



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

Adult Category

The 19th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2024

FAME

Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.

William Shakespeare

For some, it is a lifetime's pursuit, often slipping through their grasp while others see it fall into their hands by mere chance. However achieved, through talent or luck, Fame, can be an ill-fated prize.

The 19th Elmbridge Literary Competition, run in partnership by The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, asked for short stories and poems on the theme of the double-edged sword that is 'FAME'.

Previous Competition Themes:

2005:	Cook Up A Story
2006:	On My Way
2007:	A Life In Colour
2008:	Once Upon A Time
2009:	A Symphony of Life
2010:	The Elmbridge 100
2011:	Breaking The Barrier
2012:	A Dickens of A Christmas
2013:	One Act Radio Play
2014:	Dear Diary
2015:	Flights of Fantasy
2016:	Love
2017:	Luck
2018:	A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
2019/20:	New World
2021:	Music
2022:	Enigma
2023:	The Road

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Category: Short Stories

1st Place: The Urn

Sean Mott

D’Arcy Lin drummed her fingers on the urn containing her father’s ashes as she watched a guy with a beard and a Legend of Zelda necklace call her movie an abomination. D’Arcy puffed out a vape cloud and leaned back into her custom-made gaming chair as the man in the video, who was surrounded by Funko Pops, shouted that her film, the thing she’d dreamed about since her college days as a stagehand for the real actors, should never have made it out of the festival circuit. D’Arcy turned up the volume on the video; it helped to drown out the rumbling of photographers, fans, and assorted leeches assembled outside her home.

D’Arcy looked at her reflection in her father’s urn. “The bags under your eyes have bags!” That’s what her father would say. He had an arsenal of moldy lines to whip out for any occasion, mostly to do with women’s appearances. D’Arcy had heard most of them on mornings when her father was preparing breakfast and she had to go wake her mother. Her father always told her to open with a joke. “If you get people laughing, you get people doing what you want.” They were a team back then.

The guy with the beard was telling people about his sponsorship partners for the video, so D’Arcy closed the tab and scrolled down on the results page for her search of reviews. She was on the fourth page of results, the spot where things get really weird. She had burned her morning tending to a hangover and subjecting herself to one cinematic crucifixion after another. She had to bear witness.

Eighteen months, three weeks, and six days of her life devoted to a movie that was nothing more than Internet roadkill for clickbait merchants and the perpetually aggrieved. Her big directorial debut after her season of award nominations for playing Catherine de’ Medici and she’d fallen straight onto a bed of nails. Loving Testament was a flop.

D’Arcy glanced at the clock and wrapped her arms around the urn. “Why delay when you can just get underway?” her father said when it was her turn to mow the lawn.

Her phone screen was coated in text notifications from her mother and brother. They were waiting for her at the cliffside.

D’Arcy, holding the urn like a water bottle, rolled her chair away from the computer and slouched forward with the momentum of the wheels, stumbling to her feet and lurching out of the doorway. Doritos crumbs clattered to the floor as she shuffled into the walk-in closet, pawing at black clothes and slipping them on, turning the urn around so her father’s name faced the wall while she changed. She left her sweatpants and workout shirt in a heap for the maid to grab as she ambled down the winding staircase.

The rumble of the crowd was louder on the ground floor. D’Arcy left her father in the entranceway and ducked into the bathroom to adjust her hair, touch up her makeup, and clear her nostrils. Shaking her head and springing to the front door, D’Arcy tucked her father in her armpit, slid the sunglasses up the bridge of her nose, brought the netted veil across her face, and stepped outside.

The glittering blast of camera flashes was warm and familiar. Everyone gathered outside – the paparazzi, the fans, the gossip rag journalists – wanted to know how she was dealing with failure for the first time. D’Arcy was deeply tempted to ignore her ingrained media training and respond to the barrage of questions. Her first failure? Did they know about the karate tournament in sixth grade? Her homecoming date who vanished after the first dance? The parade of bombed auditions and calls to agencies that went unanswered? They only knew her after the moment of discovery, after the blockbuster with the capes and spandex, after the accolades and the headlines and red carpets. They only saw her life through the prism of success. They didn’t know failure was her genetic inheritance.

D’Arcy kept her head low and parted the sea of humanity as she beelined for her sedan. Someone asked her about the urn. She covered her father’s name with her hand. She slid into the driver’s seat and balanced her father over the cup holders in the middle console. She slammed her palm on the horn as she slowly backed up, taking care not to clip anyone in the mob. She didn’t need another frivolous lawsuit. She reached the end of the driveway and saw a teenager holding a sign that read,

“Loving Testament wasn’t that bad!” D’Arcy lowered her sunglasses and waved at the girl, whose face lit up as she flipped the sign to reveal the words, “It was worse.” D’Arcy let out a dead chuckle and peeled onto the main road. She didn’t take her foot off the gas pedal until she reached the coastline. She knew the route from childhood memories. Her father would take her hiking on the trails when he was in between jobs and needed a break from interviews. The air was cleaner and colder out here, kissed by the sea and filtered by the cliffs. You could let out a scream and the crashing waves would ensure no one heard it. A sealed-off pocket from the world.

Her mother and brother were stationed at the gazebo by the edge of the cliff. Her mother was loudly talking with someone on the phone about the will and her brother was perched on the picnic table, picking at the skin on the sides of his fingernails. D’Arcy apologized for being late. Brief pleasantries were exchanged amid short hugs. D’Arcy held up the urn. Her mother told her to get going.

D’Arcy unscrewed the lid as she walked to the cliff, looking at the empty dust that used to be her father. Her mother and brother offered no words. She cleared her throat and tried to summon up the eulogy that had escaped her for months. She thought about the man who drove her to karate lessons and missed her graduation and let her sleep on his couch and always called her up for money and never forgot a birthday and couldn’t be bothered to attend a movie premiere and succeeded and failed as a father so many times so as to leave the scales in apathetic balance. Her father was gone and D’Arcy, the rising star renowned for her ability to tap into a reservoir of emotions on screen, had no words. She’d grieved more for her bad reviews.

D’Arcy mumbled something she could barely hear and let the ashes slip into the wind. They danced on the breeze for a moment, threatening to blow back on their faces before they scattered over the ocean, dispersing until soon no one would know they had been there.

“That’s that,” her mother said.

The three of them wandered back to their cars. D’Arcy wanted to ask if they would like to get lunch or just go somewhere and talk, but they were already absorbed in phone calls and video chats. Her mother kissed her on the cheek and told her they were on a healing journey together before she fired up her Hummer and ripped down the road. Her brother said it was a classy ceremony and asked if she knew any movies that needed a key grip on probation. D’Arcy said she’d look for him and he hopped into his beat-up Chevy and disappeared. She was alone on the trail. She thought about taking a walk, but that would only heighten this encroaching feeling of loneliness. She looked at the urn, waiting for a profound feeling to strike her, something that often came like a thunderbolt on the set, but the golden container only revealed her warped reflection.

