

**Carrick U3A**

**Barbara Scammell &  
Tony Herring Memorial  
Writing Competition**

**2020**

# Contents

*To go directly to a particular page, just click on the item below if you use a desktop or laptop. On an iPad, touch an item in the list.*

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Winners</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Fiction</b>	<b>6</b>
PROBLEM SOLVED BY TONY BARBER	7
THE WORST MEAL EVER BY DAVE NEALE	9
TWO-TONE AND THE DIP BY JOCK TURNHAM	11
SILENT LETTERS: A KITCHEN SINK DRAMA BY JANET ZORO	13
ATISHOO ATISHOO BY MARY RATCHFORD	14
EVERY CLOUD.... BY TONY BARBER	16
IMPRISONED BY ANN MUNDLER	18
LUCKY DIP BY SUE SWINCHATT	21
NON-RETURNABLE BY JENNY REID	24
PAINT BY NUMBERS BY JENNY REID	25
RECYCLING BY IAN SEARLE	27
SOMETHING TO TELL MY LADIES BY ANN MUNDLER	28
THE AUTHOR BY JOCK TURNHAM	31
'THE CLAIRVOYANT' BY BRENDA BURGESS	33
THE COVER UP BY PAT JOWSEY	35
THE END BY MARY RATCHFORD	37
WHAT'S IN A NAME? BY DAVE NEALE	39
MESSAGE IN THE SAND BY PAT JOWSEY	41
<b>Non-Fiction</b>	<b>44</b>
CANDLE ICE BY SHEILA HUTCHINS	45
THE UNKNOWN HERITAGE BY IAN SEARLE	47
WHAT MY GARDEN MEANS TO ME BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE	49
A PROJECT FOR LOCK-DOWN AND A SURPRISING OUTCOME BY ELEANOR HOLLAND	52
A CREAM TEA IN THE HIGHLANDS BY SUE SWINCHATT	54
ON THE RAILS BY JANET ZORO	56

THE POETRY OF COLOUR	BY BRENDA BURGESS	58
PRECISE PRECIPITATION	BY VALERIE GREY	60
THE TARTAN KILT	BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE	62
TODAY I FEEL HAPPY	BY ROZY BROOKS	63
<b>Poetry</b>		<b>65</b>
SONNET TO A MARRIAGE	BY TONY BARBER	66
THE DAY AT ST AGNES	BY JEAN ANDERSON	67
THE BUZZARD'S CRY	BY JEAN ANDERSON	68
PERSONA	BY IAN SEARLE	69
A FRIEND IN FIVE IMAGES	BY JANET ZORO	70
ARCTIC NIGHT	BY SHIRLEY CARDUS	71
DOG HAIR IN THE WOK	BY JUDY PRICE	72
FLORA MACDONALD IN MY BACK YARD	BY JANET ZORO	73
HOPE	BY BRENDA BURGESS	74
I CANNOT SEE YOU NOW	BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE	75
JUNE	BY ANN MUNDLER	76
KNICKERBOCKER GLORY	BY JOCK TURNHAM	77
PARKINSON'S	BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE	78
REMEMBER THE DAY	BY TONY BARBER	79
REWILDING THE PLANET	BY SUE AMER	81
THE RIDE	BY BRENDA BURGESS	82
THE SALON	BY ANN MUNDLER	83
THE SAN PEOPLE	BY JACKIE GRANT	84
VE DAY 1945	BY ROGER VIVIAN	85

## **Introduction**

This year we had a 'virtual' prize giving with about 18 people attending. Many thanks to all those who entered their work and we were delighted that we had ten people who entered the competition who do not belong to either Creative Writing Group. They were also amongst the top prize winners. The standard of writing was extremely high this year making the job of judging the competition very difficult. We are very grateful to Rosemary Aitken for her time and expertise.

Rosemary Aitken has published successfully in several genres, with more than 100 short stories (for magazines, anthologies and radio), prize-winning poetry and one-act plays, regular magazine articles and over 30 novels: (historical Cornish fiction, contemporary romance and - under her maiden name, Rosemary Rowe - 18 crime novels set in Roman Britain). Founder of the Quiller writing course, she has run writers' conferences and workshops nationally, and for some years gave a summer course in crime-writing for Exeter University. She has co-judged a number of country-wide competitions, largely for the WCWA, of which she was also chairman for several years.

**Brenda Burgess, Truro Creative Writing Group Leader.**

## WINNERS

### Fiction

1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Tony Barber	'Problem Solved'
2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize	Dave Neale	'Worst Meal Ever'
Highly Commended		
	Jock Turnham	'Two Tone and the Dip'
	Janet Zoro	'Silent Letters'

### Non-Fiction

1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Sheila Hutchins	'Candle Ice'
2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize	Ian Searle	'The Unknown Heritage'
Highly Commended		
	Maureen Woodhouse	'What My Garden Means To Me'
	Eleanor Holland	'A Project for Lockdown'

### Poetry

1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Tony Barber	'Sonnet to a Marriage'
2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize	Jean Anderson	'Day at St. Agnes'
Highly Commended		
	also Jean Anderson	'The Buzzard's Cry'
	Ian Searle	'Persona'

# Fiction

## 1<sup>st</sup> Prize

### PROBLEM SOLVED

BY TONY BARBER

George felt ill; there was no doubt about it. He was experiencing the typical symptoms of a virus infection, a dry cough, he could scarcely taste the biscuit he had just bought at the hospital coffee shop and surely he must have a temperature; the sweat on his brow indicated that. According to the rules, he was a prime candidate for catching an infection: 76 next birthday, not in the best of health, his paunch was evidence of being overweight. He had to admit he lived mainly on cheap takeaways; he just could not bring himself to prepare his own healthy meals; since his wife died he had little enthusiasm for cooking from fresh.

But the doctor he had just seen said he was free to go home, that he was just suffering from a summer cold and he should go to bed with two paracetamol and sleep it off. What did she know? Straight out of medical school he guessed. She seemed keener on getting through her shift than giving any serious attention to an old man who was preventing her from meeting the handsome nurse that she was flirting with.

There was nothing for it but to make his own way home by taxi. Thankfully there was one waiting outside the hospital entrance, so he was able to take it and give the driver instructions on how to get home. He judged it wisest not to tell him that he wasn't feeling well and was careful not to cough while in the cab.

Home at last! He paid the driver and made sure that he added an extra pound. You can't be too careful when giving a tip, he thought. He knew that young people nowadays don't give tips but he had always been accustomed to doing so and it seemed sensible; you never knew when you might meet that driver again and need some extra help. He watched the taxi drive off into the distance and he walked up his drive fumbling in his pocket for the door keys. He reached the front door only to realise that he must have left them on the hall table when his daughter had taken him to the hospital.

What now? This was his home; he knew it better than anyone. There must be some way he could get in without breaking a window. He walked round the house trying all the windows to see if by chance one had been left ajar. No luck! Since he couldn't get in there was no way of phoning his daughter. Mary had repeatedly told him that he ought to get one of these new mobile phones if only for emergencies like this, but he had always resisted. He told her he was too old a dog to learn new tricks. He began to think that maybe she was right. He would

have to ask her how to get one when he next saw her but, he began to worry, when would that be? He sat down on the back doorstep and wondered what to do next.

“Yoo hoo, George, lovely evening, what are you doing out there?”

It was Maud his next door neighbour. She had only moved in a few weeks before so he didn't really know her except to exchange pleasantries over the garden fence and he wouldn't normally have dreamt of asking her for help, but there seemed little alternative, if he wasn't to spend the night in his back garden. He went over to the fence and explained his predicament.

“You poor man, come round and we'll see what we can do.”

“I can't Maud, I'm suffering from a virus and I don't want to give it to you”

“Nonsense, I was a nurse, I'll look after you.”

His situation was becoming increasingly desperate so he reluctantly accepted Maud's offer. The first thing he wanted to do was to contact Mary using Maud's phone to ask her to bring his spare keys, but all he got was that irritating message - *The person you are calling is not available. Please leave a message after the tone.* So all he could do was leave a message and hope that she would pick it up before night fell.

“Never mind” said Maud, “Let's have a cup of tea, and some of my freshly baked cake.”

And so they starting talking. He learnt that she too was widowed and had retired after a lifetime working as a nurse in the NHS. He didn't dare ask her age but he guessed she must be in her early 70's and in his eyes a handsome, if not a beautiful woman. Her family, three daughters and four grandchildren lived far away. She rarely saw them now, but she was keen to bring out her photograph album and explain where all her relatives lived, what their occupations were and what the grandchildren were studying. As they talked he relaxed and began to feel much better and wondered if, after all, he was just suffering from a summer cold.

There was still no phone call from Mary, so Maud said why didn't she cook them a meal while they were waiting. He guessed that among her other accomplishments she would be a good cook, and so it turned out. As he told her when helping her wash the dishes, it was a long time since he had had such an excellent meal with such pleasant company and then, thinking about it afterwards, he attempted the most adventurous thing he had done for years: he kissed her, and surprisingly she kissed him back.

Much later that evening Mary returned his call, full of apologies for not having done so earlier, not realising that he was calling from a different phone and thought that he only wanted to chat; she had only just appreciated how important the call was and would come round immediately with his keys.

“Don’t bother”, said George, “any time tomorrow will do.”

---

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize

### THE WORST MEAL EVER

BY DAVE NEALE

In my experience, the food usually plays but a small part in turning a meal into the worst ever. No, it’s the company, and that last meal of our band certainly exemplified that. I guess we’d been together too long; too many roadshows; too many nights in dodgy rest houses; and simply too much time in our own company.

I got the blame for everything, but I was only doing my part in moving things along and I certainly didn’t expect them to work out as they did. The problem was that we no longer had the pioneering novelty that we’d once had. OK, we were still pulling in the crowds. The Beatles would surely eat their hearts out at the fantastic welcome that we’d received the previous day. But we all knew it wouldn’t last forever, and that we needed to progress things in some way.

It’s not uncommon for band leaders to have an early demise but, when we looked around for ways of boosting our image, it never occurred to us that Jay would end up dead. I’d better say now that Jay wasn’t his given name, but we quickly learnt that if any fan accidentally overheard us using that, they’d be immediately screaming the house down, demanding to know where he was. So we always reduced it to ‘Jay’.

Bart, Matt and Pete were pretty rebellious about our lack of innovation whereas Jay was, as usual, controlled about it. John inevitably backed up Jay, whatever he said. So, we argued and talked and argued some more, until eventually we agreed a kind of way forward.

It would be a traditional publicity ruse; we needed a showcase trial. With Jay’s background, there’d be no problem stitching him up for something. When the fans heard that Jay had been

arrested, they'd be shrieking blue murder that the authorities were victimising him. No magistrate would dare to come down too heavily and Jay would walk away as a public hero. As a plan, it wasn't brilliant and it certainly wasn't without risk, but who cares about risks when you're young? (Well, looking back all those years, we seemed very young, then.)

"OK," Jay said, looking around. "One of you is going to stitch me up."

"Who?" John asked.

Suddenly, everyone who had been moaning so much a few minutes earlier was shouting that they couldn't possibly do it. Now wasn't that a surprise?

Amongst all the clamour, Jay quietly said, "OK, let's decide." He reached for the jar of breadsticks on the table and the adjacent bowl of sauce. "It's the one to whom I'll give this piece of bread when I've dipped it in the dish," he said, dipping the end of one of the breadsticks into the sauce. Then he concealed all the breadsticks on his lap whilst he slipped the one with the sauce amongst them.

"Take one each," he said, holding them out towards John, who was sitting next to him.

John took the first, and I was next to him, so I took the next. Its end was covered in sauce.

To be fair, I'm not certain how much everyone else was aware of what was going on. It was a long table and there were still arguments continuing over whether this was the right course of action, and if so, who would be the person to stitch up Jay. Of course, after it backfired, everyone denied any involvement at all in events. When they published their diaries, it seemed as though they were all totally innocent and what I had done was purely for greed. Even now, I don't know whether that was deliberate or simply that they weren't aware of the draw taking place.

But I was the one who'd taken the breadstick, so I was the one who had to go down for causing Jay's death. The Press pilloried me and my name is still mud. I gave all that money to charity, and they called it blood money. And when I went before the beak, he had to make an example of me.

Of course, no one can say that Jay's death didn't infinitely transform things. What would have been a mediocre publicity stunt has instead meant he has gone down in history, as of course, have I. I won't bore you with the renowned public details, most of which you either learnt at school or can easily look up.

And at least when John wrote his diary up, he did record Jay's actual words about the not-so-lucky draw of the bread covered in sauce and me taking it. It's a shame no one ever

understood the real meaning as he missed out the important bit in-between where he drew the first breadstick. (Well, he would, wouldn't he? to quote one of your more recent victims in a not too dissimilar position.) If you want to check, you'll find John's words in his book in the Bible, Chapter 13:26–27 (although different versions do use different words).

Finally, it looks as though I'll get time off for good behaviour. A few hundred more years in purgatory and I should be released to apply for my retirement bungalow in heaven.

See you there.

Jude

PS: I stopped using my full name for rather obvious reasons.

## Highly Commended

### TWO-TONE AND THE DIP

BY JOCK TURNHAM

I first met Lenny back in the twenties. I had my own slot in the 'Times'.....stories about characters various who inhabited Greenwich Village, here in Manhattan. It was very popular with readers, I am led so to believe.

Anyhow, this Lenny was a pickpocket of renowned skill. I had the pleasure of seeing him ply his trade once near Union Square. He simply nudges this smart-dressed guy and makes off with his pocket watch and chain, the mark being no wiser!

So famous was Lenny that he is awarded the moniker of 'Lenny the Dip' by his admirers.

He could dip his fingers into the smallest of pockets.

Lenny, and my good self, became chums....we liked to drink a cup of Irish together in Quincy's where we also partake of a game of chess on occasion. I have not a little ability in this sport even if I say so myself. So when I learns of Lenny's difficulties I feel obliged to help....naturally.

It seems he was in Chumley's, the speakeasy on Bedford....you know, down in the West Village. A negro jazzman, by the name of Two-Tone....on account of a vivid white birth mark

down one side of his face, is blowing his horn to an admiring crowd. He has played in 'The Cotton Club' and 'The Stork' so what he was doing in this dump is a mystery !

Anyways, they suddenly has to clear out as the proprietor has gotten a '86'...which is a tip off that the police are about to raid the joint. The booze is hidden and the clientele head for the back door. They is all pushing and such when Lenny finds himself face to face, so to speak, with Two-Tone's chest. Lenny's fingers can't help dipping into the waistcoat of said Two-Tone and fishing out a prize.

Back in his rooms, Lenny examines the article which turns out to a heart-shaped gold locket inside of which is a snap of a dame....maybe Two-Tone's broad....or his mama.

Now, maybe, Lenny should have returned the purloined item.....but no, he goes straight to Silas the Jew, who has a seedy pawn shop over on 58<sup>th</sup>. Silas gives him two hundred bucks, no less, for the locket !

When I see Lenny a few days later he is still gabbing on about his 'Lucky Dip' which has made his fortune.

However, I learn from Desperate Dave that Two-Tone has discovered it was Lenny who thieves his locket and wishes to have a conversation, tout-suite.

I is having a quiet drink in Quincy's when Lenny bursts in. He is distraught on account of Silas having sold the locket back to Two-Tone, and that said Two-Tone wants the two hundred bucks together with a piece of Lenny his self !

Lenny hustles an envelope containing the dough, less a few bucks for expenses, into my coat pocket. I try to protest, but he wants me to look after it until this all blows over.....which Lenny thinks may be imminent....after he has received a bloodied nose.

