

Stage II. We arrive at Highbury and Islington in a raging snowstorm, platforms awash with slush. Bike man and I squelch our way to a shelter where an indicator shows 'All trains to Stratford'. Peer through the snow flurry at an adjacent platform indicator and spy 'Richmond 1 minute'. Young bike man looks crestfallen. I (bright spark) enlighten him. 'Does it go to Camden?' he asks hopefully. Why yes, good sir. Over the high connecting bridge we splash and skid, he with heavy bike held high, onto the platform for Richmond. Footing needs full concentration in quite appalling conditions. Flash, flash. The indicator goes wild. Then 'Goods train approaching'. We never get that on the underground. The Richmond train is now due in 6 minutes. The feet

slowly dampen as we wait in the shelter. At last we arrive at Finchley Road and Frognal (never Frognal and Finchley Road).

Stage III. More slush, but this trial must continue. It is now 3.30pm and the Lords experiment is not on, so aim for a shop and post office. Complete shopping but misdirected thereafter and return to the station stampless. Conditions underfoot were now atrocious and the Orange One overcrowded. Decide that close contact with heavy steaming was not conducive to good health and disembark at Highbury and Islington. Hurrah for Highbury! The post office, sleep but functioning, is adjacent to the station. 87p postage delivered in small denominations. Will there be room for an address?

Stage IV. Now running late, so abort and take the fast Victoria Line homeward. Two men sitting opposite, long-legged, well-built, started chatting. One, turbaned, his face animated, could be, surely, the spitting image of Monty Panesar. Uncertain, trying not to stare. shouldn't he be playing in India?

Next time I'll try the westbound route of the Overground to Finchley Road and Frognal (how that word jumps from the page) and the No. 13 bus to Lords. Of course, the No. 82 bus from Victoria is direct and much quicker, but just think what I might be missing.

Interpol

Bernie Bickerton

A voice near my foot says, "Got a cigarette?"
I slowly open my eyes and lift my arms to shield them from the bright white décor. I can smell disinfectant. I vaguely remember: diabetic clinic, surgery on foot. I'm in hospital.

The voice speaks again, "Thought that might rouse you." I feel an aggressive shake of the bed. "Wake up, Keith, there's a good chap."

I look down; a bespectacled and silver haired man, wearing a crushed black velvet jacket, a purple bow-tie and twinkling diamond cufflinks is seated at the foot of the bed.

“Who are you?” I ask. He doesn’t reply but studies my face intently.

“Are you Police or something?” I hope to God he isn’t, I won’t let him take my DNA.

“Of sorts. Now, dear brother, please don’t play games.” He speaks in an upper class accent, it sounds vaguely familiar. His smiling blue eyes beam back at me and he grins broadly.

“My brother died in childhood. Who are you?” I ask tersely.

“Keith, don’t concern yourself with such trifles. Relax; you must rest following the amputation. I’ve sorted everything you need. Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

My eyes take a panoramic view round the room. There is a note on the bedside table telling me that my private nurse is seated outside, alongside a *Fortnum and Mason* menu; the furnishings and adornments are plush, and I see ‘Big Ben’ as I glance at the window. I gulp. This is a private hospital. How did I get from a NHS mixed ward to this?

“Who are you? What is going on?” I ask again, I am confused and feel weary.

He ignores me and walks to the other side of the room and opens a white wardrobe. “Here are your new clothes and I haven’t forgotten about your foot, a shoemaker will visit to measure you up.

I tell myself this must be a nightmare that I must get out of. I try a different tack, “How do you know my name?”

“I know everything about you, Keith. I began my research on the night we met.”

“No, we’ve not met.” I say angrily.

Walking slowly towards me, he continues, “We met when you pathetically tried to sell me a Christmas edition of the *Big Issue* from the cardboard box that you call a bed on St Thomas’s Street; then you begged that I give you £8 for a NHS hospital television card. I

took pity on you.” I can feel the coldness of his hands as he leans over and strokes my hair, I shiver.

He pulls the chair to my side and gently clutches my arm. “I’ve paid your hospital bill and you’re being discharged later, to my care. As long as you do everything I tell you, I’ll protect you from danger.” The clutch becomes a grip.

I try and hit him but I feel weak, he catches my wrists and squeezes tight. “Ouch, you’re hurting me, let me go.” His grip tightens. “Let me go.” I roar.

A petite nurse comes running in. A security guard follows shortly. On seeing them, the man releases me. The security guard stands in front of the man. I look at the marks on my wrists and am examined by the nurse who, facing the man, authoritatively demands, “What is going on Dr Hyde, what were you doing to your brother?”

I shout at the top of my voice “He is not my brother! Have him arrested; he is taking control of my life.”

The man ignores me as if I am invisible and looking at the nurse, over his spectacles, “Nurse Dauntless, he is hallucinating; I fear the dose of general anaesthetic was slightly more than he needed.”

Nurse Dauntless replies, “Dr Hyde, we cannot ignore what we’ve just witnessed and heard. Please leave with the security guard. I need to talk to Keith, in private.” She turns her back on them and faces me, examines my eyes, checks my drip and vital signs.

The man is roughly pushed out of the room and into the arms of two uniformed Police Officers who have arrived.