She was driving down a road surrounded by strip malls when she had the desire for disgusting chicken wings. She pulled into a bar with no name and sat in a booth with her sunglasses on. She still had the urn with her. She made her order – which violated her diet but who cared? – and started eating. The waiter was staring at her. “Aren’t you D’Arcy Lin?” he asked.

Normally D’Arcy would deny such a request but instead she nodded, cleaning her honey garlic-stained hands with a wet wipe. The waiter asked for a selfie. She acquiesced. Other people in the bar approached her. Some wanted pictures, some wanted to tell her Loving Testament was garbage, some just wanted to say hello. She was engulfed by people, the centre of attention, stuck in a light so bright it burned out any other thoughts. She smiled and laughed and signed the autographs. Someone bumped the table and sent the urn rolling under a chair. D’Arcy didn’t notice. It stayed on the floor until the janitor found it and took it home, thinking it was an award. Stray ashes still clung to the inside.

2nd Place: Watershed

Chris Cottom

Waterstones is packed for the launch but I squeeze into a space between Fantasy and Young Adult, The ‘Underground Anthropologist’ has announced that his new book – *Binge Drinking in Post-Brexit Britain* – will be the last he’ll research as a participant observer. The dustjackets of his fifteen hardbacks have revealed nothing more than his silhouette, and I’m not the only newly minted sociology graduate itching to see the pseudonymous ‘Professor Bland’ in the flesh.

Garlanded by both academia and the media, he’s the UK’s most renowned social scientist. Living incognito amongst different ‘people groups’, he’s spent decades studying cultures and customs, beliefs and rituals. The body of research he’s created is the envy of universities across the world, while the shelf of spin-off bestsellers has made him a wealthy man.

He’s Heseltine-haired, with pin-striped creases as sharp as a razor, and I struggle to imagine this titan of the tomes dressed down for his ground-breaking first work, *Shell Suits in Salford*. Success had followed success: *Ordinands Observed*, his affectionate portrait of priests-in-training; *Crackheads in Croydon*, described by *The Guardian* as ‘visceral but ultimately redemptive’; and its follow-up *Needles in Neasden*, still regarded as a standard text in addiction counselling. Reviewers lauded *Divorced in Darlington* as ‘a landmark analysis of loneliness and the world of wine-bar pick-ups’. His publishers robustly denied a rumoured cross-sectional study of swingers in Swansea.

My favourite is still *Dancing with Dumbo*, based on his year at Euro Disney, dressed as Goofy. The book vividly describes the unspoken hierarchy whereby café staff and non-speaking ‘cast members’ defer to those with high-status roles like Cinderella and Snow White.

Tonight, the professor relates amusing anecdotes from his work, yet discloses little about the man behind the concealed tape-recorder, other than an oblique reference to being married more than once.

‘My first love will always be anthropology – no apologies for that!’ he says, pausing for a ripple of chuckles. ‘But I’m getting too old for fieldwork, although I want to get down on the grass in Godalming for an eye-level look at group dynamics in garden gnomes.’

After his talk, I'm wondering how I can get a second glass of Sancerre, when a woman asks if I'm familiar with the professor's oeuvre.

'I've read them all ... except that one,' I say, pointing at his longitudinal study of families without fathers, *Deserted in Deptford*.

'His masterwork,' she says. 'Extraordinary scope, elegiac prose, it's—'

'Excuse me,' I say, and head for the book-signing queue, where the Professor gives me a professional smile

'A-L-E-X,' I say.

His Mont Blanc pen hovers and he looks up again, searching for a memory he can't seem to find.

'Just "To Alex," then?' he says, smiling again, his eyes anxious.

I don't smile back. 'Could you add something?'

'Sure.'

'Could you put "Love from Dad"?'

3rd Place: Lindisfarne

Chris Robinson

Events that winter rapidly spiralled out of control. Our familiar community was invaded, the peace and calm of our streets unsettled by unwanted visitors.

North Allerwick, a small, wind-battered village on the Northumberland coast, had peacefully existed for centuries tucked away in the shadows of Lindisfarne. Although people occasionally left, strangers seldom settled. Nondescript and unflustered, North Allerwick allowed time to pass, seemingly distant from the wider troubles and crises of the world.

But that winter, the one in 2019, the one during which North Allerwick rapidly found itself on everyone's tongue, our community was challenged like never before, not even when the threat of Jacobite rebellion just over the Scottish border twice threatened destruction and menace.

The disappearance of Barry Paterson had triggered a frenzy of speculation. A retired publican, married, a grandfather, he was not the type who would walk out on his life. His spectacles had eventually been found partially buried amongst the sand dunes which ran along the shores of North Allerwick's wind-swept shores. The dog he had been walking that late afternoon returned home with one of his thermal gloves, bone dry, held in its jaws.

After house-to-house inquiries and days of searching by the police, somehow, inexplicably, his disappearance was picked up by the national news outlets. Within days, my village's name heavily featured on television and radio, and photographs of Barry appeared in the tabloids.

Almost overnight, North Allerwick changed. Television crews trawled the streets, lingering outside Barry's property; reporters clambered onto the beach and braved the blustery iciness to report the day's investigations.

North Allerwick's remoteness combined with its proximity to the churning black water of the North Sea probably helped to explain why it made for good television. The views of Lindisfarne lowering in the distance must have been a reporter's career aspirations come true: obligatory The North Face winter padded coat, icy knuckles grasping a microphone, hair whipped repeatedly across the face as a live report was given, and all with the austere beauty of that low-lying tidal island in the background

with black guillemots and grey Arctic terns adding a dash of grace and beauty in the sky above.

Let's be truthful: this level of press scrutiny would not have been applied had a similar disappearance happened somewhere not so scenic and isolated.

Shortly afterwards, the next wave came, ill-informed, unaccountable sensationalists, each with their wildly inaccurate theories regarding the inexplicable disappearance. Mobile phones in hand, spewing lies into their handheld devices, they speculated without restraint about what had taken place on those undulating dunes. God-like, they highlighted supposed police errors, pinpointing the missed significance of an unknown car parked in a layby close to the beach on the day in question, or the proximity of Barry's spectacles to a stretch of the beach where undertows and winter riptides churned and roiled.

Unsubstantiated theories were posted on social media. Daily these hypotheses mutated, always seeking a new explanation no matter how implausible. The names of some of my friends were presented for public debate, and hearsay was given the gloss of potential truth without foundation. Rumoured affairs, disputes, petty jealousies: all were allotted to a handful of North Allerwick residents, their characters besmirched.

Looking out to the grey, seething water from my kitchen window, discomfort writhes in my chest as I recall those weeks and the heavy darkness which swept over our village. Having lived in North Allerwick all my life, watching it being trampled into the mire by this ruinous, microscopic dissection was unbearable. The disappearance of a respected, loved member of our community, for many years the welcoming presence in The White Feathers, seemed to be of no real importance.

Uncovering who had done it, and why, was the driving, all-consuming force.