Of course I agree to this request. We leave Quincy's surreptitiously as I do not want Two-Tone to vent his spleen over me.

A couple of weeks later I chances to meet Desperate while strolling down Broadway. He has sad news.....Desperate always has sad news of one sort or another. It seems Lenny was on the Staten Island Ferry when he fell overboard. He was unable to swim on account of both arms being in plaster, and now he is fishfood.

Back at my apartment I recover the two hundred bucks from its hiding place and ponder my next step. No one knows I have this money and I don't think Lenny had any relatives apart from a sister in a care-home somewhere upstate. The money would be no use in her condition, so I decides the best thing is to keep it for myself. I shall invest it at the racetrack.

I takes a walk to the ferry and nods a salute at my friend who is now at peace on the seabed.

Lenny's 'Lucky-Dip' turned out to be not so lucky.....for him.

I looks across at The Statue of Liberty and reflect on my good fortune at the expense of another.

As my good friend Talulah might have said: "That's New York for ya! Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh."

## Highly Commended

### SILENT LETTERS: A KITCHEN SINK DRAMA

BY JANET ZORO

I've been trying to work out just how it happened; my memories are a whirling mess, I grab at them, try to organise them, like some wretchedly difficult jigsaw puzzle. I must write it down while the picture is clear; once it gets shaken up again I'll probably find some vital piece is missing. I shall start now; I hope I won't get it wrong.

I was inventing a 'Silent Letters' quiz for the last session with my Basic Skills group. I work in the kitchen so I can get supper going at the same time. When Kevin came in, I was washing up his lunch things and wondering if my hollyhocks were going to flower this year. He went to the fridge and got out a bottle of lager.

'I've got to watch Chelsea and Man U,' he said.

'Fine,' I said, slightly amused by his use of language. GOT to? ' We'll eat when it's finished.' By this time he was reading my screen.

'What's a silent letters quiz?' I would have thought it was self-evident; the clues are along the lines of 'a light bag used by walkers', 'metalwork found on front doors', 'a little man lurking in the garden' and the answers 'knapsack', 'knobs and knockers', 'gnome' all start with a silent letter. Before I could explain he read a bit more. 'Oh, I see; quite clever,' he said. Praise indeed - he is a very intelligent man, despite appearances. Then he started on a long list of learned suggestions. I objected; how could a Basic Skills class be expected to guess words like psittacosis, whortleberry, mnemonics? So he added 'knickers' and I pointed out that the two

rather loutish lads in the class would have a field day with that one.

'They won't react to knobs and knockers, then?' he smirked, and I deleted it. He is right so often. Off he went to the sitting room whistling: '*I love to go a- wandering ...*' I have always hated that song, ever since they used to play it on *Children's Favourites*, seemed like every week. I deleted 'knapsack' and settled down to find some more. 'Method of turning wool into a jumper'; 'examination taxi drivers have to take'; 'a chess piece'; 'an annoying little insect'; 'a tiny songbird'; 'a ship on the rocks'. The list was endless. Then Kevin called me, yelling over the screaming soccer fans; I ignored him; I was working; let the lazy bugger come and tell me. But he obviously HAD to keep watching the match, and he shouted.

'Bring me another beer, and some of those ham and mustard crisps'.

Something sort of exploded inside me. Several silent letter clues popped into my head. 'African war club'; no, we didn't have a knobkerrie. 'large adjustable spanner'; there was probably one in the garage but it might take me weeks to identify a wrench. 'tight loop joining string or rope'; I did have some washing line handy, but my knotting skills aren't very good. So I settled for 'sharp narrow blade used for slicing'.

---

## ATISHOO ATISHOO

BY MARY RATCHFORD

The afternoon was muggy and warm. Gladys was nodding off in her favourite chair by the window, a half empty cup of tea and biscuit crumbs were on the table beside her. The room was small but had everything she needed and the nurses were all very kind. She was lucky because her room had a window which looked out onto the street below so there was always something to look at.

She was woken from her nap by the sound of children playing in the street. Their childish screams resounded as they chased each other playing tag.

Gladys was at once transported back to her own childhood. A faint smile appeared on her face as she remembered the warm sunny summer days; sitting on the grass making daisy chains and placing buttercup heads under the chin to see if you liked butter. Suddenly the

chasing game outside stopped and for a moment it was quiet, until, the children holding hands in a circle began to sing.

“Ring-a-ring o’ roses a pocket full of posies, atishoo atishoo, we all fall down”

Gladys shivered; someone had just walked over her grave she thought. Gladys had been at the facility for several days and had adjusted to her surroundings. She was quite comfortable as they had decorated it out very nicely, not at all as if you were in some kind of clinic. The food was good, although a bit repetitive and sometimes it came late, but you couldn’t grumble.

Gladys knew her time was coming, because all the paperwork had been signed and her goodbyes to her family completed. She almost felt relief that all would be sorted very soon.

There was a gentle tap on the door and Gladys’ nurse came into the room.

“How are you Gladys ?” but before Gladys could reply she continued “nice piece of fish for supper today and some jelly and strawberries for afters. That would nice, wouldn’t it Gladys?”

Gladys thought, yes that would be nice, if she were going to have the described supper. It was as though the nurse was teasing her because she knew and Gladys knew, there was no way she would be having a nice piece of fish or jelly and strawberries. That would be the supper others in the clinic would be eating today. Supper for Gladys would be a couple of tablets and a drink of water. It was all a pretence.

Again, outside in the street the children started singing again.

“Atishoo atishoo, we all fall down”

The nurse tutted and walked over to shut the window and close the curtains. The room with the sun blocked out was now prematurely dark.

“Come on Gladys over to your bed.”

Realisation that her time had now come, Gladys momentarily felt a sense of panic. I don’t want to go to bed now, it’s too early, but before Gladys could protest her nurse pulled her up out of the chair and led her over to the bed. The nurse stood over her and held out a hand with two capsules.

“Come on dear, have these and then everything will be alright.”

Gladys took the capsules and the glass of water. Sighing deeply, she put the capsules into her mouth and slowly drank the water. Although one of the capsules stuck in her throat, Gladys knew that this was what she wanted. No la la brain or wet bedding for her, she was in control and she had chosen this time. The capsules swallowed, Gladys laid her head on the

soft downy pillow and as her body gradually lapsed into deep darkness she thought again of when she was a child, playing in the road with her friends.

Outside, the sound now muffled by the closed and curtained window, the children continue to sing. “Ring-a-ring o' roses a pocket full of posies, atishoo atishoo, we all fall down”

---

## EVERY CLOUD....

BY TONY BARBER

I'm getting married in the morning.

It happened like this. My good friend Steve and I were in our local pub discussing life, love, the local football team, global warming and plastic on the beach. This was pre-corona when pubs were still open and CV meant only one's professional *résumé*. My own CV? Thank you for asking: briefly, Grammar school, Cambridge University where I read economics, acted with Footlights with no great distinction, gained my degree, went into the City where I worked for a merchant bank, married, brought up my family, lost my wife and retired down here.

“I am bored”, I said, “I came here hoping to enjoy my retirement in a place where we had such great family holidays. I don't want for money. My children only come here when they want a cheap holiday. Apart from you I have few social contacts. What can I do?”

“U3A”, said Steve, “You are bound to find something there to keep you busy”

So I joined U3A and sure enough, it cured my boredom. There were so many groups to choose from. I worked my way through a number searching for the right one to match my interests. I started on Bridge; I had always played the game socially, but my memory always let me down and I found that I couldn't face my partners' recriminations after failing to land a solid contract. So I moved on.

Creative writing came next, but my years at the Bank had driven out all my imagination, and I had to agree with the group leader that my poor efforts just did not match the standard they required and despite all the help they were willing to give, I would not stand a chance of getting my stories published. I might just about get something in the U3A monthly magazine.

As for Poetry, I never could understand the thought processes that created modern verse. The only thing I was any good at was composing rude limericks and I was firmly told that that was NOT poetry and the Poetry Group was not for me.

I then tried Family History. I have always nursed this feeling that if I went far enough back I would discover aristocratic forebears. Despite all my efforts and with the help of the Family History Group computer, I failed to find any. Sadly I have to accept that I come from a long line of agricultural labourers. So I gave that up.

I was beginning to wonder if I would ever find a group to suit me, when once more Steve came to my rescue. He suggested that I should try the Drama Group. I looked back to my time at Cambridge with the Footlights Dramatic Club and how much I had enjoyed appearing on the stage, so I readily agreed.

This year they were putting on Noel Coward's *Still Life*, a play later made into a film *Brief Encounter* directed by David Lean. It is a romantic story of a brief affair between the two main players. You probably know the story. The main action takes place in the waiting room of a railway station. Steve was directing it and he and his girlfriend Ann were playing the parts made famous in the film by Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson. He chose me for the part of the ticket collector, played in the film by Stanley Holloway.

I have to give credit to Steve and his production. He spent hours rehearsing us. Everyone involved put their hearts into it. The bit players were keen and the stage makers had captured the nostalgic atmosphere of a provincial station waiting room in the 1940's.

Rehearsals were going fine. We were due to open in a week's time, when I had a frantic phone call from Steve.

"I've taken sick", he whispered, "I have lost my voice and my doctor says I have to isolate myself for at least a week".

"Is there any chance that you will recover before we open"

"I can't risk it. We simply have to put the play on. The Committee have given us a large grant, the tickets have all been sold so please, you have to take over my part and do the best you can with it. You have heard it often enough. I have spoken to Ann and she is willing to do extra rehearsals with you. If you won't do it there's no one else I can trust and we will have to cancel. Fortunately, I have found a new member to take the part of the ticket collector"

So I agreed to take over. Ann and I worked very hard to do justice to Steve's original production. We spent hours together to get everything right. I know it's traditionally said that a poor dress rehearsal foretells a successful show, but that didn't prove so in our case.

When the day came for our final show, I can modestly claim that we did Steve proud. The hall was crowded with friends and family. I think almost the whole of U3A were there to cheer us on. There was scarcely a dry eye in the house at the final parting of the two lovers. A shame that Steve was not there to see it.

At the final curtain, overcome by the emotion of the occasion, Ann threw herself into my arms and kissed me with much more enthusiasm than my performance merited. The curtain came down to thunderous applause from cast and audience.

That performance makes the latest entry on my CV. Although Steve recovered well, he shortly after resigned from the Drama Group. I think he was jealous of my success. I haven't seen much of him since then but I still have all my new friends in the Drama Group.

That's the end of my story except, as I said in the beginning, Ann and I are getting married in the morning.

---

## IMPRISONED

BY ANN MUNDLER

Violeta ran fast, the furious row with her boyfriend Pablo jangling in her head, her small holdall bumping against her leg. She turned, checking to see if anyone from the circus was following. The outline of the big top was silhouetted against the night sky. The exhilaration of freedom after weeks of lockdown spurred her on.

Raised voices during the night had woken some of the sleeping circus performers in their caravans.

'It's Violeta and Pablo. They've been rowing for days. Lockdown 's getting to all of us but Violeta's young and doesn't take kindly to having her wings clipped. We're all feeling the frustration of not being able to perform.'

In the morning Violeta was missing and Pablo desolate.

The illegal club was in a basement in a shabby street that ran parallel to the sea. Another dancer at the circus had told Violeta that she could earn more in a night at the club than in a week at the circus, performing her high wire act.

'Pole Dancing?'

'That's what I said. Don't you have Pole Dancing in Bulgaria?'

Ferdie, the club manager looked Violeta up and down; sexy boobs, nice legs and very pretty.

'I'll give you a weeks' trial. There's a room if you want it. My guests give you big money if you perform to their liking. Tuck it into places we don't talk about.'

Violeta found the leering, ogling man repulsive but the money on offer irresistible. In no time she would have enough for a plane ticket back to her beloved grandmother in Sofia.

At the end of her first night Violeta felt degraded and exploited. She didn't hear Ferdie follow her to her room. She did hear the key turning in the lock.

The window was high, above an enclosed yard. Violeta's shrieks went unheeded. Panic engulfed her. She had to escape.

The agile dancer jumped down the last few feet of her precarious descent. Instantly a glaring light illuminated the yard as an ear-piercing alarm shattered the quiet. She was over a wall in seconds, heading for the dunes at the back of the beach. She heard Ferdie yelling obscenities after her. His large, lumbering frame was no match for Violeta, who ran like a gazelle. A searing pain in her foot caused Violeta to pull up sharply. She saw, too late, the glinting edge of a broken bottle, half buried in the sand. Blood spurted from a deep gash in her foot. Everything went black. She was dimly aware of being roughly dumped in an enclosed space and being bumped along in a vehicle.

The floor she found herself lying on, when she briefly regained consciousness was rough and cold.. Violeta's hands and feet were bound tightly, her mouth taped shut. She was desperately thirsty. Her foot, bleeding profusely throbbed, the pain severe.. Violeta blacked out again.

Minka, the Russian circus ring mistress, made no bones about commanding the police to look for Violeta.

'The girl is young, headstrong, has her passport and clothes with her. She may be in grave danger.'

Minka didn't mention the stolen money to the investigating officer.

'Madam, can I have a word?'

Rudi, the chief clown, was shifting from foot to foot, terrified of this formidable woman..

'What is it, Rudi?'

' I know where Violeta went.'

'You what?'

'I was at this club, one of the punters. I know I did wrong.'

The clown's face had no need of the traditional white make up as he trembled before this terrifying woman.

The police knew the club well; illegal drugs, money laundering, sex trafficking. They had been watching the tiddler for some time, in order to catch the big fish. This development forced their hand. Two officers confronted Ferdie, in the smoky, dimly- lit, garish lounge.

'No, never set eyes on her.'

'She was here two nights ago. We have a witness.'

Ferdie was mutinous, refusing to say another word.

The trail of blood from the dunes to the lockup, located in the road at the back, struck fear into everyone involved. The forensic team got to work, Ferdie was arrested.

'Murder's a very serious crime.' The detective smiled, sarcasm written all over his face.

'I want a solicitor before I talk. I have rights.'

'So do young girls who are kidnapped. Now where is she?'

Forensics got onto the tyre tracks left in the sand. The tracks led to a concrete slab of a building, the door camouflaged. After several blows with a battering ram the door swung free. Violeta's lifeless body was discovered.

'Looks as though we're too late.'

'She's got a pulse, weak but there. Blue lights, fast as you like. Now go.'

Pablo sat by Violeta's bed when she returned from the operating theatre, her foot swathed in bandages, a bag of dark red blood slowly dripping into her arm. He looked enquiringly at the surgeon who accompanied Violeta to the recovery ward.

'She's lost a lot of blood.'

'Will she be able to dance again?'

'That depends on her. There is some nerve damage, but nerves can heal in time.'

Violeta was discharged to the locked down circus. She and Rudi would be required to give evidence at Ferdie's trial. A worse ordeal, for both of them, was the thought of facing Minka.

'Minka's changed so much Rudi. She was so gentle and nice to me. What's happened?'

---

## LUCKY DIP

BY SUE SWINCHATT

Izzy would go on a Saturday afternoon, by herself. Her husband Kit didn't like horses or racing, and Izzy didn't like her husband. In fact, she loathed him but thoughts of leaving kept being trumped by her great affection for creature comforts. In the last race that day she put her money on an outsider. Because she liked the name and because Izzy enjoyed taking chances. 'Lucky Dip' didn't let her down, winning by a nose. The man standing next to her had taken a hefty hit in the wallet and needed cheering up.