“Nurse Dauntless, please tell me what is going on?” I plead. I am so tired.

“Keith, try to rest. The hospital doubted his authenticity when he arrived looking for you, a supposed lost brother. It was the age difference and with a copy of your birth certificate in his hand, he was trying just too hard. Poor you, you’ve got yourself tangled up in the Interpol investigation into the trafficking of black market donor organs. We rescued you just in time.”

The Rhubarb Challenge

Reported by Chester Guttridge

After several years of research and planning, the ancient game of Rhubarb Challenge has been revived in Scotland, in the Grampian township of Macmucty. I was privileged to attend the first public event there.

The aim is to score as many hits as possible on the opponent's chest using a stick of rhubarb, in a game resembling fencing. A square area 10 by 10 inches is marked out on each contestant's chest and dusted with powdered charcoal, using a mask. The rhubarb marks the charcoal when a hit is achieved. Marks are counted at the end of each of the 4 rounds of 3 minutes. The chest is re-dusted with charcoal between rounds, if necessary. The other hand is kept behind the contestant's back and plays no part in the game.

It is a tactical game, rewarding skill and speed in attack and defence. Excessive force leads to broken sticks and almost certain defeat. Damaged sticks are replaced at the referee's discretion at the end of each round, penalty points being deducted. Contestants are encouraged to grow their own rhubarb as many did on this occasion, although club rhubarb was available.

There is no ladies' game, agreement not yet being reached as to the size and placing of the charcoal square, although a rectangle might be adopted, possibly with rounded corners. The ladies are experimenting with talcum powder, charcoal being pervasive and persistent.

The game has ancient origins, appearing on a Greek vase, showing naked men and women contestants, although the weapons were possibly celery, which is not widely grown in Scotland. The cooler Scottish weather precludes conformity with the Greek dress custom.

The winner, Mr Ray Burn, explained that in the hands of experienced players thick, sturdy sticks, even if a little shorter, are better than long ones which are usually thinner and break more easily. He varies his tactics according to the type of stick he is using. Mr Burn attributes his success to growing his own rhubarb. He uses

well-rotted farmyard manure and waters his plants with a special herb mixture which he brews in an old whisky barrel. The Club is conducting trials to find the best cultural conditions for game-quality rhubarb and the most suitable varieties.

One contestant was disqualified for strengthening his rhubarb by inserting a slither of bamboo into a slit in the growing stalk and then binding the wound with raffia, which he removed when the wound had healed. Unfortunately for him the referee spotted the scar, slit open the rhubarb and revealed the offending bamboo. His reserve sticks were also scarred. He was banned for three challenge matches, but may appeal.

The event ended in the refreshment tent with rhubarb crumble and the local malt. Surplus rhubarb was sold to raise cash for club funds.

Travellers' Tales

Helen Jackson

Autumn's Author asked for experiences of writing schools. In 2006 I attended a two-day travel writing course in central London run by what was at the time, a relatively new, small company, called Travellers' Tales (www.travellerstales.org). The company has now expanded and offers both travel and photography weekend trips abroad.

Our first day began with a discussion on how we described travel writing and our favourite authors, who ranged from Billy Connolly to William Dalrymple.

Our tutor, Jonathan Lorie, then explained the difference between 'show' and 'tell' and how to describe places before our first practical exercise: 'describe a place you know well' in 15 minutes. We then moved on to describing people and how conversations when you're travelling should be jotted down for later use, as articles opening with quotes are particularly effective. Our second exercise was to describe a person you've only met once in 10 minutes which was harder than it sounded. The afternoon finished with a talk by

Anthony Sattin a journalist, broadcaster and the author of several highly-acclaimed travel books. We left with homework: a 500 word article on the theme ‘arriving somewhere for the first time’.

Reading our articles aloud the following day and hearing Jonathan’s critical assessment was a nerve wracking experience but fellow writers were just as nervous and very supportive. Our course finished with a discussion on the various publications and the types of article they were interested in. We also learned how to lay out our articles, structure accompanying letters and how to approach editors: ‘they’re always busy and understaffed so get your idea across quickly’.

So what has happened since? I decided to concentrate my efforts on travel related competitions and letters to travel magazines and newspapers. These have produced a wide variety of prizes. The Saturday Telegraph has been my most successful publication and my ‘Holiday Heaven and Hell’ entry won a two-week holiday to Sri Lanka whilst more recent letters have won Eurostar weekends to Paris and Amsterdam and flights to Malaga.

The Daily Mail ran a monthly on-line competition for 500 word articles with a specific travel theme. Successful entries on Sweden’s Ice Hotel, Bolivia and Lithuania each returned 5 Lonely Planet Travel Guides of my choice. My ‘winter sun experience’, sent to a similar competition in The Times, resulted in a weekend at Budapest’s finest hotel, The Gresham.

The Sunday Times Travel Magazine provided a trio of Aspinall travel bags valued at £500 and whilst letters to Wanderlust travel magazine have not won major prizes, they’ve produced ten Footprint Travel Guides.

Whilst I’ve not yet secured a paid commission or won the Vincent Brennan Travel Article Prize I’m still enthusiastically writing and submitting. Hopefully our forthcoming three-month trip to Central America next year will provide lots of material.