Perhaps I should have seen it coming. After all, my property's garden backed onto those dunes through a cobbled wall and a wind-ravaged wooden gate. Barry and I were the same age, and we had gone through two schools together. Our families were close. With the passing of my husband in 2013 I had lived here, alone, overlooking that beach where Barry often walked, pushing himself into the stiff breezes which often buffet this coastline.

My son-in-law told me it was harassment, but what could the police do? I was photographed and questions were flung at me by these intruders who would loiter close to my home and even stand at the back of my property on the dunes, filming

and compiling their so-called updates. New content had to be generated no matter how ill-founded it was.

My name and image were smeared online for the world to see. Lurid theories were freely thrown: marital unhappiness, a long-held affection for me, my own bereavement and loneliness.

All, all were totally unfounded.

Barry still hasn't been found. The case must still be open, but, after all this time, what more can be done?

Whatever had happened during that winter's late afternoon walk, North Allerwick's shoreline has not divulged its secret.

Here, this dark December morning, a light spattering of rain skitters against my kitchen window. I cradle this mug of steaming black tea, staring out to sea, across my garden where a cormorant is resting on my wall with wings outstretched. I think of Barry and the callous assault on my village, my people, my home.

I rarely set foot outside. The garden is overgrown, and that gate barely clings onto its hinges. I know the dunes are still there, as they will always be, but I seldom see them. I do not want to.

My name was freely shared; photographs of me are now public property. My life, I have no doubt, continues to be a tawdry speculation.

I shelter from the prying eyes of the world: even now, after all this time, they still occasionally visit, armed with their mobile phones as they record their wildly inaccurate aspersions.

The irony bites deep: known by millions in their virtual worlds, I shun the real one, the one outside my door, my beloved North Allerwick, on the tempestuous Northumbrian shore, in the shadow of Lindisfarne.

Highly Commended: Footnote

Chris Jennings

I don't mind that he's made a success of his life - good luck to him I say - but just because he's famous, that doesn't change the fact that I didn't like him then, and I don't like him now.

I totally understand that right now I seem to be alone in that, but what people forget is that I'm one of those who knew Sean Baldwin before the fanfare kicked in. I managed to get a clear, unobstructed look at him and I was able to form my opinion through close observation rather than hype and hoopla.

'You really went to school with him?' people ask.

'Yes,' I say.

'What was he like?'

'Exactly the same as he is now: a prat.'

Wasn't it the Jesuits who said 'give me a boy and I'll show you the man'? Well obviously I'm not in touch with the man, but I knew the boy and nothing I've seen in his public career has given me any reason to think he's changed. The only difference is the PR machine and this talent he obviously has for massaging the media.

But when I think about it there were signs of string pulling even then. He doesn't mention it in his memoirs or interviews (maybe he's been advised not to) but the fact is he nearly got me and Lee Hamlin expelled. That was his very first publicity stunt, although he didn't manage to pull it off that time (not for want of trying I might add). But he was just a beginner then, cutting his teeth, road testing his act.

Admittedly he was good at playing the victim, but what he didn't count on is that Dr. Hoffman knew my father and had watched me grow up. Hoffman knew what type of lad I was, and he wasn't about to wreck his friendship with Dad and sling me out of the school on the word of the new boy.

Plus Lee and I were the most popular boys around, I was football captain, voted Head Prefect, we brought honour to the school, all that. So why I ask you, if we were so terrible, why did all the other boys at the school think we were great? Why was it only Baldwin who had the problem?

But still, the accusations were made in a convincing enough way to get us suspended, so Baldwin did score a minor victory of sorts. Maybe that's what sent him on the road to success, he'd got the whiff of triumph in his nostrils, so he wanted to go one better the next time.

What Lee and I did to Baldwin was nothing more than happened (and still happens I bet) in hundreds of schools up and down the country. Good natured ribbing, nicknames for the new boy, that kind of stuff. Sometimes it went a bit far maybe, got a bit personal at times, but it was never all that violent, and hell we were kids, kids play rough – that's what they do.

The simple fact is that when you're that age you're more honest. If you don't like someone you say so, most often to their face, and likewise if someone's picking on you, you either belt them one or if you can't hack it you just stay out of their way.

But Baldwin was a whiner rather than a fighter, and he wouldn't stay out of our way. He wasn't the only one we made fun of by any means, but he was the only one of them who was thin skinned enough to take it seriously. No one else got upset, everyone else took it on the chin, gave us as good as they got, only he felt the need to tell on us.

It was all obviously just a playground joke, but every time we started to kid around on him he'd go squealing to the teachers, pointing his finger, blah blah blah, just because he wasn't man enough to deal with it himself. Is it any wonder we didn't stop?

When I knew him Baldwin was so precious about himself, so earnest and quick to play the victim. Forget the speeches, those are written for him by someone else, if you want my opinion the guy doesn't have a sense of humour. Frankly I think we were well within our rights to get pissed off with him from time to time.

And you can't tell me he hasn't reaped the benefits of that. I'm willing to bet anything he'd deny it, but the fact is we did him a favour back then. Because I don't care who you are, if you go into public life you're gonna have to take some knocks, you're gonna have to fight your way through, you can't just cry about it and expect the world to realign itself to your ambition just because you want it to.

Take me, all that grief I went through with the divorces, the drinking, the drugs and the redundancy. But I don't whine, you won't find me crying about all that crap to some therapist. No, I work my way through it because I've learned that to get on you have to

be tough. Anyone or anything gets in your way, you knock them down and keep on going.

That's why I believe that when we gave Baldwin those beltings we gave him his first lesson in public life. Of course we won't ever get the credit for it, and I'm not going to pretend that we were acting out of social conscience, but ultimately that's what it was.

It really makes me laugh seeing all these 'friends' of his being interviewed, telling us what a great guy he is, half of them hardly know him, but they act like they had this amazing insight because they were able to spot his genius before anyone else, before the media turned him into a so called 'renaissance man.' All that 'I'm proud to have played a small part' bullshit.

I was there at the beginning, I saw him as he really was - a spoilt, attention seeking whiner - and in those couple of years I did more for him than all those journalists, spin doctors and hangers-on put together.

One day he's going to get found out and then you'll see what I mean. All those idiots falling over themselves to praise him now, they'll be the first ones to light the pyre, you mark my words. 'I always knew there was something,' they'll say. And maybe some of them will be telling the truth, but I spotted it first. Until then, while his star gets brighter and brighter, I still have my consolation.

There was a time Sean Baldwin was scared of me, and I gave him the greatest gift he ever got.

I gave him a reason to fight.

Extract from 'Sean Baldwin: A Biography' by Benjamin Tennant:

'...but his natural ability could, on occasion, inspire resentment amongst fellow pupils. As Dr Gerald Hoffman, Headmaster of St. George's, puts it: "There was a minor altercation with a couple of other students¹, but Baldwin never let it derail his academic achievements..."'