'I never seem to have much luck,' James confessed to the beautiful stranger who'd just handed him a glass of champagne.

'So, James, what do you do when you're not here losing your shirt?' asked Izzy, teasing. She let him talk about himself, while she nodded and smiled in all the right places. This is the man who will change my life, she thought.

‘Why don’t we go on to a little place I know?’ she whispered.

For days afterwards he was on cloud nine, anticipating their next rendezvous. To James, women were unfathomable creatures and he found Izzy intriguing. After a second wonderful evening together, he began to believe his luck really had changed.

\*\*\*

Kit had invited his old friend Adam and wife Camilla over for a barbecue. Izzy selected a bottle of wine from the rack. She was about to apply the corkscrew when she heard Kit calling from the garden where he was trying to keep the sausages from burning.

‘Izzy darling, they’re here.’

The unwilling hostess opened the front door and greeted her guests with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Camilla stepped inside, air-kissed Izzy and handed her two packets of blinis.

‘My little contribution to the evening.’

‘You shouldn’t have,’ said Izzy, reminded that she must take the smoked salmon dip out of the freezer.

‘Ooh, is that a jug of Pimm’s, I spy?’ Camilla asked. Without waiting for an answer, she headed for the garden where the Pimm’s and Kit’s cooking skills both awaited her appraisal.

‘Hey there, gorgeous.’

Adam did his usual trick of letting one hand slide down Izzy’s back until it rested on her bottom. But this time she was ready for him. He gave a little yelp and clutched his thigh. The corkscrew she was still holding had found its mark. For a moment he looked like a beached fish, mouth flapping in surprise before he scuttled after his wife. Back in the kitchen Izzy poured a glass of wine and sighed. It was going to be a long evening. She popped the dish of frozen dip into the microwave, pressed the defrost button and went to join the others.

Later, after the damp evening air had driven them back indoors, Kit poured generous brandy nightcaps for everyone. Camilla found the as yet untouched dip, put a dollop on top of a blini and stuffed it into her mouth.

‘Mmm, you must have some,’ she said, offering the dish to Adam. ‘It’s almost as good as mine. Just a touch more lemon, perhaps...’

‘Will you excuse me? I’ve got an awful headache,’ Izzy said, glad to leave Kit and his detestable friends to their feasting.

Kit's symptoms didn't appear for more than 24 hours. At first, he put the stomach pains down to over-indulgence but soon he was slurring his words and unable to stand. Izzy rang for an ambulance as he drifted into unconsciousness. The hospital tried for hours to revive him, but without success. At home that evening, Izzy became very emotional when more shocking news was brought to her door by two young police officers; Camilla and Adam had also succumbed.

Word got around fast that three people in Salisbury had been poisoned by some kind of neurotoxin. For a few days Izzy was under siege and couldn't leave the house without cameras being pushed in her face. The sudden death of well-known publisher Kit Tremayne was big news. Not again, shouted every banner headline. Were the Russians up to more dirty tricks? The media only lost interest after the source of contamination was positively identified. It rarely happened nowadays, they said, but it wasn't unknown for smoked salmon to become infected with botulism. The strain had been particularly virulent, but everyone insisted it wasn't her fault. The producer had been temporarily shut down and the coroner's verdict would undoubtedly be death by misadventure. They told her she'd had a lucky escape. Izzy had always believed you made your own luck.

\*\*\*

When she'd suddenly stopped answering his calls James wanted to find out what was wrong, but where to begin? He didn't even know Izzy's surname. Then his world started to completely unravel. He found himself under arrest, taken to police headquarters in Devizes and unceremoniously locked in a cell.

At last they were ready to start questioning him.

'A small quantity of botulinum toxin has gone missing from a lab at Porton Down,' said one of the two officers sitting opposite him. 'That *is* where you work, isn't it?'

'Alright, yes, I took it,' James admitted. 'She said she needed to Botox some little lines around her mouth and couldn't get hold of a prescription. I was just trying to impress her, I suppose.'

Sometimes the truth makes fools of us.

'Izzy Tremayne's version is rather different,' said the other detective. 'She broke off the affair and you wouldn't accept it. You stalked her, threatened her...'

'No!' interrupted James, beginning to panic. 'What are you talking about?'

The detective pushed an open file across the table towards him. James saw it held details about the recent food poisonings. Only now did his mind slowly join up the dots. What had his beautiful temptress done?

‘But I don’t even know where she lives.’

From the look on the man’s face, James didn’t think the truth was helping.

‘So, how do you explain your fingerprints being in her kitchen.’

---

## NON-RETURNABLE

BY JENNY REID

I was feeling rather unsettled; my head ached, my back ached and my eyes were feeling heavy. I pushed the crockery to the side of the dining table but in so doing, accidentally knocked the rather splendid candelabra, sending plates and cutlery flying and leaving quite an unsightly gash on the highly polished surface.

The dining chairs, being far too heavy for my slight physique were difficult to manoeuvre, and as I rose to leave they scraped noisily and scratched the newly laid oakwood floor, demonstrating the impracticality of such floor covering. How I miss the old Axminster....

I shuffled along in my slippers towards my favourite chair, passing ‘Mona Lisa’ on the way. I’ve always found her silly ‘smile’ irritating so I turned her face to the wall and straightened the frame to a uniform position.

The recliner usually provided a welcome resting place, but as I tried to relax I noticed what I presumed were the television controls tucked down the side. I pressed the button hoping to catch ‘The Antiques Road Show’ but was immediately propelled backwards, and all I could see was the not so antique ceiling rose circa 1970. I tried another button only to find my legs rising uncontrollably, until I pressed all the buttons at once, whereupon everything seized up including me! I eventually managed to extricate my traumatised self at which point I needed to lie down and recuperate.

I removed my glasses and hearing aids and carefully placed them on the bedside table, before stripping down to my under garments and climbing into bed. I always felt better for an afternoon nap and the warmth of the cosy duck-down duvet and soft pillows enabled me to completely relax. My

state of inner calm however, came to an abrupt end. Just as I was dozing off, a rather ugly, obnoxious jobsworth appeared, shook me quite violently and rudely told me to “clear off.”

I certainly gave him a piece of my mind and while being escorted to the exit, I purposely knocked over his umbrella stand, telling him in no uncertain terms that it was the very last time I'd be popping into Furniture World!

---

## PAINT BY NUMBERS

BY JENNY REID

On the twenty-first floor of Windsor Towers, Leo was taking in the view of the Thames from his balcony. He loved his new apartment but admiring the view wasn't getting the unpacking done. He really mustn't become distracted he thought to himself, or he'd be late again for his treatment at The Epithany Centre.

Next door Rachel was working on her latest portrait. She stood back and studied it carefully, pleased with the result. The fact that the good looking city guy in the picture, bore more than a passing resemblance to the new neighbour she'd met in the lift last week, was no coincidence. He'd introduced himself as Leo Johnston and she remembered shaking his outstretched hand rather too enthusiastically as she replied, "Rachel Irving-Penrose."

Leo resumed the task of emptying the over full boxes but his thoughts kept returning to the attractive girl next door. Although the building was supposedly sound-proofed, he could often hear her pottering round and soon got to know what time she left for work in the morning. Always punctual - he liked that. In the early evening he'd listen for her return and knew as soon as he could detect the distant sounds of classic FM from her radio, that she was safely home. Mother kept on at him to find a 'nice girl,' one who would help lift his dark moods, maybe she could be 'the one.' He'd never had much luck with previous girlfriends, especially the blondes; they disappeared pretty quickly.

Over the next few weeks Rachel saw him most days, mostly in the lobby, where he would be checking his post box as she was leaving for the office. They exchanged pleasantries and discovered they shared similar tastes in music, particularly Beethoven, and when she

mentioned painting, Leo showed considerable interest and talked enthusiastically about the benefits of using art as a form of therapy. Rachel decided it was time to become better acquainted with this drop-dead gorgeous man and her invitation to pop round for drinks was eagerly accepted.

Leo couldn't believe his luck on Friday evening, as the two of them sat on her balcony looking out over the river, enjoying cocktails, canapés and each other's company. Mother would be pleased! After a couple of hours however, he started to feel rather unsteady, which he put down to all the fizzy wine Rachel called prosecco. His psychiatrist had warned him against drinking alcohol with his medication, but on this occasion he didn't like to refuse and risk appearing 'uncool.' He was glad when the bottle was empty but then Rachel brought out something called 'shots' which were much smaller and easy to down in one go. He was starting to get a bit twitchy, a familiar warning before one of his 'episodes.' and in a matter of minutes was desperately trying to make sense of the sudden lunge, followed by a struggle....followed by violence. "Stay calm Rachel," he pleaded, as they both clung to the balcony. Moments later a loud splash could be heard as the Thames swallowed up yet another luckless victim.

At 0600 hours on Saturday morning, Inspector James stood over the lifeless body of a young man who'd just been fished out of the water. "Looks like another suicide gov," offered young PC Mallard, "seem to be getting a few of these lately. His name is....er, was Leo Johnston, I found an appointment card in his wallet from that Epithany place on Northlands Road. You can just about make out the logo. No doubt another one of their no-hopers who didn't stay to finish the course."

Rachel Irvine-Penrose was also up early, putting the final touches to her painting. She'd hardly slept with the excitement of successfully completing another of her assignments. A few dabs here and there and it was finished - a perfect likeness. After leaving it to dry all morning she could barely wait to hang it on her bedroom wall. Luckily there was just enough space left alongside Phillip Bentley deceased, Toby Fox deceased and Simon Wallace deceased. The late Leo Johnston completed the set quite nicely, she thought, as she scribbled her initials, R.I.P in the bottom right hand corner.

---

## RECYCLING

BY IAN SEARLE

Fred Carter was a traveller who had given up travelling. There were two reasons. He drank so much that travelling was hazardous. The other reason was Jim Proudfoot. Jim was Fred's drinking partner. He also owned two small fields. He had inherited seven fields, but he had sold off five of them to live off the proceeds. The two men first met on a three-day binge somewhere in Plymouth, though they had both forgotten the details. Fred moved his Romany van into one of Jim's fields, and it never moved again.

Jim was as indifferent to the damage he was doing to his liver, as he was oblivious to the wasteland he made of his fields. Fred, a less consistent drinker, preferred to binge. This left him periods of sobriety, at least during daylight hours most weeks. He had a market stall and built up a profitable business. He described it as recycling. It was a natural development of the old rag and bone trade.

The field in which Fred parked his van slowly filled up with rubbish of all kinds. He acquired two old caravans which proved useful as storage, and they inspired him to collect several garden sheds, some of them complete with redundant tools. He sold the tools. The empty sheds provided room for the first house clearances, so his collection soon included many small items. He cleaned anything he thought might sell on his market stall. There was no shortage of material. It was surprising how many old people died, leaving what their younger family members considered junk. Fred even discovered he could charge to take away this so-called junk. He moved into a larger, more modern caravan.

One day, he drove his old truck to a property where he had been asked to clear the garden. The new owners wanted to install wooden decking, so Fred removed forty paving slabs which he would sell later for a good price. At the bottom of the garden there was serviceable, iron fencing and what appeared to be an old log, covered in mud. Fred had help to load it all onto his truck. Back in his field, he unloaded everything, including the log. He could saw it into short lengths and turn it into kindling, which he knew would sell well. He used a hose to wash off the mud, and then he stopped, pushed back his cap, and stared in surprise. This log had been carved. He stood it up and leaned it against a handy fence post.

He had seen carved heads representing the Green Man before, but this was full-length, a sturdy, naked, male torso, wreathed in ivy. But it was the face that gave him a shock. Beneath the leaves and vines, the thick beard, the features were familiar. He saw them every time he

looked into the cracked mirror he used occasionally. The face seemed to be leering, mocking him. It made him feel uneasy. He turned on his heel and went in search of a drink.

That night he slept badly. He half-woke, imagining he heard mocking laughter. In the sound of the wind he could have sworn he heard a voice calling, "Destroyer! You ruin all you touch! Where is the green of nature?" He could not sleep. He sat up and looked out of the window. The Green Man seemed to stare back at him in the fitful moonlight. All at once he felt very cold, and he grabbed an old cardigan. He could feel the van shaking, as though something was trying to push it over. As he looked out again, he saw a finger of ivy move across the window. To his horror it was growing as he looked. Unable to move, he watched as the small shoot spread across the entire window. At this speed it would reach the roof in a few minutes. He grabbed more clothes, dressed, looked again. There was one small patch left clear. Through it he could only see the leering face of the carving. He strode to the door. It would not open. It was jammed. He threw all his weight against it. It gave about two inches with a strange, tearing sound, and through the gap he saw the ivy had grown over the entire door.

A week later, as Jim opened his first can of lager, he staggered out into the morning sunshine. He frowned, There was something unfamiliar about the field. He did not remember the mound of ivy by the hedge, nor the funny-looking, carved post. Where was Fred? Jim shook his head, bewildered. He obviously needed another drink. Carefully, he picked his way up the step into his kitchen.

---

## SOMETHING TO TELL MY LADIES

BY ANN MUNDLER

'What's that bloody woman doing here? It's not her usual day.'

I thought I was sotto voce but obviously not sotto enough.

'Did you say something, Pearl?' asked Henry, the dishy receptionist at my leisure club.

'Take no notice love, just muttering to myself.'

Mrs Designer, that's what I call her. Trainers, jacket, swimsuit, goggles, hairband, all the lot with the right labels on the outside. I cut the label out of my costume. Don't want anyone

seeing my size or the chain store where I shop. I do wish I could turn up wearing my cozi under my clothes like Mrs D and friends, but I can't. It cuts into my bottom when I'm driving. Goodness knows how girls cope with those thongs. Mrs D and friends are like greyhounds out of traps, the speed at which they get out of the changing room into the pool. It takes me a good five minutes to heave my swimsuit on, then I drop half my stuff trying to get it into the locker.

I try and slip into the pool without making too much of a splash, while she's facing the other way. Talk about graceful; she hardly makes a ripple when she swims, and she's fast. Makes me feel like a toddler with arm bands, splashing around. My hubby reckons the water level goes up an inch when I get in, cheeky bugger. Tells me I'm fat and past it. I think he's seeing someone. His behaviour is odd, sort of devious and furtive. He can be very insulting when he has a mind to.

Mrs D is getting out now. She's so slim, like a model. Can't make out why she doesn't go to the flashy spa up the road. Bliss, I have the pool to myself. I swim round and round in circles dreaming up fantastic holidays I'm going to tell my ladies about, up at Park View Care Home, while I do their hair and nails. That's my job and I love it. They all have varying stages of dementia and lap up a story. They smile and nod while I talk. One day the scissors will slip while they're nodding.

Today I think I'll go to the Bahamas. Round and round I go, imagining the gorgeous sunshine, golden beaches and tall cocktails served by handsome waiters. I can't tell my ladies where I really spend my holidays. Two weeks with hubby in Clacton. At the same boarding house every year. It's owned by an aunt on his mother's side. My mother always used to say it was all cabbage and candlewick, which just about sums it up. Nothing's changed in years, same food, same décor, even the same conversation.

Nora 's my favourite at the Home. She loves nothing better than for me to tell her about my latest exotic holiday, while I'm shampooing and drying her wispy hair. One day, the bit she's got left, will all come off her shiny pink scalp and disappear down the plughole.

My salon is actually a cubby hole, under the stairs. It has a sink and an electric socket, but not a lot else. I make it nice for my clients with lots of coloured bottles on the shelf above the sink. I only use two of them but they look pretty. With pastel towels and capes draped over

the two rather shabby chairs, and a good spray round with the room freshener, it's improved no end.

Sometimes it pongs a bit but I don't say anything. The staff are lovely and do their best.

Nora likes a manicure as well as a hairdo, just the cuticles shaping and a coat of shell pink varnish to finish. She sits with her hands stretched out while I tell her about my holiday in the Bahamas -----several times. She doesn't remember anything for long.

'Your nails are dry now Nora.' She sits, admiring her new nails, not talking for a while.

'Where did you say you went, Ruby?'

'It's Pearl Nora, my name's Pearl.'

'Oh yes Ruby, I remember.'

Every week I rehearse a different holiday destination for my ladies. It could be the same one every week for all they remember, but it would bore me stiff. Sometimes it's The Seychelles, or Barbados, Australia or the Galapagos. I pick up brochures from the travel agent in town and read them till I know them backwards. The staff, at the Home sometimes overhear my tales. They must think I have stash of cash hidden away to be able to afford such luxury holidays. My charges are really very reasonable. The overheads for the cubby hole don't amount to much, but neither should they. It is, after all, just a space under the stairs.

Most days I'm home by teatime, but today I'm late.

'Where've you been, Pearl? I was worried about you.'

'More like worried about not getting your tea.'

'Don't be like that, my sweet.'

'As a matter of fact I've been to the travel agent.'

'Lovely, booked anywhere nice?'

'Yes, Barbados.'

'Brilliant. When do we go?'

'Not we love, me. You can go to Clacton.'

---

## THE AUTHOR

BY JOCK TURNHAM

Monica Jarvis arranged the two armchairs to face each other. She sat in one, made herself comfortable, and opened the file. Monica smiled to herself. Working in this mental hospital she found very rewarding. But this case, Ronald Sharpe, gave her particular satisfaction as they had made such progress together. She felt a tingle of excitement at meeting Ronald again. Today, she believed, would see the breakthrough.

Ronald Sharpe was a writer. He had achieved fame and not a little fortune when his novel, *The Devil's Undertaker*, topped the bestseller list and was subsequently made into a film starring Brad Pitt.

Since then however, he had suffered from so called 'writer's block'.

Ronald slid into obscurity and sales of his book slowly dwindled. As a desperate last resort Ronald joined a local writing group hoping that the companionship of like minds might kickstart his creative juices.

Certainly within the confines of the group he found success, even winning the odd prize in local competitions.....but nothing he wrote was worth publishing. The group he belonged to set tasks or themes each month and each writer responded in their own way. Ronald worked hard on the challenges hoping that the group would show appreciation of his efforts.

Ronald's life had changed from one of Celebrity to that of quiet contentment.

A month or so ago Ronald's neighbours reported hearing loud noises and screams coming from his flat. Ronald lived in residential accommodation for the elderly. When the police arrived they were obliged to break down the door. They found Ronald lying on the floor wearing nothing but a vest. His whole body twitched uncontrollably. Foam and spittle covered his lips and his eyes appeared white orbs. The room itself was a shambles. Overturned furniture and broken glass and crockery surrounded Ronald's body.

An ambulance was sent for and Ronald was taken to hospital. After treatment he was transferred to the nearby mental hospital where he had remained ever since.

At first Ronald had been unable to speak, but slowly Monica had teased words...mainly gibberish...from his lips.

As the weeks passed he became less agitated and was able to hold a simple conversation, albeit question and answer.

But today, Monica felt that she might be able to ascertain the cause of Ronald's breakdown and then, she believed, by talking openly about the crisis Ronald would be on the road to recovery. He must face his demons!

Monica looked up from the file when the expected knock on her office door came. She rose and greeted Ronald and invited him to sit. Monica attempted to put Ronald at ease.

"Tell me" smiled Monica " about the days and weeks before your breakdown. Something perhaps was upsetting you. Take yourself back and describe it to me if you can."

Ronald stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Well," he murmured " I was sitting at my desk, where I always write, and, and, I found I couldn't get started. My mind, it was blank!" His voice began to rise in volume. " I thought I was having a bout of writer's block like before.....but this was ridiculous!"

"Go on" encouraged Monica.

"I mean it's a bloody writing circle for God's sake. As if it matters!" Ronald was shouting now, clearly disturbed. " Why should I care? I don't ! I don't !"

Ronald jumped to his feet his fists clenched.

"Come , sit, Ronald. It's OK" whispered Monica.

But Ronald would not sit.

"Who do they think they are?" he screamed. "I'm a great writer. I've published, they haven't. Setting me stupid tasks with stupid bloody titles!"

Ronald began to storm around the room.

"I can't, I can't ! I don't know where to start! I can't get started. I can't think!" he wailed.

"What", asked Monica " what were you supposed to write about? Come on Ronald, what was it?"

"No!" cried Ronald "No! Please don't make me say it."

Ronald was now writhing on the floor, tearing at his hair, his eyes rolling.

Suddenly he went into a violent fit.

"What was the title?" insisted Monica. "Tell me !"

She leaned over his body desperate to hear his whispers.

Ronald went into a coma. The doctors at the hospital found that his brain had suffered severe damage. He would be unlikely to recover.

Opening Ronald's file Monica wrote :

'Cause of breakdown and ultimately brain damage.....a piece of writing with the theme....

'A twist in the tale'

## 'THE CLAIRVOYANT'

BY BRENDA BURGESS

An elderly man sat quietly reading in the residential lounge of the Sundown Nursing Home. His hair was carefully groomed and his neatly pressed dark blue trousers matched the warm jacket he was wearing. A man of quality you could say.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Grey."

There was a serenity in his expression as he looked up to answer his visitor.

"Do you know, Malcolm, I've been waiting years for someone to say that to me. If you've got plenty of time I'll tell you why." Malcolm pulled up a chair close to his old friend.

'I've got all the time in the world, John. At least until they round you up for bed.'

John smiled; his blue-grey eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Well, I used to make a living at it, you know."

Malcolm looked puzzled.

"Reading people's thoughts. It's a mixed blessing to have this gift. You always know what other people are thinking about you, which isn't always very comfortable. But at least you always know where you stand. But I got off the point; I had a show where I would promise to tell people what object or person they were thinking of and guess what I called the show? 'A penny for your thoughts,' of course."

'What fun! Was it successful?'

"Well, I made a living at it. I had some really strange experiences and it was how I met the only love of my life."

'Tell me all about it then.' Malcolm leant forward eagerly.

"One of the strangest objects someone had for me to guess was one of those shrunken heads. I couldn't believe what I was 'seeing.' I was at a loss for words. Eventually I mumbled something like 'it's very small, very old and quite rare. Where on earth did you get it, Sir? Not one of your relatives, I hope.'

The audience was getting restless and someone shouted out 'Get on with it! Tell us what it is.'

When I told them what the object was, there were gasps of shock, one woman fainted and had to be carried out to the ladies room.

After the show I went to ask if she had recovered. I was shown into the manager's office where she was lying on his leather sofa where he often took an afternoon nap. The first thing I noticed about her was her gentle smile. She was an attractive woman with dark hair and long shapely legs. I suppose she was in her early thirties and it was love at first sight.

When she looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said

'How could you come up with such a horrible trick?' I wasn't surprised as a lot of my audience thought my show was all deception. I told her that it's all genuine, it's a gift that I have.

'You're kidding me! So tell me what I'm thinking at this moment.'

I looked at her sweet face and what I saw there made me feel embarrassed. I mumbled that I couldn't possibly tell her and that she was a very forward young lady.

It was her turn to blush.

'Oh dear, I think I do believe you. My name's Gladys, by the way. What's your real name? I only know you as 'The Grand Master of Mind-reading.' I introduced myself as John Grey and asked her if we could have dinner together later as I would very much like to get to know her better. She answered eagerly,

'Yes, I'd love to. Even if the circumstances to bring us together were a bit bizarre, I'm really glad I fainted.

So that is how we met.

We had a quiet meal in a small Italian restaurant down the road and we talked for hours. She told me all about her life as a travel agent receptionist and the places she dreamed of visiting. I promised that one day we could go on a journey that she would never forget. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at her watch.

'I can't believe it's so late. I must go. Work tomorrow.'

It was with great reluctance that I walked her home. We agreed that we would meet again the next day. As we approached her house she suddenly clutched my arm, and gasped,

'Oh, my god, there's my husband standing at the gate.'

It was then that I realised that she was either a mistress of deception herself or my psychic powers were failing.

But when I saw this burly chap with tattooed arms and chest standing there, holding a pair of growling Dobermans, I didn't need to be a clairvoyant to tell what he was thinking. I took to my heels and ran.'

---

## THE COVER UP

BY PAT JOWSEY

It all started during the Hen night, Alice was getting married next week so we girls had been letting our hair down, and that naturally involved a lot of drinking. They all said they were worried about me, having split with Bernie last year after being together three years. I kept telling them I was fine but none of them believed me. I was quite happy, having my own flat and a good job I enjoyed very much, employed at city based Duggins and Duggins as an accountant for fifteen years so I am financially secure. I must admit the body clock sometimes rang an alarm bell; however, I do try to ignore it. All the others had found their husbands or partners and I was the only one of the group on her own. Joanie got Tinder\* on her phone and that was it. Everyone had a go at suggesting what sort of companion would suit me. Someone said that when you get past 40 you can't be too particular but it was worth a go. A picture of me was put online and to be truthful I didn't look too bad.

The information came back that the first six introductions were free, that was the draw, I am always a sucker for a bargain so I put my name down on the website. Alice did remark that that was maybe scraping the bottom of the barrel; however, the decision was made so I was all set to find a partner. All the girls were desperate to find out what was going to happen. I promised to let them know, I can't remember much after that. I fell asleep in the toilet and was put into a taxi to get me home.

It wasn't until the next morning when my phone started pinging that I vaguely recalled signing up to the website. You can't believe what was showing up on my screen. I don't want to be cruel but no wonder these introductions were free. I was a complete novice at this dating game; it was years since I had ventured out into the jungle of the singles market. But she who dares wins.

Feeling that this might be my last chance and after quite a few G&Ts, I arranged to meet the first decent looking and sounding fellow who appeared on the introduction site. We met in a pub around the corner from my flat. He had recently lost his mother and was looking for company. It would be like trying to be an angel. It seems that most men want a Mother, nurse or a hooker.

During the next few weeks, I worked my way through an assortment of lonely men who wanted to be looked after. One said he was an indispensable part of the local hospital, he was the mortuary attendant. Another worked with wildlife, he turned out to be a rat catcher, or as he put it a pest exterminator. You were lucky if your date showed up with their own teeth and hair, also two arms and legs, hopefully functioning.

My friends followed my adventures like a soap opera. If dating sites could be sued for fraud, people would make a fortune.

Most applicants pretend to be six inches taller and ten years younger on their details. One night was unforgettable. Speed dating, I tremble at the thought. Men and women turn up at a venue, could be a church hall. Dressed up and eager to make an impression. Men in woolly cardigans were immediately put on the back burner, also flared jeans, flowered shirts and pullovers. I was in Chanel and Jimmy Choo's, talk about overdressed. Tattoos and Beer Bellies were in evidence and that included some of the women. I was out of there a lot quicker than I went in.

I was on the verge of giving up, when Tony turned up. Little taller than me with nice fair hair and kind blue eyes. After all the disappointment, I couldn't believe my luck. He was divorced, had three children, and was the first date who was kind and gentle. Opening doors for me, buying flowers and small gifts without expecting to go to bed with me. He made me feel good about myself.

After three months, I was eager to get serious, when I suggested him staying the night he made an excuse. Maybe he wasn't as keen as I was but he said he loved me. I wanted to meet his children and get to know more about his life.

When I talked to the girls they said he must be still married and living with his wife. I had to face him and find out. What happened next was unbelievable.

We went out; Tony took my hand, saying he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. However, he had to tell me the truth. He was born a girl, had given birth to three children who were with their Father. He knew he had been living in the wrong body most of his life and had waited until the children were grown. Now after taking a male hormone he ready to start his new life.

So what do I do now? He was the answer to my prayers, I loved him.

Tinder\* A dating website

---

**THE END**

**BY MARY RATCHFORD**

It is a privilege to live near the sea especially when it includes a nature reserve. The wild and open landscape makes it perfect to get away and saunter, observing the gulls swooping around the craggy cliffs. The sounds of nature, the humming of insects amongst the grasses and the gentle swish of the sea and soft flurries of fresh breeze on my face.

Anyway, on the specific day I am going to tell you about, when the incident occurred, I had had a particularly restless night. Perhaps the Thai curry I had made for dinner was not such a good idea, as it repeated itself throughout the night, while I was trying to sleep. So, just after dawn, I took myself off for an invigorating walk.

There had been a bit of a storm during the night and the gulls, possibly excited by the restless waves, were particularly active and noisy. The wind was more challenging than enjoyable that morning, but my focus was set on completing the circular walk along the cliff and back home.

I was enjoying watching the activity of the gulls and then, my attention was drawn to a dark object in the sea. It could have been a dolphin but as it got closer, I saw that it was a small rubber dinghy. The sea was rather rough and every now and again, the boat disappeared, as

waves hit it broadside. I peered at the bobbing craft for signs of life, but I couldn't see anyone on board and I began to fear the worse. Moving gradually towards the edge of the cliff, I strained my eyes to try and focus, mesmerised by the lurching craft. Then looking down to the beach, I saw a message in the sand. It was a large stone circle with the words "The End" written in the centre. Now I was really worried, was the abandoned boat and the message connected. Someone depressed enough to take a small craft out into a very rough sea.

In any event, someone was in trouble and being a good citizen, I decided it was my responsibility to call the lifeguard and police. My hands shook not just from the cold but also nervousness as I dialled 999. I explained that there was an empty dinghy in the sea and a note written in the sand, about ending it all.

Within a short period of time, a RNLI lifeboat appeared around the headland. It sped towards the small craft which was now filling with water and with each new wave, lurched over to one side. Then a police helicopter suddenly appeared overhead, the roaring sound of the helicopter blades filled the air as it circled around me and over the sea below.

My morning walk was definitely getting more and more dramatic as the lifeguard and the police focussed on a possible disaster.

Suddenly, out of the blue, a man came running towards me waving his hand and screaming, "Hey what the.....You have ruined everything."

As he got closer, I could see he was carrying a camera.

"You fool, why did you call in the RNLI and Police? You had no reason to do that and now you have completely ruined the end."

I stood there mouth open wondering what this madman was talking about. Stunned I shouted above the noise of the helicopter.

"There is an abandoned dinghy out there and a sign on the beach which says 'The End'. Of course, I called for help because someone has obviously decided to end it all by taking that rubber dinghy out into a choppy and dangerous sea."

The man, looked at me his face red with anger, and yelled.

"I am making a film, and this was the last scene, where I pan from the drowning boat to the sign which says "The End" and now you have ruined the climax of my film"

We both looked at each other mouths agape and then slowly both turned to watch the emergency services as they continued looking for a non-existent body. There was no way of

letting them know their search was futile, above the sound of the sea and roar of helicopter blades.

Then, as I turned to walk away, the downdraft of the helicopter rotors scattered sand over the message which had started the whole emergency. Philosophically, I thought, tomorrow I'll go for a walk along the canal near my home, instead.

---

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BY DAVE NEALE

For the third time, Tom checked his watch. 11.36; only four minutes after he'd last checked it. He sighed. How much longer was Carol, his sister, going to be? They'd decided to have a day out in St Ives. For him, that meant having a stroll around the town until they found a good pub, then spending a few hours sampling the beers. Instead, Carol insisted they tour the Tate. Whilst Tom quite liked some art, all that modern stuff left him cold. He stared at the huge picture immediately in front of where he was sitting, waiting for Carol to finish. It was a random sequence of curved lines and colours, totally void of any sense of meaning, but it was entitled "Wedding through a Window, by Joe Bates." He snorted. As if!