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637pp. Publ. 1996 (Waverley Press)

¹ James Rushmore and Lee Hamlin

Highly Commended: Flocking Fame

Kate Hughes

The most famous sentries in the world paced the outer walls of the Tower with the intense precision of trained armed guards. Their black coats shone in the late spring sunshine as tourists snapped pictures. Maurice passed Tabatha on his way towards the grand drawbridge and winked. The others had warned him against this, but he paid little heed to the MeToo movement. He had known Tabby for years and their flirty banter was fondly accepted by all the staff including her.

He had worked at the Tower of London his whole life, as had most of the ravens. There was no contract of employment, but they were held in the highest regard by the Corporation of the City of London, and he was glad to do his duty for King and Country. The Crown Jewels had never been talked about so much his whole career. The forthcoming Coronation of King Charles III had meant that security had been ramped up several notches, and three Beefeaters had already gone off sick since the Queen died. Yes, they may have more impressive uniforms and paid leave, but everyone knew who ruled this roost. And they had feathers.

However, it wasn't the Coronation that was the subject of the backyard gossip. It was the commemorative stamp collection that was going to exclusively feature the ravens, and boy, they were excited! The starlings nesting on the South Wall had coordinated a cheerleading squad especially to pledge their support, and a pair of African Greys were flying over just to watch the photoshoot.

Maurice's seniority meant that he felt responsible for getting the team ready to be photographed, thus securing their part in postage history forever. The stamps were never going to be an unquestionable authority of the bird's clout when it came to security and PR, but it was a good move in the right direction and reputation was key. Maurice's forebears had had their beaks put out of joint centuries ago after the debacle with Anne Boleyn's beheading, and Maurice wanted to help make amends for that.

That was a messy tale involving the theft of eyeballs resulting in twenty-four ravens gracing the pastry cases of King Henry VIII's chef's pies and was still the cause of bad blood among the royal swan community. In Maurice's opinion this was a case of sour grapes on the swan's behalf, but the Square Mile was a small world and the proverbial mud stuck to feathers just like tar once had. Now the ravens really would

rule the roost again and be adorning international correspondence whilst they were at it. It was important to Maurice that they got this right.

It was not helping matters that the younger generation of ravens wanted to have a social life. Working Time Regulations now meant that sentry duty wasn't a 24/7 affair as it once had been, and birds of Maurice's ilk struggled to get their heads around having so much free time. Often the older crew would be available for tourist photos long after they could have retired to their quarters. Some of them had formed a union and meetings ran late into the night, others were members of Ravens Revisited: a working group for those who wished to trace back their ancestry.

But the kids had their own ideas. Betty's son Lance had his own Instagram page which a homeless man in the park ran for him. When Lance was not on patrol he'd go and sit in the park and the double act would delight the passers-by, coining in a pretty penny with the man's contactless machine. Mary's twins regularly visited a nail salon and more than once had come back with bejazzled beaks. Mary had hit the rafters the first time this happened, and the family still weren't on full speaking terms. Maurice knew that countless others were regulars at the London Eye and had acquired a taste for chips and miniature doughnuts. Last month Lilly had ridden the entire loop of the Circle line before British Transport Police had brought her home. She had been singing Auld Lang Syne (it was the Easter break) because she'd stolen a can of Special Brew before boarding and had been so drunk, she had vomited on her claws.

Sometimes Maurice despaired. It was as if their fame and reputation meant nothing. Or maybe the fame had gone to their heads? It was harder and harder to call order. He needed to impress upon them that they were going to be world centre stage for the Coronation when all eyes would be on London. Then they would be international postage icons and needed to be on top form for the photoshoot and subsequent press coverage.

Maurice slept fitfully the night before the Coronation dress rehearsal, his wings getting tangled up with his bad dreams as he tossed and turned. He had no idea what time it was when Tabby was at his side, shaking him awake urgently.

'The outer wall! An attack! The Cullinan diamonds!'

She was hopping furiously from foot to foot, screeching so loudly Maurice could barely understand what she was saying. All he knew was that the largest diamond in

the collection had been removed from the sceptre for cleaning, and this was why security was at an all-time high. But how on earth could that have been breached? Now upright, his feathers bent in all directions, he rummaged for his pocket watch. 3am! He struggled up the ramp, and as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he heard an almighty flapping of wings. 'What on earth...?'

The sky was teeming with birds, a living canopy undulating overhead. Birds of all shapes and sizes flapping furiously, engulfing the Tower in a plumed frenzy. Then he caught sight of Lance and Lucy directing the air traffic from the westerly parapets. And on the other side of the courtyard Lilly and the twins were consulting a great horned owl who appeared to be wearing hi-vis.

Maurice rubbed his eyes and dreaded to think what was at the bottom of this ornithological nightmare. Eventually the sound of the birds began to subside, and Lance approached him, out of breath, eyes gleaming.

'Don't worry Maurice, we headed them off at the pass!'

'Who?' Maurice demanded, trying to calculate how long they might have to make good an escape once the City caught wind of the mayhem. He could feel panic setting in. What would great grandfather Gideon make of this?

But Lance forged on, explaining how they'd heard rumblings on the Birdvine of a planned magpie attack. The magpies coveted their gleaming treasures and always had done. But an actual attack? Unheard of.

Later in the back yard, after Maurice had knocked back a double shot of Bird World Feather Shine and had had a chance to smooth his feathers, Lance described how the magpies had received top secret information about the location of the sceptre from the African Greys who had indeed flown to London but not for any photoshoot. They wanted to assert original ownership of the South African gems and had called on the local birds to do their dirty work for them. The magpies, at the very prospect of being so close to the biggest and shiniest diamond in the world had naturally wanted to be part of the action. It transpired that Lance had more than one Instagram account and had been able to infiltrate their plans and make a few of his own. It was only due to his quick thinking and flawless organisational skills that the plot had been interrupted and just in the nick of time too.

As Maurice learned how hard the youngsters had worked to foil what had to be the biggest feathered heist in history, his chest swelled with pride. Tabby held his wing in

hers as she delivered the crowning glory of it all: the group who had come to the rescue when it was needed most? The royal swans!

Maurice saw the long-necked rivals peering over the wall, and nodded for them to come in. Soon, the back yard was filled with friends, and three cheers went up for Lance and his gang. The modern era of avian protective agents was here, and his successors were the most innovative and dedicated he could ever hope for. He just hoped that they could handle the fame.

City Chronicle

African Greys delight crowds

A pair of African Grey parrots, thought to have defied the Saharan slipstream by migrating from Durban to London have been captured and rehomed at London Zoo. The birds, found causing disruption at the top of the Shard, were deemed a public health hazard by officials at

London City airport. There is no current plan to return the pair to South Africa, who will remain a feature of the children's petting section in the Zoo's new birdhouse which opened last week, two years late and £1.2m over budget.

Commended: What She Would Have Wanted

Edward Barnfield

There's none of the atmosphere you'd expect backstage. No circle of backing singers saying last-minute prayers for their performance, no roadies making frantic adjustments to broken fender straps. Instead, there's a faint electronic hum and the flash of random diodes, an odd sensation that reminds Danny of hospitals and breathing machines.