With nothing else to do, he stared at individual sections, looking for something which never came, then he stared at the picture as a whole. Nothing. It was after he'd stopped examining it, that his eyes defocused and suddenly, wham!

You've probably seen those images where you think you're looking at the outside of a box, and it suddenly transforms and you realise you're looking from the inside. Only with this, Tom was looking through a French window at a wedding party. Not just a picture but a complete 3D happening. As he hurriedly stood up and moved towards it, the people inside took on life, and he could hear the chatter of many simultaneous conversations. It was so realistic, he felt he could put a hand through the open French window and into the scene, so he did.

"At last, here's the groom," someone called, and a young man leapt forward and pulled him by the hand right into the room. "We wondered where you'd got to," he added.

"I was just..."

"Don't bother with explanations. It's time for your wedding dance. Your bride awaits."

He stepped aside and there stood the bride, the most beautiful woman Tom had ever seen. The perfect figure in a white gown which flowed out behind her, smiling lips which begged to be kissed and eyes so deep he could fall into them; eyes which were locked on him as though he was the most fantastic man in the world.

Hang on, he thought, I'm a middle-aged guy old enough to be her father, and definitely not the man she was expecting. "Er, I'm not..."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said the guy next to him, who he presumed was his best man. "Get on with the dance." He shoved him towards his bride.

"Darling," she said, and melted into his arms.

I can't bloody dance, he thought. What should he do? But the music started and he was twirling like a Strictly Come Dancing finalist. It was magic! He was not only holding the most beautiful girl in the world but he could dance. Soon other couples were joining in and he expertly steered his bride between them, whispering sweet nothings into her ear whilst having animated conversations with all those around.

I could get used to this, he thought, as they took a break and he was handed a glass of champagne. Normally, he didn't touch the stuff, much preferring beer, but this time it tasted of flowers and honey, with a freshness that soared through his blood with an invigorating thrill.

His bride (he still hadn't learnt her name!) whispered into his ear! "Darling. You know we have to leave for the airport soon. I'm so looking forward to our honeymoon. I must go and change."

She disappeared and the others surrounded him, wishing him well.

"Don't forget you have to get changed, as well," his best man said. He pulled Tom towards the French window through which he'd entered and shoved him through.

"Where have you been?" Carol demanded.

"What?" he said, looking back at the wedding reception, only to find it had returned to that random sequence of lines and colours.

"I've been looking for you for ages," she said. "Where did you get to?"

"I was at my wedding," he said.

Puzzled, Carol glanced all around before glancing down at the title of the picture he was standing next to. "Ha-ha," she said. "The joke is on you. Anyone who understands art knows this picture is nothing to do with a wedding. Rumour is that when he painted it, Joe Bates was so drunk he misspelt the title. He meant to call it "Weeing Through a Window."

"Strange," he said. "I got an incredibly powerful impression of a wedding." Then he glanced down to the floor, where there was a large wet patch.

Starting to blush, he hurriedly said, "Let's go and have a beer, now."

Then, after thinking for a moment he added, "Maybe we can come back afterwards." He really, really wanted to meet his bride again, even if it did mean wetting himself!

---

## MESSAGE IN THE SAND

BY PAT JOWSEY

The RSBP Warden found the bodies the second day he was on the Island. He was there to check on the Kittiwakes, a protected species migrating in to nest on the cliffs. He spent a week camping out every year, checking the birds as they arrived. He had seen rooks circling and thinking they were after early eggs went to investigate.

The young couple clothed in rags were laying close together on the beach below the cliffs. Disturbance to the birds worried him as he called the authorities for help.

The local Detective Inspector was perplexed how the couple could have arrived on the Island two miles off the coast from the small village of Porthgaven. He spent hours searching the area. The warden who discovered the tragedy of the two deaths had destroyed any evidence around the bodies. The girl had written something in the sand, but all the policeman could decipher was 'ONT SET' that meant nothing to him. After extensive enquiries in the Village, no one knew anything about the couple or who they were. After six months, the incident was consigned to the cold case list. It was a complete mystery.

+++++++

The Villagers relaxed when the questions stopped, they didn't like outsiders or Emmets as they called them. When the young couple arrived in their campervan, camping out on the beach. It was hoped they would move on after a week or so. However, the girl said they would

stay as long as they liked and the residents could lump it. The boy was noisy and rude; swearing at anybody who complained at the mess and damage their camp was doing to the beach. When some of the local youngsters started going to campervan getting alcohol, LSD, and smoking Cannabis, staying into the night getting drunk, having sex, outraging their parents and the Village. The Vicar called a meeting.

What was decided was never talked of again. However, a few days later, the Campervan, and the couple disappeared. The Campervan was taken apart and sold for spares on E-Bay. All traces of their ever being in the village were erased

Sharon and Wayne had enjoyed their time in the village. They laughed at the small-minded residents, who cared what people thought? Life was for living.

When the local kids turned up begging for a bit of fun, knowing that their parents would be furious made getting drunk and smoking a bit of weed even better.

There had been a few warnings.

A dead crow tied to the campervan, refused service in the local shop, a note pinned to the door 'Leave now or regret it' Wayne and Sharon laughed it off; things went quiet for a few days.

When the men arrived in the middle of the night, they tried to fight them off but with no chance of success. Nothing was said as the couple were dragged from their bed, tied up, and put into a small boat. They struggled, begging to be free, but the men said nothing. After the short trip to the Island, they were carried from the boat, untied, and left on the furthest beach with nothing on but their nightclothes. Their captors stayed silent the whole time, not a word to the couple or each other. The whole episode had been planned to the last detail.

They passed the first day thinking the men would return; surely, this was only a warning. Hope soon faded, after screaming and blaming each other for their predicament, they realised they only had each other. Walking the shore looking for boats they could attract and escape their prison. Wayne climbed the cliff in an attempt to see further and maybe find any way to attract help and be rescued. Coming back down to Sharon, he slipped and broke his ankle. Crying in pain and despair they clung to each other praying for any hope that might be out there. Finding that chewing dew soaked grass in the morning, they managed to get some trace of fluid into their parched mouths.

As the days passed, they grew weaker and calmness enveloped them. Both of them remembering their parents, they had run away from years ago and never contacted again.

On their last day they huddled together, Wayne died first in her arms. Sharon with her last scrap of energy wrote in the sand.

Don't upset the locals.....

\*\*\*\*\*

Two years later a new female Detective inspector arrived in the county, she was determined to solve the only outstanding case in local records. Questioning the RSPB warden, she discovered the man should have been on the island a week earlier the year the couple died. Delayed as his wife had just given birth to their first child.

That week had been the difference between life and death for the couple.

Interviewing village residents; finding the usual hostile silence of the locals. By then the DNA of the couple had come back with the Identity of the girl, then the boy known. Their families had offered a reward of £5000 to find out what had happened to their children.

When this was made known to the Villagers, the attitude of the younger inhabitants changed as they looked for a way to get away from the village. Within a week, details of the abduction of the couple became known. Men arrested and charged with murder, the rule of silence continued. At the trial later in the year, no witness came forward to speak against the accused. Reducing the charge to manslaughter, still the verdict reached of not guilty. The Village tried to resume the enclosed character of before. However, the publicity took off. Visitors flooded in, bringing in demands for shops and restaurants. Wealth came to the area, property prices sharply increased. The death of two young people forgotten, as the message in the sand is now.

Don't upset the visitors.

---

# Non-Fiction

## 1<sup>st</sup> Prize

### CANDLE ICE

BY SHEILA HUTCHINS

It was a couple of weeks before we were due to leave North West River, Labrador. We had spent a year working as a doctor and teacher in this remote community, a settlement on both banks of a narrow neck of water between two lakes. The two sides of the “river” were joined by a cable car. On one side thirty miles of road led to the larger community of Happy Valley and the Goose Bay American air base. On the side we lived there were no cars, no roads and everyone travelled by snowmobile in winter and boat in summer. It was late June, the snow was melting fast and the first icebreaker had got in to Goose Bay the previous week with much needed supplies.

“You must hear the candle ice at break up” someone had suggested. Candle ice are perpendicular ice crystals that form in lake water as it melts. It can be compressed into huge blocks, but is very unsafe to walk on, breaks easily and as the crystals float upright in the water they chink together, making a lovely musical sound. With this wonder of nature in mind we set off one Sunday morning, with one of the nurses from the hospital, in our traditional clinker built local boat, the Josie M.

We knew our safety code for boat expeditions in this area, especially during the risky break up period; always let someone know where you’re going. Walking to the boat we passed our (also British) friends the dentist and his wife, heading out in what locals scathingly called their “store bought” canoe, purchased from the Hudson Bay catalogue. “We’re off up Little Lake to hear the candle ice” we said. Our friends were exploring Big Brook, a nearby river flowing into Big Lake.

The weather was glorious, we chugged along for about an hour in open water, until we reached the edge of the ice, cut the outboard engine and listened. Yes, we could hear the tinkling sound of the ice as we bobbed gently in the water. We relaxed, savoured the magic of the sound and the still-snowy landscape all around us. Finally, we started the engine to turn the boat and return. We were about 100 yards from the shore, and completely surrounded by ice. To this day I remain baffled as to how this happened without us noticing. Yes, a slight wind had got up, but it felt like the floes had a malicious intent, propelled by some sinister underwater force to trap us. It seemed supernatural and very scary. We were a long distance from open water and stuck firmly in the ice.

My husband announced that if we could get to the shore, and walked really fast, we might be able to make it to some fishing cabins just inside Little Lake before darkness fell. At the time I thought this was ridiculous. We had only cruised a short way up the lake, it was about 2pm in the afternoon, and didn't get dark until late. We could surely make it safely to the cabins in a couple of hours? We women stood at the back of the boat, pushing as hard as we could on the ice foes with oars, whilst the husband sat on the prow, bashing the ice with his feet to try and break a path through to the shore. We got there, but it took about a hour.

ur intended journey along the shore was impossible. The scrubby vegetation was impenetrable. There was snow on the ground, gnarled low trees throwing roots everywhere and only very small clearings in the dense overgrowth. There was no shoreline free of vegetation. There was no path. Yet we walked. Somehow we ploughed through the bushes and trees, on and on, hour after hour, stopping only to gulp a handful of snow, and once to share a solitary orange. Fleetingly I spotted a large paw print in the snow. I couldn't stop to think about it. There were black bears in the area, and they were certainly out of hibernation by now.

Eventually, just as the final rays of light were disappearing, we broke through into the clearing where a couple of small wooden cabins stood. They were used by locals on fishing trips, just simple shacks with basic furniture, a kerosene stove and lamp, and some cooking utensils. The relief was overwhelming. We did not have to spend the night in the open, with the cold and the bears. Exhausted, scratched, thirsty and hungry, we had to break a window to clamber inside. No food, but we made a foul tasting drink with melted snow and "Tang" crystals (a powdered form of orange drink) and hunkered down for the long night ahead. I found a pair of oven gloves which I pulled on my icy feet, and shivered under the scratchy blankets.

In the middle of the night, just as we had drifted off, we were woken by the sound of a boat engine in the distance. We lit the lamp, and waved it in the window, hoping it was a search party looking for us. The dentist and his wife would have realised we were missing, and told the local men where we had gone. The boat spotted our signal, and pulled up on the shore. The men peered in the broken window, flashing a torch round the cabin. Our relief turned to horror as they asked "where are the others?".

They were found the next day. Their flimsy boat had overturned in the melt waters, and they too had trudged for miles to get home. Safety precautions are somewhat pointless if the

only people who know where you are going are also setting off on a boating expedition at the most dangerous time of year for northern maritime communities. We were suitably contrite, and bought several crates of beer for our brave rescuers.

---

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize

### THE UNKNOWN HERITAGE

BY IAN SEARLE

“You’re interested in the theatre, aren’t you?”

We were on one of our weekly, U3A walks, and Lawrie Piper had fallen into step with me. His question led to a short conversation and to an introduction to Mavis Spargo. Mavis was a small, vivacious lady, a dark-haired Celt, originally from Wales, but she had been married for years to a Cornishman. She had almost black eyes which glittered with passion as she told me about her obsession to see the revival of the Ordinalia, medieval, Cornish, Mystery Plays. She needed someone to take on the role of honorary secretary to the Ordinalia Trust. The word “Ordinalia” meant nothing to me, but after an hour with Mavis I had learned enough to commit several years of my life to the project. It was enthralling and ultimately frustrating.

Halfway through the Thirteenth Century, the Black Death arrived in Cornwall. It had a devastating effect on the mining industry which, at that time, was a vital part of the national economy. Nearly half the population died. The feudal estates lost half their labour force, contributing to a social revolution. The county, like the rest of England, was dominated by the Catholic Church. Throughout Cornwall, as elsewhere, there were numerous religious foundations, one of which was Glasney College at Penryn. It was at Glasney, scholars believe, that one or two gifted canons wrote the scripts for three plays, the Creation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

A copy of these scripts had been kept in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. They were written in medieval Cornish and had not been performed for 300 years until Bristol University Drama Department put them on in 1969. They had been translated into modern English for that

performance. I still have a typed copy. I read the plays with amazement. I was soon almost keen to see them reinstated as was Mavis. The Latin word, Ordinalia, was given to the three plays, and there are just a few stage directions added in Latin.

I was never a religious believer. I had not been particularly interested in history. Although I have a degree in modern languages, Cornish is not one of them. Yet these ancient scripts in their modern translation, entranced me, and I soon recognised their importance. There were several reasons. I was hooked.

They are important as examples of medieval, vernacular drama. They still work remarkably well. Putting to one side their religious theme, it was interesting to discover they were designed for performance in the medieval "Rounds", or "Playing Places." These were earthworks, grassy banks about eight feet high, enclosing a circular, grassy "platea". One complete Round exists today at Rose, near Perranporth. Only in Cornwall and East Anglia were such performances staged out of doors. Elsewhere, in the North of England, Mystery Plays were performed on mobile wagons.

The language is of interest to Cornish speakers and scholars. The modern revival of Cornish drew quite largely on the Ordinalia, although it is in Middle Cornish, and the plays are written in verse.

Above all, the plays give an insight into the medieval mind. The populace was largely illiterate, and their one source of information was the Church. Unable to read or to speak Latin, they would learn from the clerics the Bible stories. They would also be very aware of the fragility of life, many of them remembering the plague. Salvation and heaven and hell were real. These three plays incorporated some of the most entertaining stories from the Old Testament in "The Creation", together with very graphic and fearful pictures of Christ's death, devils emerging from the mouth of hell to seize victims, miracles and repeated references to the need for God's grace, referred to often as "The Oil of Mercy". Yet, interlarded with the portrayal of Christ's suffering and death, there are many comic moments, often totally unexpected. For example, when Jesus cries, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," one of the Roman guards at the foot of the cross, retorts, "I don't give a fat fart for your father."

The Ordinalia Trust was established by Mavis, who recruited about a dozen, respectable members of the great and the good. The President was Lord St Leven. I set to work finding funds. Numerous charitable trusts coughed up about ten thousand pounds. It was not

enough, however. As the Millennium drew to an end there was no prospect of staging the Ordinalia and the Ordinalia Trust collapsed. I had left it by then. This would have been deeply disappointing, but the Arts Council provided funds for another group in St Just to stage a modern adaptation of the Ordinalia. It was a big, community effort. The cast was enormous, over 200, and consisted mostly of local amateurs. The first play was staged in 2000 in St Just in Penwith. St Just has one of the few surviving Rounds in the middle of the town. It was everything I could have wished.

While promoting the Ordinalia, I met many Cornish people, some of them Bards of the Gorseth, who were committed to the preservation of the Cornish language and culture. I also visited many places and groups – WIs, Old Cornwall Societies, U3As, local Councils and the like – to talk about the Ordinalia. I even gave one presentation to a group of U3As in Northern Ireland. Yet the very existence of this rich heritage remains unknown to most Cornish people.

I remain an atheist, but my reading of these old plays was certainly moving. Their study led me to a deeper understanding of Cornwall's past. I found the medieval scene especially interesting. The Church was all-pervasive. The scale and importance of tin mining was a surprise in those, pre-industrial times, and the King was in trouble, trying to finance his war with France, when the economy, including mining, took such a hit from the Black Death.

The Ordinalia remains Cornwall's most precious, hidden treasure.

---

## Highly Commended

### WHAT MY GARDEN MEANS TO ME

BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE

Since the lockdown gardening has been totally absorbing. I think you might call it 'mindfulness', escaping from the bad news. With all the extra time available my garden has flourished with a new vegetable patch, extended borders, a renovated pond, and a wildflower area. In the Spring the greenhouse was bursting with plants with plenty to give away. Time flies with such an absorbing hobby and 'digging for victory' has taken on a new meaning!

There is nothing to equal the beauty of a Cornish garden and an added bonus during lockdown is that there is more time to be still and see the previously unnoticed details of nature.

This year I got the idea of revamping the bottom of the garden and divided it off with an arch, and then added a new grass path to the greenhouse and a veg and soft fruit plot. It's like a secret room. My garden is run on a shoe-string. Although over 70, I do most of the work myself (except mowing the lawn!). Buying plants from garden centres is too expensive. I really love Truro City's flower beds but can't manage that style. There is an area where I grow cuttings and seedlings. I cut Hazel poles from the wildlife area to make plant support tepees, and grow almost all the plants from seeds and cuttings (many given to me by friends!). In fact I love to walk round the garden and say to myself, 'Julia gave me that rose, that cutting came from Anthea etc.'

There are so many memories in the borders. Not long ago my husband died and without fail each day I keep noticing at least one small white feather in the grass. I mentioned this to a friend who said, 'Feathers appear when angels are near. They are sent to give you encouragement. He's with you in the garden you know.' One border has a Tayberry along a fence. My husband insisted on buying that and I had to give in; but there it is defiantly full of berries ripening!

The wildlife is the best thing about my garden as I love nature and want to do my bit towards preserving it as best I can. The Lockdown even gave time for the construction of a Bug Hotel. I try to keep plastic to a minimum and reuse plastic pots. Making pots from newspaper has been successful as the roots are undisturbed when you plant out. I keep everything 'eco-friendly' avoiding pesticides and anything which would harm wild life. There is a pond and a large shady wildlife area with wood and stone piles for creatures. I try to keep plastic to a minimum and reuse plastic pots. Making pots from newspaper has been successful as the roots are undisturbed when you plant out. I love birds and dozens feed from the feeders and nest in nest boxes and in the wildlife 'jungle'. As well as common birds - Jays, Greater Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, tree creepers, thrushes, wrens all come. There are two bird baths and the pond for birds to bathe in. There are also grass snakes that bask near the pond and they have even laid eggs in the compost! A hedgehog called Nutmeg comes through the gaps in the fence.

Most of the plants grown are good for bees and other insects. There are apple, pear and plum trees and other fruit bushes, wild flowers and rockery plants, lavender, foxgloves (grown

from seeds), delphiniums, herbs, wallflowers, Veronica, Ajuga, flowering shrubs such as Cistus etc.

There are four water butts and I garden organically with natural pesticides and try to keep slugs at bay with copper strips and egg shells. This is not always successful though! I only feed the plants with organic food such as seaweed and chicken pellet manure. I earnestly believe that chemicals sprayed on our food are bad for us.

What about the future? This year I have added a wildflower bed and areas of wildflowers in the lawn. Next year the lawn will be smaller – (I am extending the veg garden) and the wild flower areas will be bigger. Lockdown has given us the chance to improve our gardens and make them a wildlife haven.

The greenhouse is rather old but that's where seeds are brought on and the tomatoes are good this year. The veg plot is a passion and when there is no room? Well! plant veg in the flower borders. This year I have extended the veg. area and in the winter will turn over more of the grass and spread the contents of the compost heap on it. Also this year there is a new area of soft fruit and fruit trees. The old apple trees yield copiously. I love to experiment with plants and recently planted two identical courgette plants, one in a large pot full of compost from the compost heap, and the other in the ground. The one in the pot is far better!

Flowers are my first love and most are planted with pollinators in mind. These include, foxgloves, small rockery plants, annuals, shrubs and wild flowers. The plants in pots on the patio give a lovely splash of colour. The borders, with repeating themes of different trees and shrubs, always have a focal point such as a granite mushroom or a bird bath. If something doesn't grow.... Well, move it, and that often does the trick! It's great to be able to invite friends round now and the garden is a beautiful healing place to sit. There are plenty of seats! My grandchildren are allowed to play ball games on the lawn.

My granddaughter painted a lovely stone which reads, *'To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow'*. That's what my garden has helped me to do.

---

## Highly Commended

A PROJECT FOR LOCK-DOWN AND A SURPRISING OUTCOME

BY ELEANOR HOLLAND

Lock-down and self-isolating were new words plus a new experience for me and I was feeling frustrated and very grumpy at the restrictions they imposed on my normally out-going sociable life. The Maritime Museum, where I have been a volunteer for about eighteen years, had closed down, the U3A groups I belong to were no longer meeting, not to mention friends who thought it inappropriate to visit or meet up. I woke up one morning and thought I have got to do something, or go mad!

Celebrating, in May, the seventy-fifth anniversary of V E Day, with its hype and wonderful memories of those, still with us and remembering all it stood for, had set me wondering if anyone would actually be remembering, in three months' time, V J Day. This day meant far more to me, who had been a child, living in India during World War II, wondering if I would ever see my Father again. He was cooped up in Rangoon Gaol, imprisoned by the Japanese, with no sign of the 'Forgotten War in the Far East' coming to an end.

I reminded myself that somewhere, I had my Father's note book, in which he had written a diary of that time and thought, this would be the perfect opportunity to transcribe it into a computer document for the family. So I set about the task, happy that I had a worthwhile Project to see me through the dreariness of Lock-Down.

My Father was a Prisoner of War for three and a half years and his Diary represented the last three months of his captivity, from January, in 1945, when he had scribbled the days' events on scraps of paper and secreted them in the crevices between the bricks behind his bed.

In late April, when the allies began their re-possession of Burma, the Jap guards marched the P O Ws out of Rangoon, heading for Thailand. After four nights of agonising marching, the Japanese abandoned them, with no means of self-defence nor any food. This was a very dangerous episode with even R A F pilots failing to recognise their plight. Four Hurricane fighter planes targeted them, killing their Medical Officer, Brigadier Hobson.

Once safely in allied hands, my Father asked that these scraps of paper be located and returned to him. He bought a note book into which he carefully copied them and a recorded their 'March to Freedom'. This is the very note book I transcribed from.

While I was at my task, my daughter was reading her Face Book messages. She answered one asking if anyone thought V J Day should be celebrated as was V E Day. She wrote 'Yes! I do, my Mum is writing up her Father's P O W Diary'. She received an immediate response, asking for her to let him know when it was complete. This she did and I found myself entertaining the Mayor of Penryn and the Chairman of Penryn's branch of the Royal British Legion in my self-isolating garden, telling them my Dad's story.

I gave them a copy of the Diary and they posted it on to R B L Headquarters in Birmingham. Once in the hands of the R B L, matters took off in different directions, pronouncing it an important and unique historical document, I received a phone call from their P R representative, asking me for some background history. She said it was likely there would be some interest and, indeed there was, from the Radio Times.

I had a telephone interview with journalist, Libby Purves, who wrote an article and a photographer arrived to take photos of the artefacts I have from Dad's desk and me! Libby wrote a lovely piece with gentle, sympathetic references to my parents, who had endured such heart-rending and frightening times, without us children being made aware of how difficult it all was for them.

The publication of the double-page spread in the Radio Times, on V J Day in August, had extraordinary repercussions. I was contacted from far and wide by friends and relations, past and present, who saw it, which was a wonderful bonus. There has also been an article and photograph in the R B L Magazine and I was asked to speak on Radio Cornwall.

It has been an amazing experience - never, in my life, have I been such a centre of attention - but I am so glad I made that particular effort. Apart from assuaging my Lock Down boredom, reading, checking and generally tidying up my haphazard typing for me, gave my children an insight into who the man, the Grandfather they never met, was. I don't think he had intended his diary being shut away in a drawer, so at least it has been given a completely un-expected public airing, highlighting how Prisoners were treated during the Second World War by the Japanese.

---

## A CREAM TEA IN THE HIGHLANDS

BY SUE SWINCHATT

'Are you with the Malaysia or Thailand tour?' a female voice behind me asked as I tried to decide what to choose from the buffet.

'Malaysia,' I replied. Over breakfast Kate, her friend Christine and I got better acquainted. They were old hands at group travel. I'd visited Singapore before, but being part of an organised tour was to be a new experience.

'I like the idea of spending time in less touristy areas and with luck, seeing some wildlife.' said Christine. This was the main appeal for me, too.

But first our itinerary took us to Melaka, then on to the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Five younger members of the group seemed only interested in finding the nearest karaoke bar each night. Fair enough, each to their own, I thought. But it wasn't much fun when one of them caused an evacuation of our hotel at two in the morning. The irate Hotel Manager showed our guide, Amlie, CCTV of the culprits drunkenly discarding lit cigarettes into a waste-bin next to the lift. Normally very relaxed and charming, Amlie's Malaysian Army training must have kicked in because the 'famous five' looked very shame-faced as they clambered aboard the bus the next day.

Visiting Malaysia in October had avoided the tail-end of the west coast monsoon, but up in the Cameron Highlands the rains would be at their peak. Nevertheless, I was looking forward to a few days in those lush, cool hills well away from the oppressive heat of the city. After stopping for lunch at a roadside hawker-stall where an excellent plateful of noodles-with-everything cost just 80p, it took until early evening to reach the hill resort of Brinchang 5000ft up in the mountains. With many aboard catching up on lost sleep, the bus progressed at a stately pace up the winding road, getting slower and slower as the gradient increased. The dense forest came right to the edge of the road, overhanging it in places and allowing only occasional glimpses of villages where the Orang Asli, who settled this area long before the Malays, live in traditional bush-material houses. Our hotel was in the centre of the small town but with nothing open very late, we all looked forward to a more restful night. Tomorrow morning we were going to visit one of several vast tea plantations in the region.

'It's ok, no rain 'til midday,' Amlie announced as we set off the under a heavy, overcast sky. It was a comfortable hour-long stroll downhill through acres of waist-high tea bushes. The

views were amazing. I noticed most of the tea-pickers were women and from their style of dress, not from Malaysia.

‘They rely on workers from Bangladesh and Nepal because the locals won’t do it,’ Amlı explained.

As we approached the processing plant, I spotted an exquisite black and green Raja Brooke’s Birdwing butterfly with a six-inch wingspan, flitting around a flowering vine. That made my day. We were shown the tea-drying room where a bright blue *Sirocco* machine dating from the 1930s, stamped ‘Made in Belfast,’ was still in everyday operation. Just as the vintage school-style clock on the wall struck twelve, the rain began to fall. How could Amlı have known? He just shrugged and smiled.

The afternoon activity was a walk up Mount Batu Brinchang, towering another 2000 feet above the town.

‘I don’t like the idea of a mountain trek during a thunderstorm, do you?’ Kate asked. Chris and I agreed we didn’t. We took a taxi to a hotel on the outskirts of town, where the intrepid mountaineers would join us on their return. No doubt to remind English tea planters of home, the Old Smokehouse Hotel had been built and furnished in mock Tudor-style back in the thirties. Every room had beamed ceilings and wood panelled walls hung with brass platters. The temperature had certainly dropped outside but we were still surprised to find a log fire blazing in the main lounge.

As we sank into comfortable armchairs beside the wide stone hearth, we were even more surprised to be offered an ‘English Cream Tea’. It was the last thing any of us imagined we’d be having in the tropics. Dainty sandwiches, freshly baked scones accompanied by bright red jam and cream of the frothy variety, plus some slices of fruitcake, all beautifully presented on a 3-tier cake stand. And naturally there was a large pot of locally produced tea. We tucked in. Warm, dry and content we wondered how the rest of the group were faring as lightening flashed and the deluge continued outside.

Only the ‘famous five’ made it to the top. They returned drenched and muddy but jubilant, even though they’d seen nothing because of thick fog. Time ticked by; more cream teas were served, but where were the rest? Around 5.30pm Amlı appeared, looking anxious. He’d heard there’d been a big mudslide on the ‘easy’ route up the mountain. We already knew from the first group that the others had gone that way. Darkness was fast approaching as Amlı and two

local men set off to find them. We returned to our hotel in Brinchang but couldn't relax until we knew everyone was safe.

It was nearly 8 o'clock before they'd all returned. None of them had got even close to the summit and things had taken a potentially dangerous turn after a second mudslide blocked the path. While trying to find a way around it, one had twisted her ankle. Another had slipped off the path and been unable to stop himself sliding twenty feet or so down the mountainside. Shoes caked in mud wouldn't grip, so he'd taken them off and cut his feet scrambling back up. This had further slowed their progress. As they entered the hotel lobby some were in tears, all looked close to hyperthermia and thoroughly fed up. Tempers flared after foolish jibes were made and tension within the group lasted for days afterwards.

---

## ON THE RAILS

BY JANET ZORO

Steam. Billowing through cuttings, smutting washing, screeching. I used to go to the station with my mother and sister to meet my father; I'd had a perforated eardrum and I had to cover my ears tightly, squeezing up my eyes, as the steam shrieked into the station. It hurt, but I would never stay at home. Day trips to London, opening windows - weighty, they plummeted with a crash when I loosed the leather strap from its notch - leaning out, being dragged in again, face blackened, eyes stinging. Wondering if I could sleep in the netting luggage racks, reading the information panels under pictures of exotic locations above the seats. Always the same, always different. Chuff chuff chuff diddly-bonk diiddly-bonk.

Indian journeys in the '80s and '90s, where First meant an upholstered seat, no fighting to get it, and delicious trays of *thali* delivered at lunchtime. Most of the Southern India trains we travelled on were steam, then, great black monsters, particularly impressive entering a station at night, whistles, hisses, clunks, the inferno of the coal box, the chaos of the platform as travellers roused themselves and their children, gathered their belonging. The magic of the little rack and pinion line up to Ooty, zigzagging through dense forest with occasional glimpses of far horizons, packed with school trips and Indian honeymooners who

would discover that love might keep them warm at night but they would need to buy thick woolly jumpers for evenings outside in the chill of high altitude.