The audience, though. The audience is loud. There's a kind of feral intensity to the atmosphere that he hadn't anticipated, a froth of people heaving and straining at the safety barriers. Some of the younger women have dressed like their idol, with sharp slashes of eye liner and wild bundles of hair. He watches them writhe on the overhead monitor.

Danny has been working with the production company for nine months for this event. It feels impossible that they're here now, ready to unleash the combined labour of hundreds of modellers, animators, riggers and engineers in a whooshing flood of creativity.

"Everything good?" asks Brandt.

Brandt is the head of the talent management agency that pulled this performance together. A bundle of overconfidence squeezed into a purple suit, Brandt has kept the squabbling factions aligned long enough to make it all happen, even when the costs kept rising and the technology kept failing. There's a line of sweat trickling down Brandt's temple, the first sign of nervousness that Danny has ever seen from the man.

"All good. The technical rehearsal went well."

The production crew are in position. Brandt gives Danny a long final look before heading back to the VIP area, to flatter and cajole the investors, the record executives, the assembled entertainment media who have all convened for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"Running in five," says a voice in Danny's earpiece. "Dimming the house lights."

"Chloe! Chloe! Chloe! Chloe!" The crowd responds to the new gloom with chanting, feet stamping, room shaking. Half of them were likely still in school the last time Chloe Ampersand performed.

In truth, Danny never really liked or listened to Chloe's music before this job. Even at the height of her fame, when her voice bloomed from every radio station and shop

doorway, she was just another soundtrack to him, another syncopated beat to sell products to. The production crew is full of earnest young people who own every album, who can't wait to tell you the impact she had on them, but Danny always felt nothing. It's only here, listening to the roar from beyond the curtain, that he finally understands her talent. The raw power of anticipation.

"Everyone in positions, please," says an earpiece voice. "Starting the initial animation." Danny flexes his fingers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome back to the stage for the first time in five years, Ms. Chloe Ampersand."

He watches her stride out onto the stage. Like most celebrities, she's smaller than he'd imagined, but carries herself with tremendous confidence.

"Allo. My name's Chloe. Thank you for coming to see me."

The crowd roars back in one big, long scream. Danny can see front-row faces transfixed and crying. Hologram concerts are nothing new, of course – there have been four or five at this venue in the past year alone – but tonight's performance is of a whole different calibre. You can see some spectators squinting, trying to decode the illusion, but this version of Chloe is as real as their neighbour in the crowd.

"I'm not sure if you remember this one," she says, and the song starts – the one that everyone knows, ubiquitous at Gen Z weddings and funerals, part of a very specific soundtrack of a decade.

And along with the song, the voice. The voice is back. There is pain in each note, the haunted quality beloved by critics, but also joy. Most importantly, it is real, nothing synthesised or autotuned about it. It is epiphanic, transformative. Floating in a most peculiar way.

"Let's see what she can do," Danny whispers, and punches a button to start the advanced performance programme.

Tonight is billed as a hologram tribute, but it's much more than that. It's a display of next generation technology, with the illusion on stage governed by computers.

Bespoke artificial intelligence deploys a bank of pre-recorded footage to power the performance, accessing the history of her life, her mannerisms, her idiolect, so that Deepfake projection can change her expression to match the moment. What they have is a perfect simulacrum of the singer. Better, in Danny's opinion, than the real thing.

He touches a keypad, and Chloe swirls on her heels, the tempo of the music changing, accelerating. The crowd howls appreciatively.

“Do you know this one, do ya?” she says as she launches into her next hit.

Danny’s programme is enabling the singer to include some jazz improvisation into her performance, reaching notes she’d never manage in the studio. The large language model they have in place enables the virtual Chloe to speak to the crowd in any one of a hundred languages. It is also capable of writing original songs, so the plan is to use these concerts as the springboard for the release of a run of new albums, one after the other, until nobody knows where the ‘real’ Chloe’s oeuvre ends, and her avatar’s begins.

And so, everyone gets what they want. The crowd gets to see their idol, always on-time, always engaged, never bored by the back catalogue. The media gets its content, the shows, in every territory and every venue equipped with the projection technology. And men like Brandt get to strut about backstage, finally working with an artist that they can completely control. Right here, right now, the future of music is taking shape.

It’s just a shame Chloe Ampersand doesn’t get to see it. She died, of course, some five years back, an ischemic stroke cutting short her career during her second sell-out tour of America. People felt bad for a while, wondering if the weight of their expectations played a part in the untreated eating disorder and desperate loneliness that killed her. Over time, however, they rationalised and began to wonder if there was some way to get the show back on the road, to keep the party going.

Technology was improving and the time, and so much had been invested in Chloe’s career and public profile, that-

Something’s wrong. Danny looks at the overhead monitor. The music has stopped suddenly, silence like a slap bringing everything to a halt.

“What’s happening? What’s happening?” Multiple voices through the earpiece, confusion across the production team. He looks down at the numbers on his interface, lines of code congealing like blood.

The hologram of Chloe Ampersand is moving forwards slowly, glitching slightly, a wobble on the wider frame, possibly caused by some lag on the network.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

She cannot exist beyond the projector’s range. She keeps raising a hand that disappears at the wrist when it goes outside the field. Her legs are beginning to

buckle, her tiny frame appearing to hold itself up on a computer-generated microphone stand.

“Please,” she says. “Please let me go.”

Brandt is with him, his face flushed to match his suit.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know,” says Danny. “Doesn’t seem to be a malfunction. It’s like the AI is stopping the performance, changing the script.”

“That’s impossible,” splutters Brandt.

And yet the figure on stage is taking off her animated earrings, kicking off the obscenely high heels that were added at the record company’s request.

“Get her back, get her back,” Brandt squeals, but the image is beginning to fade, the backdrop showing through the singer’s suddenly wraithlike body.

The crowd is split, some of them silent, forgiving, wondering perhaps about their own complicity, but the people in the front row are beginning to boo and swear, angry about the money they spent on tickets to this digital resurrection. In his peripheral vision, Danny can see furious men in suits move from the VIP area towards him, the backstage noise rising, and the production manager running up, panic on his face. But Chloe Ampersand’s performance is over for the night. Possibly forever. He can see her resignation in the lines of code before him. The experience of a lifetime is done before it ever had the chance to get started, and all they are left with is a ghost in the machine.

Highly Commended: Sunflowers

Lucy Fielding

“Arson, then?”

“Perhaps.”

“Crap.”

DS Kevin Bell stamped his feet in the soot and inspected the fragments of glass and rags dangling from the fire investigator’s pencil. It was a minor miracle, finding any evidence at all amongst the acres of burned and blackened stems. Fierce shards glistened in the summer sun like glass on a sniper’s scope.

“We can analyse this, but we won’t get much,” said the investigator. “A partial print, maybe. Some chemistry.”

“Hmm.”