In Mexico in 1980 we took a train from somewhere in the far south to Mexico City. We had travelled round the country for several weeks on buses, often standing, packed tight, as we lurched along bumpy mountain roads. We might be pecked by a chicken or prodded by a machete but it was impossible to fall over. After an expedition to Palenque, a ruined city of pyramids, stairs, tombs and altars deep in the jungle (we and a German couple we had met on the bus were completely on our own) we headed for the iron way. The old rollingstock, packed with villagers, swayed slowly through paddy fields, agave plantation, tropical forest and tiny roadless villages. At every stop passengers shoved off and on, including musicians and merchants, who alighted at the next stop. Sellers of sweets, tortillas, fruit, agricultural implements, parrots - anything you might need, including homemade *mescal*. We bought a bottle. It was crystal-clear and stupendously effective! Lulled by the marvellous music - fiddlers, accordionists, drummers, flautists, singers - we drifted through the many miles. I think it was seventy two hours to Mexico City. It could have been less, or more. That's why the *mescal* was so useful.

Probably the craziest train trip was in 1992 when we were invited to a wedding in San Diego California, and decided to visit old friends *en* (a very indirect!) *route*. We flew to Washington then after visits to Princeton and Boston, travelled an approximately 6000-mile loop on a four-week Amtrak ticket, for about £200 apiece. Stopped off in Chicago to change trains and discover a very friendly bar, crossed the plains, climbed into the Rockies then down the other side. A night in Colorado, a dawn trundling past the dustbins and parking lots behind the glittering Las Vegas strip, the staggeringly stylish Deco station in LA and on to the palmy beaches of San Diego, the wedding in a mountain orchard, and back by the southern route. The trains dawdled through deserts, each with its own mesmerising beauty. We had a fabulous night in Austin - bats and music and outstanding TexMex food, then the long trail back north.

We've never been on one of those luxury trains; it's not just that you get murdered on them and have to dress for dinner, or even the insane cost. It is the constantly changing excitement of ordinary trains and the ordinary (sometimes extraordinary) people you encounter and the delicious triumph of limited language skills, sign language and getting the gist. Sadly, there are fewer of these experiences on offer now - I believe there are no

passenger trains in Mexico any more and Indian Railways are all electric. More and more tourists travel on named super trains, and never see roadless villages or purchase parrots during the trip or chat to Indian freedom fighters and *beedi* manufacturers.

My early train memories are still so clear. I can even recall one of those pictures, and the information - 'the primitive Veda people of Ceylon live in caves and sleep on platforms to protect them from the unhealthy dampness rising from the jungle floor'. Funny what you retain.

---

## THE POETRY OF COLOUR

BY BRENDA BURGESS

A solitary man stands in a sparsely furnished room. December sunlight shines through the window, lighting up his soul. The white washed wall, a sun-soaked grey, stands as backdrop to the scene. Legs straight and taut, he stares with red-rimmed eyes at the simple straw-bottomed chair, standing stolidly, its rough-hewn frame echoing his own rugged form. The light earthy tones of the terracotta tiling are repeated in his unruly rust-red hair. He takes his tobacco-filled pipe and draws deeply on the strongly-scented smoke. His blue eyes, keen and sharp, narrow as he takes in the chromatic scale of colours heightened by the effect of the sun.

Yes! The blue/grey colour of the door sings as it stands next to the yellow painted frame of the chair and the same yellow note soars above the off-white wall. The weight of the deep ochres and earthy reds grounds the surface of the floor. His eyes caress the rough wooden shape and his body remembers the sensations of the patterned ridged straw seat pressing into his flesh and the firmness of the rungs at his back.

As he places his pipe, together with the screw of tobacco, on its seat, his heart pounds with excitement. Yes. That was just how he sees himself. He becomes the chair and begins to paint.

Bold brushstrokes heavily laden with colour mark out the main subject, with dark dramatic lines. It almost fills the large canvas. He mixes yellows till he is satisfied that the colour that he will use does indeed vibrate against the dull blue/grey door.

With manic energy, he sets slabs of ochre and red, and slashes lines of light green to form the pattern of the tiles. The door is a block of blue/grey, and with the same shade, he edges the legs with reflected colour. The paper-white of the tobacco twist stands out on the yellow ochre straw seat. To balance the weight of the floor in the background, he adds the small wooden crate containing sprouting onions that stands in the corner. The sun resonates across the whole canvas and his heart is filled with joy.

Even as he stands there another idea develops in his fertile mind. Another painting, another chair. The concept of both paintings displayed together excites him. They could be placed so that the chairs faced each other as if in conversation. On the other hand, if they were arranged the opposite way it could hint at the tension that was building up between them and driving them apart.

Entering his friend's empty room he is aware of G's presence filling the elaborately furnished room. His chair is ornate, made of deep red wood with curving back and arm pieces. The green of the straw seat reflects the muted green of the wall behind. Two novels and a blue china candlestick are placed on the seat as if to form a still life. The soft light of the candles subdues the rich dark red and green tones of the richly patterned carpet. The whole room is permeated by an air of rococo elegance.

He has finished the paintings. He takes up his pipe again and looks hard at what he had done. Yes. This is what he set out to do. The empty chair, a symbol of his sense of isolation, becomes HIM, rough, unpretentious, honest and inspired. And, yes, the lighted candle signifying life force together with the deliberate placing of the books sums up the slightly arrogant and ostentatious character of his friend.

Satisfied, he takes his brush to sign his name on the side of the crate in the corner of the canvas.

V.i.n.c.e.n.t

...

In his letters Van Gogh writes *'one may make a poem only by arranging colours, in the same way that one can say comforting things in music.'* He also states *'arranging*

*colours in a picture in order to make them vibrate and enhance their value by their contrasts is something like arranging jewels,' and 'The aim of this painting [of my chair] was to capture the effect of sunlight on colour.'*

The fact that the 'Yellow Chair' by Vincent Van Gogh hangs in the National Gallery London and 'Gauguin's chair' hangs in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam speaks with an eloquence. They are two totally different paintings and of two conflicting characters, and I find it moving that Vincent did not choose to depict himself as the well educated and widely read man that he was, but that he had honed down the priorities in his life to the barest essentials. Gauguin was the extrovert, showy self-publicist and Van Gogh, the reclusive genius who gives us his soul. The poetry of his colours enriches our lives as few other artists have done.

---

## PRECISE PRECIPITATION

BY VALERIE GREY

Whilst holidaying in South Africa, encouraged by a cloudless sky, it was time to visit the coast. But *whoa*, hold the horses, I'm British and we do not commit to any outside venture without benefit of a weather forecast: it takes a seriously demented person to do that. The soft voice on the enquiry line told me there may be showers today. Well, to someone from the Green and Pleasant Land, this did not constitute any sort of threat, so I set off jauntily. At the halfway point I turned back. In no way what was taking place outside the car could be described as "showers". I surveyed the turmoil of grey clouds rolling overhead and the falling sheet of water cascading down the windscreen and decided the sky's outpouring was "heavy rain", not "showers" and from the looming clouds above bad weather was set in. This caused me to reflect on the word showers - or rain in its entirety.

Clearly in S.A. showers is a term used loosely and can mean a light sprinkling to an all day downpour. In Britain of course where there is *so much* weather, playing such an important role in our lives, this will not do, rain in *serious* stuff – it has **status** and therefore entitlement to an earnest examination.

**Rain.** It's easy enough. We don't just have heavy or light rain, we have grades of rain: dirty; patchy; mirky; soft; heavy; driving; pouring; persistent; bucketing, torrential – plus drizzle; mizzle; downpour; stair-rod; deluge and cloudburst. Or, if you are a scientist, Convective Rain, Frontal Rain or Orographic Rain, depending on what cloud formation it fell from! And this doesn't even begin to touch on the brands of hail, snow and sleet that fall upon our undeserving heads. There's no end to the variety of falling and floating water that British skies can rain down on us. So to what else would we devote so much speculation, conversation and capitulation?

**Showers.** Let us now embark on various categories of showers. We have summer showers; occasional showers; intermittent showers; persistent showers; light showers; moderate showers; heavy showers and freezing showers. Recently a new classification has crept in – organized showers. Well, I'm still working on the interpretation of that one but it appears fairly regularly in our nightly forecasts. Perhaps it is, after all, time to control and organize things?

**Fogs and Mists:** Well, these little charmers are almost exclusively British and we make the most of them too. We have smog; harr; fog; sea fog; hill fog; moorland fog and fog banks at sea. We have Cornish mist and Scottish mist and low cloud, which is another form of mist. For something so flimsy and vaporous, it's powerful stuff. It regularly delays trains, blocks motorways and closes airports.

**Sun:** Conversely, although there are over sixty entries referring to sun in Encarta (only two of which are deprecatory: sunburn and sunstroke), we do not bother to qualify this giver of life. Nobody talks about hot, cool, thin, light or heavy sun.

The weather has always played a significant role in British life and parlance. Passing a stranger one would characteristically offer a friendly little quip such as "Nice for the time of year, eh?" or "Cold enough for you?" or "Do you think it will dry up later?" Not so in South Africa where the greeting to a stranger is invariably "Hi! How are you?". You see, the emphasis is on the stranger not the strangeness of the elements – interesting that. Our everyday dialogue depends on weather reference. If it is not raining "cats and dogs", one is "right as rain". If it is, one takes a "rain check". If it doesn't rain "pennies from heaven", one saves for a "rainy day". One decides on something "come rain or come shine" or just goes along with it, like Gene Kelly, "singing in the rain" and in so doing "weathers the storm". There is also a plethora of songs devoted to rain, "Into every life a little rain must fall". I could go on but sometimes "rain stops play". Lets face it:, it's a paradox. We love it but love to complain about it. We love to holiday in the Lake District, reputed to be the wettest place in Britain yet with rich literary associations. "The Lakeland Poets", notable amongst them William Wordsworth, found them a significant inspiration.

And if you haven't had enough yet, let us consider some everyday idioms. To get to know strangers we find a way to "break the ice". They may prove to be "fair weather friends", "terrible windbags" or "pure as snow". They may have their "heads in the clouds", be "in cloud cuckoo land" or they may be inclined to "tilt at windmills". They may "take the wind out of our sales" and "steal our thunder". We could accuse them of "whistling in the wind" or "sailing close to the wind" or even not have the "foggiest idea" about anything so we keep a "weather eye" open in case we are accused of "making heavy weather" of things. We talk of "rainy days when nothing goes right" and we "skate on thin ice" or "sail close to the wind". We are "snowed under" with work, which we are not able to "put on ice". We may be "under a cloud" which will "put the wind up" us and "cast a chill over the day: unless we can "ride out the storm" until the "cloud is lifted" and we get a "second wind". The "wind of change" may happen in time and land us on "cloud nine" with "greased lightning". The Americans of course try to knuckle in. They eat eggs "sunny side up" and "walk sunny side of the street". But they'll never crack our secret weapon – the esoteric argot of weather – and learn, like us, to "weather the weather whatever the weather, whether we like it or not"!

## THE TARTAN KILT

BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE

My Grandfather fought as soldier in the First World War and his regiment was The Black Watch. He played the bagpipes when his regiment went into battle. The Germans nicknamed the kilted soldiers "The Ladies from Hell" as an insult, but the soldiers took it as a compliment. He was badly wounded at the battle of Mons and he always said he had seen the angel. After many days he was rescued from a trench and brought back home to recover in hospital, although he never really recovered, as he was deeply affected by the horror of that terrible war.

His meagre possessions were returned to his parents and these included his blood-soaked kilt. Times were hard and his mother had a plan for all that lovely warm tartan material in her son's kilt. It was to be unpicked and washed and she would have a local dressmaker make it up into coats, hats and muffs for "the wee lassies" - her daughters.

However, my great-grandfather (her husband) had other plans for the kilt. Without her knowing he secretly took his son's kilt it to be made into coats.....not for the lassies though! A while later, on looking out of the window, my great-grandmother was stopped in her tracks. There was her husband and his eight whippets parading down the street. Each whippet was kitted out in a beautiful TARTAN coat!

---

## TODAY I FEEL HAPPY

BY ROZY BROOKS

Today, driving through West Wales, I feel happy. I am travelling the glorious, newly-opened road at Llanteg, Carmarthenshire, which sweeps down then up again, switch-backing around and over foothills. The newly painted black top is dark, its stark white road markings have yet to be tarnished with the rubber residue of travelling tyres.

Dew, hovering at freezing point, sparkles on the verges. The highway swoops and side-winds onwards to the distant mountains where the rising sun illuminates summits crowned with flat caps of clouds, stippled and streaky grey.

Through the open car window flows cold morning air, strafing and chilling my cheek and ear. I feel elation. It thrills and expands in me like helium filling a balloon, pervading my limbs right down to my fingertips, bringing heady exhilaration, until I burst into a huge grin. The car glides downhill, so smooth and silent, electric motor engaging, leaving only the swish of tyre on tarmac blending with the wind noise through window gap. The swift downhill motion intoxicates my senses. It courses through my body as I struggle to resist the urge to accelerate, feeding my state of joy. The smell of damp road, forced through the air ducts, raises memories of long-ago wonderful road trips with my children. Other roads, distant and fragrant with damp exotic scents. Other mountainous routes, twisting and turning with precipitous drops. Happy memories permeate my brain so it releases the wonderful hormonal responses of feeling happy.

Early morning colours slowly clarify as daylight seeps across the sky. Meeting the far-off summits is an exquisite pale blue fishbowl canopy, mottled with drifting clouds. Closer by, the canopy touches ground in verdant fields. These grasslands are speckled sporadically with white skew-horned sheep and the occasional jet black odd-one-out.

After two years, I feel happy; yes feel, not just accept it, on an intellectual level. I feel happy in my achievements. Proud of the children I have raised, in which I include stepchildren, as there is no difference in my love, in fact, I often love my stepdaughter more (but don't tell the others). I am proud of my career, with its contribution to education, boosting damaged and disengaged young people whose life story is so different from their peers. I feel happy with my husband and with my dear friends with whom I share hobbies: fishing, music, quilting and now my new outlet of Creative Writing. It began as a therapeutic intervention and has become a profound and integral part of me. It is essential, irresistible, compelling me to write, edit, review, re-write, again and again. I thrill in anticipation of the time set aside to indulge my desire, immersing my mind and body in the creative and physical functions of writing. It is Mindfulness at its best, as I focus exclusively on the flow of the story and the structure of the phrases. I am invigorated by the intellectual activity and the catharsis of laying out past events to examine them. I reflect on the newly learned skill of drawing on my senses and perceptions then describing these sensations, persuading you, my reader, to travel with me.

Each experience and memory must be considered, re-lived and words found to evoke the emotions I feel, so you can be in that moment imagining the scenes and feeling my emotions. Of course, the real skill is to build the narrative which will draw you in and keep you travelling with me.

I am recovering from and learning to live with stress and anxiety, precipitated by losing my job which in turn destroyed my sense of identity, self-worth and all trust in anyone except my closest family and friends. I am restored to something like my former self, confident and happy with medication and mates. I still experience episodes of scary dissociation and de-realisation but recognise them for what they are and implement my hard learned strategies to dissipate the terrors.

Recovery is a long journey, still to be travelled. Now that I can feel the recovery, and thus believe in it, I can travel on, enjoy the trip, planning and expecting to feel joy.

My happiness returned on an early morning drive through Wales, travelling home. First towards the mountains then passing beside them and eventually crossing the beautiful bridge, spanning vast flats of the muddy tidal river and glimpsing a final view in the mirror of the high, sheep speckled mountainsides. And so, I travel westward, plunging into the frenzied motorway junctions, bridges and lane changes, heading home, feeling happy.

# Poetry

**1<sup>st</sup> Prize****SONNET TO A MARRIAGE****BY TONY BARBER**

What shall I say we crafted, you and I  
Standing before Saint Peter at his gates  
There was no sample kit for us to try  
No diagram to tell us what awaits.

The tools we had to use were few enough,  
The promises we made before the law,  
The 'prentice piece that turned into our love,  
Much more than symbols were the rings we wore.

We built a home wherein that love could grow,  
And brought new life to further Nature's plan.  
The sorrow and the loss I could not know  
That what was two would now come down to one.

It's near the time for me to take my rest,  
I pray our work shall be forever blest.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Prize****THE DAY AT ST AGNES****BY JEAN ANDERSON**

We came here often, you and I  
To watch the waves and spot the surfers,  
Black clad and seal-like whatever the weather.  
How clever I was, you joked, to make this place our home.

As you weakened it became a special place  
Somewhere to enjoy, winter or summer,  
With others or by ourselves.  
We saw the waters calm and lazy  
And we saw them turbulent and crazy;  
We loved the sea.

But you're not here today.  
The waves still roll, the surfers ride the swell  
And you're not here.  
A fragment of a rainbow crosses the painted-by-numbers sky  
And the northern coast's lit up by shafts of sun.  
It's all the same,  
But you're not here.

## Highly Commended

### THE BUZZARD'S CRY

BY JEAN ANDERSON

I heard it first, the penetrating cry  
And looked up to the marbled azure sky.  
At first the one bird soaring high above,  
Then three more quartering.

That sound had pierced the traffic hum  
The garden chirrups and my solitary thoughts.  
It cannot be mistaken once it's heard  
The joyful pleasure of a hunting bird.

It's melancholy too, but powerful and strong  
Proclaims a territory, "Here's where I belong,  
Searching for thermals to assist my flight  
Onwards and upwards, ever my delight

Into the wide ether of a perfect day".

## Highly Commended

PERSONA

BY IAN SEARLE

I saw Olivier years ago as Archie Rice, The Entertainer.  
He'd been on stage for quite some time  
Before I realized that it was him.  
All actors must deceive us in this way,  
They change easily as we might change our socks.  
They modify their voices and the way they walk.  
Unlike the ancient Greeks, they make no use of masks.

In a less professional way I do much the same.  
Every morning, in my bath- cum-dressing room.  
I look into the mirror, put on my genial face,  
Assume my character for the day ahead.  
In company, I smile and laugh, tell jokes.  
In meetings, I take on my serious look,  
Attend to others' tales of woe, and frown in sympathy.  
I'm playing hide and seek. I dodge from mask to mask.

Naked in the bathroom, or ill, caught unawares,  
I am vulnerable, without the energy to find a mask,  
A scuttling hermit crab without its shell.  
When I write fiction, bits of me emerge  
Coyly, behind the characters I've made,  
Teasing the reader, who thinks he's seeing me.

In poetry, however, there is no room to hide.  
I shiver, naked, searching for a towel,  
And braced for mocking laughter or, far worse,  
A cold, uncomprehending and dismissive stare.

## A FRIEND IN FIVE IMAGES

BY JANET ZORO

Imagine a cabinet, mirrored, gilded, jewelled,  
A woman's treasure chest , all glitz and glam.  
Through this looking glass she keeps her life:  
mother, lover, dancer, clown,  
cook and actor, entertainer, friend.  
Behind those dazzling doors, niches, drawers and shelves –  
all full, all tempting, promising delight.  
Maybe a vintage Bentley, classic lines and massive engine,  
fast but comfortable, not quite in fashion, but so beautiful.  
Men long to sit behind the wheel, women admire the elegance.  
Not temperate weather, though wonderfully warm.  
Sun always shines, but lively winds toss billowing clouds,  
swirl transparent misty veils, tease with a sudden sheet of pearly rain,  
flickering lightning, rainbows.  
When the sun comes out again, it's full of promises.  
Must be a cat; she sneezes like a cat, stays up all night  
and loves to sleep for hours, curled on the sofa.  
Supple, graceful, each movement shows her hidden strength,  
her body's subtle power.  
She has an independent wildness: she's no-one's pussy cat.  
But, if she likes you, lets you, stroke her –  
then listen to her purr.  
At rest, she's rounded hills, soft valleys, a landscape like  
a group of Renoir's gorgeous girls. But when she dances, she becomes  
a seascape, tumbling breakers, whirls and eddies, colours changing as they roll.  
Sequined surf and frilly wavelets flirting with the sands,  
always moving, leaping, gliding, skirts of water spinning, swooping,  
hypnotic in their rhythm, their eternal rise and fall.

**ARCTIC NIGHT****BY SHIRLEY CARDUS**

Arctic night washes in, in shades of blue:  
powder and midnight, slate and steel,  
on a turning tide, restless as an ocean current,  
colours stirred and nudged and blurred.  
Fragile snowflakes, gripped by icy water,  
gasp then whisper away.

Arctic night creeps in, soft as velvet,  
stealthy as a cat's paw,  
slinking over harbour wall and quay,  
prowling among the boats, hunkered  
and hibernating from tide and storm,  
blind to the encroaching dark.

Arctic night closes in, stalking liquid lights  
like scattered flotsam embraced by the sea  
that bravely shiver and tremble,  
as inky shadows suck and swallow.  
Colour surrenders, is consumed;  
then all is darkness.

## DOG HAIR IN THE WOK

BY JUDY PRICE

There's dog hair in the bedroom  
There's dog hair on my clothes.  
It creeps inside my slippers  
And gets between my toes.

It drifts around the dining room,  
Crawls out across the mat  
And wanders surreptitiously  
By resting on the cat.

It snuggles in the curtains,  
Sleeping in the folds  
And lurks along the skirting boards  
In fluffy sausage rolls.

There's dog hair in the kitchen  
There's dog hair in the wok.  
It settles on the dinner plates  
And nestles round the clock.

It wreaths around the ankles of  
Tables, stools and chairs,  
Invades the pink chrysanthemums  
And lingers on the stairs.

It flies about the bathroom  
Clogging up the fan.  
Takes refuge in the shower  
And floats around the pan.

More furtive than a whisper  
It glides beneath all doors,  
Evades the mighty Dyson  
And dances on the floors!

**FLORA MACDONALD IN MY BACK YARD****BY JANET ZORO**

The white horse reared and broke a tile;  
she reined him in and, as he backed,  
head tossing, nostrils flaring dragon breath,  
his great tail swept  
a terracotta cherub from its perch  
to shatter on the ground.  
She felt too old for this;  
the fire and energy had been blown out  
by loneliness.  
Half-heartedly she raised her arm;  
the plaid flapped and her battered hat  
snagged on the rusty leafless appletree.  
She cursed.  
The horse slurped rancid water  
from a cobwebbed windowbox.  
He stamped and pulverised a pot of thyme.  
Snickering, head bowed, he nibbled at the mint.  
Flora sneered down at us:  
'Oh what's the point? You English  
simply don't know how!'  
Spurring her steed, she wheeled,  
and clattered through the house into the street,  
trailing knickers, shirts and socks.  
The four of us, the brave new socialists,  
sighed, laid down our crimson banners,  
and drifted to the pub.

## HOPE

BY BRENDA BURGESS

'I hope that you will soon be better,'

The cards all say but,

He tries not to move to keep the pain at bay,

Morphine drips into his soul as he lay.

Shapes sway and move around the place,

The Surgeon comes, shifty smile upon his face,  
"And how are we today?" He asks, not waiting

To hear his weak reply. His smile is grating.

He groans.

"The op' went well but a growth was found,

We hope it proves to be benign,  
But tests do take a little time,

Just make sure you move around"

He groans.

\*\*\*

'I hope you will soon be well,'  
The cards all say, but,

Chemicals course through his veins in a way

Causing nausea that rules each dreadful day.

The Specialist, with smiling eyes,

She says softly "I will tell you no lies,  
But this may help to dispel your fear,

These are new drugs to make it disappear."

His empty stomach heaves and he has to grope For the basin as he groans.

There's nothing left.... But hope.

## I CANNOT SEE YOU NOW

BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE

I cannot see you now  
The twilight call has come for you  
And you are borne from me  
All dimmed and out of view

Your little boat has crossed the bar  
No twilight turning back  
Your sail is trimmed and set  
And you are truly out of view

It's left the unspoken words  
That I still yearn to say  
They are ready, longing, waiting  
For my starlit crossing of the bar

There you are! You're there waiting  
Just you, waiting on the shore  
Here our mingled tears of joy  
And endless time for the unspoken.

**JUNE****BY ANN MUNDLER**

June is the month of promise,  
High sun, long days,  
Summer at its zenith.  
Roses in glorious bloom  
Beautifying gardens, parks hedgerows  
Scented, exquisite in form,  
No mortal could devise

June is the month of fulfilment,  
Decisions made, futures planned  
Love affairs started,  
Relationships deepened,  
Optimism blossoms  
As rose buds open  
To renewed promise.

**KNICKERBOCKER GLORY****BY JOCK TURNHAM**

Through Kensington and Kew  
The Green Line slowly creeps  
I draw faces on the window  
While my mother, restless, sleeps.

Richmond then to Kingston  
Snuggled in our hats and coats  
Our footfalls ghostly echoes  
Yellow smog invades our throats.

My sister has sailed to America  
My brother to Aldershot gone  
My father is out on the ocean  
Me and Mum are now quite alone.

Every day, at my school, I can find her  
Cleaning classrooms when 'home bell' has tolled  
By day she steams sheets in a laundry  
My mother looks so very old.

But today I'm eleven – it's my birthday !  
So to London we'd gone for a treat  
Brian Rix at The Whitehall Theatre  
'Dry Rot', then something to eat.

Shop windows ablaze as we hurry  
'Lyons Corner House ' beckons us in  
'Silver Service' ....we are posh in this moment  
ICE CREAM.....my eyes sparkle, I grin.

Turkish Delight for the journey,  
On a cake, a ballerina I see  
'Look mum! She's going round in circles!'  
Mum softly sighs, 'Just like me'.

**PARKINSON'S****BY MAUREEN WOODHOUSE**

We had no inkling you were there  
Just a wisp on the horizon  
Barely discernible  
Waiting

You rolled in keeping low  
And we carried on, unknowing  
Never dreaming what was to come  
Unsuspecting

A faltered step, a tiny tremor  
Handwriting that grew smaller  
Still we travelled on  
Unknowing

Our sights were set on other things  
Busy, busy. No time for realizing  
Your iron grip was ready  
Grasping

Trying to break our spirit  
Your strangled knot was tightening  
But you found our entwined love too strong  
Unyielding

The cards stacked on your side  
But you failed to see  
God's love abiding with us  
All conquering

**REMEMBER THE DAY****BY TONY BARBER**

Remember the day we ate at the beach  
Sandwiches, salad, home-made quiche?  
We left our plastic cups behind  
A whale swallowed them  
And died.

Remember the day, our shopping day,  
when we bought fresh apples in a plastic tray  
which went to waste?  
So they built a ship to take our tray  
to China, far away.

Remember the day I bought you a dress?  
The latest fashion, I confess.  
You would wear it but once  
so they built a factory in Korea  
for next year.

Remember the day we put out the bins  
but did not recycle, for our sins?  
They built a landfill for our waste  
in the beautiful valley  
down the way.

Remember the day a caterpillar caught our eye  
We used a tub of poison from ICI?  
We did not mean to kill a hive of bees.  
Now we have no honey  
for our tea.

Remember the day we planted a field?  
Chemicals to improve the yield  
washed into the river and algae bloomed.  
No bugs, no fish, no birds, no rambblers,  
no river.

Remember the day, that very last day?  
We did not mean to, I'm sorry to say.  
We found we had killed what we loved  
Lost beauty, lost life, lost joy, lost hope.  
Just stop.

Yes, remember those days, the harm we caused.  
Restore now the world at whatever the cost.  
It's nearly too late but we have to start now.  
To value the lives that our children will lead,  
pay heed.

**REWILDING THE PLANET****BY SUE AMER**

We need to do battle: reduce sheep and cattle,  
Cut farm subsidies, then plant lots of trees  
To rewild the uplands – their future's in our hands.

Cull grey squirrels and the rabbits,  
Otherwise young trees can't grow;  
Saplings will sequester carbon,  
Helping climate change to slow.

Ditch the dairy, shun the sheep –  
Losing them won't make me weep;  
George Monbiot's shown the way,  
Though the farmers may say nay.

Far less flatulence and flying  
Helps to keep the planet green  
For the future generations  
Yet unborn, unheard, unseen.

Put our money where our mouth is –  
Veggie/veganism now;  
With our dairy intake lowered  
Every day can save a cow.

Save the planet, halt the plastic,  
That would really be fantastic;  
Clear the ocean garbage too,  
So Greta's vision may come true.

## THE RIDE

BY BRENDA BURGESS

The painted faces look inviting.  
 The music blares loudly, saying  
 'Come on. This could be exciting.'  
 Round and round,  
 Merry go round

A shilling a go, Cheap at the price,  
 The drum beats loudly, saying,  
 'Come on, for that you could go twice.'  
 Round and round,  
 Merry go round.

Lifted up and seated in place,  
 The child clings to the horse's mane.

' Now, hold on tight, let's start the  
 race.' Round and round.  
 Merry go round.

Sadly the horses do not run,  
 They just go slowly up and down,  
 Its really not all that much fun.  
 Round and round,  
 Merry go round.

He cries, ' I feel sick, I can't go on',  
 'Hold on there, dear, time's nearly up',  
 The music booms relentlessly,  
 On, and on, and on, and on.

Round and round,  
 And round,  
 And ... round, [to be read slower and slower]

Merry ...  
 .... go  
 ..... round.

**THE SALON****BY ANN MUNDLER**

The salon, my sanctuary  
Respite from domesticity.  
Fragrant, soothing  
Mind relaxing.  
My stylist hovers  
With samples of colour  
For me to discover.

Try something daring  
Brown is so boring.  
Be exciting, flamboyant.  
Purple streaks; lime peaks  
Will last for weeks.  
A new creation  
An utter sensation.

Husband incredulous  
Says it's ridiculous  
Hair is horrendous.  
Threatens divorce  
Grounds cruelty  
Of course  
He only loves brown.

## THE SAN PEOPLE

BY JACKIE GRANT

Elandscave, high up in the Drakensberg mountains

Where the San people danced and sang;

And the Shamans went into trance and crossed the bridge to the Spirit world

Where they became one with the animals

And once out of trance, they would paint the rocks to describe where they had been and what they had seen.

Elandscave, where the water cascades over the edge and the sunlight shines onto the wet rocks, glistening in the hot sun;

Where the paintings envelope one with their bright colours and exquisite artistry

And invite you to try interpret their meaning.

This is a 'spiritual' experience

One is not merely looking at paintings on a rock,

But feeling the simplicity of these special people's lifestyle

Where they took only what they needed,

Danced and sang, and lived in perfect harmony with nature and the animals.

Hunter, Gatherer, now long gone,

We feel your spirit,

We hear your song.

## VE DAY 1945

BY ROGER VIVIAN

May the Eighth, caught the workman's train

leaving as usual, but not for work again.

This time got off at Trafalgar Square,

hundreds of people already there.

Servicemen, civilians as well,

all enjoying the freedom from Hell.

In and out the fountains they went,

dancing and singing as tho' heaven sent.

Over to hear Winston Churchill's oration,

with, what seemed all of creation!

Then up the Mall to Buckingham Palace,

to see the King, there was no malice,

just the crowds cheering and waving,

all happy and glad, no misbehaving.

What a difference 2020 has done,

no social gatherings and community fun.

Maybe one day things will get better,

and, once more we can look forward, - together!!