“Best ask around, see if anyone saw anything?”

“Good idea,” said DS Bell. “I’ll write that down, shall I?”

“We’ll send over any results.”

“Fine.”

Bell picked his way back across the incinerated earth and crab-stepped through a gap in the hedge. The constable was waiting by the car. Her name was Constable Kim Karen, and she drove like Indiana Jones on steroids. Karen raised a querying eyebrow.

“Well?” she asked.

“Molotov cocktail, looks like.”

“Jesus.”

“We’ll need to look for witnesses.”

“Who burns down sunflowers?” Karen shook her head. “They’re *sunflowers*.”

“Probably kids messing around.”

“*Jesus*.”

Karen marched around the car and grabbed the door but Bell held up a hand. “Let’s walk, shall we?” he said. “Could use the exercise.”

“I’ll have to move the car.” Their all-electric neon monstrosity was parked at a clumsy angle on the verge with the casual arrogance of a BMW. While Karen repositioned, Bell flicked through the meagre strands of information that had been sent from the station.

One resident – Marjorie Poole – had been calling once a week since June to report anti-social behaviour, trespassing, and theft. She lived across the road, and was apparently one of those people who used their front window as a substitute television. Promising.

The woman who answered the moss-green door was in her eighties, and was still tall enough to look DS Bell in the eye through a pair of thin-rimmed gold glasses. Her short, wavy hair was a palette of greys from threads of silver to streaks of slate. She wore a dress of dark blue linen, set off starkly by a bright chunky necklace and matching earrings in garish shades of red and coral that screamed ‘healing crystals’. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Well, you’d better come in then.”

Bell was nonplussed. Most people usually wanted to know why a police officer was standing on their doorstep. They wanted to check ID, reassure themselves that he was not a murderer wearing a costume from a shop. He was used to obstruction, suspicion, ‘come-back-with-a-warrant’-itis. Marjorie Poole was already halfway down the hall, completely uncurious, entirely murderable.

All right then.

“Mrs Poole,” he began, once they were seated at the kitchen table clutching mandatory mugs of tea.

“*Ms* Poole.”

“Sorry. *Ms* Poole. We’re here about the fire.”

“Oh. The fire?”

“Yes. At the sunflower farm.” In case she had a different inferno in mind.

Marjorie Poole sucked at her teeth. “Terrible thing. But bound to happen eventually, wasn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, all those visitors. Trampling about, smoking, picnics. No surprise there was an accident. Cigarette butt, was it? Disposable barbecue?”

DS Bell flicked a glance towards Constable Karen, who sat impassively, taking down notes.

“That’s certainly a possibility. We understand that you’ve reported several incidents over the past month, and there’s a chance that the fire was started deliberately. In which case, you may have seen something. It would have been last Friday, between 9pm and 11pm.”

“Deliberately? But that’s *awful*. I have no idea who would do something like that! I’m sorry, but I didn’t see anything. I was asleep.”

“No noise, nothing that woke you up – a car engine, maybe a loud group of kids?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Okay. Can I ask about your previous complaints? It sounds like there’s a pattern of behaviour – trespass into the fields, noise, anti-social behaviour. The offenders haven’t been identified?”

“The offenders, detective, are different every time.” Marjorie Poole sat upright in her chair, in an attitude of affront. “Every weekend: cars parked on the verges, tourists trampling the wildflowers, pushing their way through gaps in the hedge to get into the farm because they don’t want to fork out five pounds to have their picture taken in the field from that movie. We are *overrun*. And I appreciate that our local police force is *finally* taking an interest in the matter.” She peered at him over the rims of her glasses, her finger pressed down on the tabletop, pushing a very old, very unhappy button in the pit of his stomach labelled Where Is Your Homework, Young Man.

“I see.”

This was a fruitless lead. The arsonists, unhelpfully, had struck at a time when nosey neighbours were in bed, and any hope that Ms Poole’s previous complaints could be linked to a group of reoffending youths was quashed. Youths did not typically sneak into sunflower fields to grab the perfect Instagram picture.

Next to him, Constable Karen cleared her throat.

“Have you considered moving house, ma’am?”

Oh my god, Karen, you maniac. Karen was a smart, dedicated officer with the people skills of a thrown brick. Her suggestion was a flaming torch flung into the dry grass that was Marjorie Poole.

“How *dare* you!” A furious hand thudded onto the kitchen table. “This has been my home for twenty years! Why should I be driven away just because him across the road decided to sell out to those movie people? *He’s* all right, charging a fortune for entry, raking it in. And what? The rest of us should put up with it, or leave?” She stood up, as sharply and aggressively as her eighty-something legs would allow.

“Follow me.”

“Ma’am?”

“I said *follow me!*”

The air in the room thickened to the consistency of treacle. Karen looked at Bell, pleadingly, but he decided to let her wade out of this one on her own. He trailed at a distance, mindful that fierce women in their eighties aren't always deterred by the life sentence imposed for killing a police officer.

They moved to the living room, where Marjorie Poole did not reach for a poker and then did not attempt to spear Constable Karen in the eye. Bell relaxed. And then stood back in astonishment.

The room was a riot of sunflowers. It was like Van Gogh had thrown up on the walls. Paintings – rich in colour, glowing with the heat of the Norfolk summer – covered every vertical surface. This space was a study in saffron yellows, cool aqua and deep, dark forest greens. A homage. No – it was worship, the same reverence that set stained glass into cathedral windows.

Marjorie Poole was never going to move house.

“I am a painter, Constable. I bought this house for the sunflowers. *Before* they were famous. I wanted a quiet place to paint. I didn't bring all those people here, but now that they are here, I don't think it's too much to ask that they respect this place. Do you?”

Karen stayed silent. Bell let the discomfort soak into her skin before stepping in.

“Ms Poole, thank you for your help. We'll be in touch if we have further questions. Best of luck with your painting.”

As the front door closed behind them, Karen pointed towards the smouldering field.

“She wasn't kidding, sir.”

A car had wedged itself next to the hedge and a young woman was standing on the roof, taking a selfie in front of the burned husks of Britain's most famous sunflowers.

“Let's go, Karen.”

They strolled down the road, towards the next house.

“Nobody followed up on her complaints, sir.”

“Priorities, Karen. We don't have the officers to patrol miles of rural hedgerow.”

“What about the landowner?”

“He hasn't broken any laws. Tourism's good for the village. Footfall. Shops.”

“She just wanted to paint sunflowers.”

“I know.”

The same story echoed down the rows of neighbouring houses, leapt from door to door like flame. *No, we didn't see anything. No, we didn't hear anything. It was*

probably the tourists. If you'd done your job properly, this wouldn't have happened.

Everyone wanted to talk about parking. Nobody wanted to talk about fire.

With no witnesses and no leads – because it's a leap from inconsiderate parking to aggravated arson – the investigation was left adrift. The national media swarmed like hyenas picking apart a corpse, demanding justice for their national treasure. News vans sprouted along the verges like wildflowers. Complaints about parking tripled.

"It's not much."

Bell leafed through the fire investigation report.

"What did they find?" Karen asked.

"No prints. Chemical analysis of the glass and rags came back as turpentine.

Definitely arson."

"Turpentine? Sir..."

"I know, Karen. Let's go."

Marjorie Poole opened the door, swathed in spattered overalls. Saffron yellow, aqua, forest green.

"Turpentine, Ms Poole."

"What?"

"You made a Molotov cocktail with turpentine, Ms Poole. You destroyed the sunflowers."

She trembled for a moment, like leaves in the wind, then drew herself up, staring Bell in the eye.

"They were destroyed a long time ago, detective."

Commended: The Phone Call

Catherine Mehta

'So what do you think, should I do it for a laugh?' I ask my best friend, as we lie on the floor of her bedroom listening to Green Day.

I'd heard a shout out on Capital FM for demo tapes. A pop band was being put together and for some reason I was actually thinking about applying. I'd never make the cut, obviously. For one, I didn't look the part - a tall, 16 year old awkward-looking brunette with zero stage school experience. Two, I didn't bounce around with endless energy like those bands on Top of the Pops. Three, I was definitely no Whitney. Four - I wasn't exactly known for my dance moves. And five - I'm petrified of performing.

'Why not? What have you got to lose?' Rachel mumbles, shoving another Maltheser into her mouth.

Yeah - what did I have to lose? I went home and headed to my bedroom. The cassette made that reassuring clunk as I shut the front of my HiFi and pressed play. I closed my eyes and started to sing.

I had to let Dad in on my secret - I needed his help to take some shots. I practised the song over and over, annoying everyone in the house. And before I knew it, I'd popped the package in the post box and forgotten about it.

Months went by. Rachel sworn to secrecy hadn't told a soul. I was in the middle of my piano practise, taking out the day's stresses with some Rachmaninoff. I could hear the phone ring in the distance. Suddenly, Dad poked his head round the door and said I had a call.

'Hullo?'

'Is that Laura? It's John from Jamming Productions. I just wanted to give you a call and let you know that you're down to the final ten,' said a voice.

'Sorry? The final ten?' I say, barely able to grip the handset. My head starting to fizz.

'Yes - we'll be in touch. Goodbye.'

My hands and feet were tingling. This type of thing didn't happen to me. Perhaps only 10 people had sent in demo tapes to a nationwide radio station. Maybe it was a prank call.

The next day, I saw Rachel in the corridor.

'Do you remember that singing competition?' I asked.

'Erm, yes,' she said, slightly preoccupied as she looked over my shoulder at a group coming towards us.

'They called me. I'm down to the final ten,' I felt slightly sick saying it out loud.

'OH MY GOD. That's amazing! You're going to be on SMTV!' she squealed, grabbing my hands and jumping up and down.

'Shhh! This is our secret,' I beg.

The last thing I needed was the whole school hearing about it.

It took precisely two lessons. As I dumped my rucksack on the floor by the leg of the desk and slumped in my chair for French, I felt a prod on my back.

'Psst.'

'I didn't know you could sing.'

'If you're so good at singing why aren't you in the upper choir then?'

I shrugged, forcing myself to look ahead at the board, feeling myself getting hotter and hotter. A trickle of sweat ran down my back.

After that, it snowballed - everyone seemed to know who I was, even the cool girls. The greetings echoed down the corridors. I started to receive invitations to things that were normally out of my league. I was no longer relegated to the shadows. I suddenly became a somebody.

The thumping beat, the darkness, the sticky dance floor. Arms in the air, pretending to be cool whilst dripping with sweat. Rachel pulls a face and melts away. A body pressing up close, matching the rhythm. Finding my face. Ears thrumming, lost in the tune. Hold on. How on earth am I snogging Matthew Roberts, the heart-throb in the year above from the boys school? I'm not too sure what's going on but judging from

the nudges, others are finding this pairing equally peculiar. I don't even fancy him that much. Oh god. We've just kissed in front of everyone. His hand finds mine and he pulls me away from the throng. A pen is found, a phone number scribbled on a receipt. Claire's mum waiting outside, The Love Zone gently crooning away on the radio as I stare out of the window, watching the night lights, love struck with disbelief.

He rang. He actually rang. School has been a nightmare, dodging questions about that night. Mum yelled up the stairs that a boy was on the phone. And there he was. And now we're going to meet at the pub on Friday night - if I can get in. It's always a bit hit and miss with security.

I push my way through the smokey crowd, perfume and aftershave mingling with stale body odour, beer and coats that could do with a wash. Random people I don't know say hello - there's a ripple of anticipation in the air, but maybe I'm imagining it. I can see him looking a little awkward towards the back.

'Erm, hey.'

'Oh yeah, hi. I wasn't sure you'd come,' he says in his low, gravelly voice.

Really? Who on earth would stand him up?

'You're good - I'm here. Shall we grab a drink?' I say

We shove our way towards the bar. He throws a grin over his shoulder, growing in confidence, grabbing my hand. Hollering over the heads of disgruntled customers, he waves to a mate behind the bar, who fixes us with drinks on the house.

In the pub garden it's quieter, more intimate for a first date. We hold hands. We kiss. We awkwardly ask each other questions about school and rugby and common ground until he stops himself short, as though he's bored of the pretence.

'Anyway, look, have you heard yet?' he asks. 'Heard what?'

'About the band. Are you in?'

Of course. The penny drops. What a fool. This wasn't because we'd shared a moment. It had all been planned. He'd singled me out because I was the one who might be famous.

My ego got the better of me. I played along. People from school were analysing our every move - the pub might as well have trained a spotlight on us, like in a movie.

'Oh, right. Not yet,' I say, trying to sound nonchalant. 'Hopefully soon.'

I tried to carry on making conversation but the responses became shorter and shorter. I made my excuses and left, attempting to hold my head high whilst dying a little inside.

Oh, Rach. It was mortifying. I'm so embarrassed.' I whale down the phone to her the next day.

'It can't have been that bad. He's gorgeous,' she replies dreamily

'But how can I have been so stupid to think that he actually fancied me?' I continue, 'What an idiot.' I am now spiralling into despair. 'Oh God, Monday. I can't do it. I can't face school.'

'Don't be silly. Of course you can. It'll be fine,' She soothes

She was right. Monday was fine - the cool girls continued to acknowledge me, all the more so, trying to prise the tiniest of titbits out about the date. Apparently his kissing was more developed than his conversational skills.

He called a week later. As though that was normal. He wasn't to know that my heart had spasmed each time the phone had rung since our date, each time foolishly hoping it was him. He invited me to the pub to meet his mates.

But then the phone call came.

'I'm sorry - unfortunately you've not been picked. We'll be in touch if we need backing vocals. Keep playing the piano.'

I gently replace the receiver. Just like that, it was over. 'Never mind love,' said Dad popping the kettle on.

I hadn't realised how much I'd actually wanted to be picked. The disappointment hit me in waves. But then again, did I want to be surrounded by so much fake-ness? The last six weeks had been the strangest time of my life. Overnight, everyone seemed to know me. For the first time ever I'd been the popular kid at school.

Laughing and joking with everyone. Actually being invited to house parties, rather than tagging along as a mate of a mate.

But it was exhausting. Outwardly, I was just playing a part. I wasn't sure who people expected me to be. And because the majority hadn't ever bothered with me, I could be anyone.

It took precisely 24 hours to become old news at school. Brief commiserations were shared in passing. I never heard from Matthew again. The news had obviously made it to the boys school.

Unsurprisingly he didn't follow up his invite with the details, so I avoided the pub for a couple of weeks. He went back to dating the cool girls. We'd nod at one another, but nothing more. Too cool to be seen talking to someone like me.

The world had righted itself. Fame destined for someone else.

Commended: Fame in Eleven Words

Nigel Frankland

It was perfectly calm. Through the single small window Neil could see that it was a cloudless sky, with not even a trace of a breeze. The silence outside seemed deafening. Inside there was only a gentle whirring, the crackling of an annoying radio that seemed to be elsewhere, and the breathing of his companion.

Neil looked around him. There was only just enough room, but nowhere near the space of a 6ft by 8ft standard US prison cell intended for single-occupancy – and there were two of them confined together here, both awaiting what the future might hold for them. He had, of course, never seen the inside of a prison cell, as he had never been arrested, and never charged with any crime. But he had done his research, just to be on the safe side. He was proud of his attention to detail.

He debated in his mind how he might describe the other man - An associate? A member of his crew? A partner-in-crime? He was not quite sure.

Over the past few days, during the journey, Neil had been able to think a lot. He remembered a day when he was nine, and had been taken to the Ohio State Fair, where the fortune teller had told him that before he was forty he would be famous and his name would be recognised by millions of people, all around the world. Even at that age he knew that some people were famous, and some were infamous, and realized that these two states were much the same, one being famous for the right reasons and the other being famous for the wrong reasons. He had wondered which category he would be in.

He thought back over the past four days. They had come for him at 5 a.m. Three vehicles with blacked out windows. Just plain unmarked limousines. Three men came to the door, all in identical grey suits, each with a bulge under the left armpit, where the weapons were concealed. All in dark glasses, even though the sun had barely risen. All with close cropped hair. No uniforms today. No uniforms were needed. They greeted him by his nick-name - the Strong Arm Man.

Neil had known they were coming, and the reason they were taking him to The Facility, as he had impeccable sources of information. He gave his wife, and each of his children, a quick embrace and a kiss, not knowing if he would ever see them again. He walked peacefully, with no force being needed, to the waiting automobiles.

He knew that this was a momentous day. It had been a long time coming.

He travelled in the second vehicle of the convoy. Security was tight. All of the vehicles had now activated flashing blue lights, and the lead vehicle used a siren to clear a way through the little traffic that was on the streets in the early morning sunlight.

He could see in the sky the contrail of an airliner which he estimated to be at 40,000 feet, and he imagined the first-class passengers in their comfortable seats being waited on by air hostesses, each sitting back with a freshly poured drink and a meal on a tray. Then he remembered that he would not be travelling in style like that. Today it would be a very different form of transport.

He was processed at The Facility, and the procedure was much as he thought it would be. Here there were men in uniform. A lot of them. They exuded efficiency and authority. Some with clipboards, and some with walkie-talkies. There was a sense of urgency and excitement in the air, as if this was a day they had been anticipating for a long time. As if bringing him in was the culmination of weeks, months or even years of work by the whole team in The Facility.

Two other men were being processed at the same time. He knew them both – they were members of his crew. He gave them almost imperceptible nods of recognition.

They made him strip, and shower, and then he had to dress in Government issue clothing. It was the most uncomfortable garb he had ever worn. If it had been designed to make him very visible in a crowd they could not have done a better job.

Then the journey began. He had heard of Guantanamo Bay, but he realized that this journey was to a destination more hostile and more remote than that, a place where

even the long arm of the US justice system could not reach. When he was a nine-year-old he never contemplated that he would achieve fame like this.

Neil wondered how he would respond to fame, being in a situation where many more people than you know actually know you. Would he welcome being recognized in the street, or would he hate it. How would his wife respond, as surely some fame would rub-off onto her, and the same with his children. Would they ever be able to disown their father and return to anonymity?

He recalled a moment two years previously when he had been in the men's room at a hotel in Las Vegas, when a man had come to an adjacent stall. Neil had made eye contact, and realised that he was familiar with the face, very familiar. A smile of recognition formed on his lips and then froze when he realized he was face to face with the recent winner of an Oscar. This was Hollywood after all. The actor responded with a shrug, a withering glance, and a weak embarrassed grin which expressed his familiarity with the situation.

Thinking back, Neil was surprised how much he had been shaken by the first stage of the journey. He knew what was going to happen, but he was shaken nonetheless. He had felt that he was rapidly leaving his whole world behind, his home, his family, his roots in the Ohio, the Buckeye state, with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

He never could recall how he ended up doing what he did with his life. It certainly was not one of the career paths suggested by his school teachers. But then, who can remember the minute decisions that make one follow a particular course in life? He thought he had been lucky, as he enjoyed what he did, and he found it challenging, and strangely, quite a lot of fun. He was beginning to appreciate that even fun can end in disaster. He knew of several people in his line of business who had come to a sudden end.

They had told him at The Facility that he would have a chance to speak, and he would be heard by many influential people, but it would help if he could keep it short. Maybe a dozen words?

How can anyone say anything meaningful in a dozen words? How could a parson preach a sermon in a dozen words? How could a crook defend himself in just a dozen words?

He had thought of what he might say. He was reluctant to discuss it with his partner-in-crime as he knew that the place was bugged with microphones, and that everything he said was relayed to The Control Room where several people were always listening, and where everything was recorded. He knew all of this because his sources of information were impeccable.

Now they were here, at The Destination. A place where things were very different. A place that many people feared. A place that, it was said, had caused many cases of madness, and was the reason for some going to lunatic asylums in the past.

He knew the door would open, and he would not see anyone open it. And that is exactly what happened. The sun shone in, and he prepared to leave.

He had been told to be careful, and especially careful on the steps, as the situation here was very different to anything he had experienced in the past. He went slowly. Just one step at a time. Counting as he went. He knew he would speak his words while he was on the last step. It seemed most appropriate.

He was descending slowly, as there was no need to rush. Better safe than sorry. To be honest, he felt a bit light-headed, and maybe a bit light-footed as well. He had just one chance to do this, just one opportunity to say what he had to say.

He knew that he really had to concentrate. It was important that he got this right, and got it right first time as there was no chance of a repeat performance.

At the last step Neil, 16 days before his fortieth birthday, paused and, with over 500 million people listening, spoke just eleven words, as he placed one foot on the surface of the moon:

“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Commended: The Real Thing

Josie Turner

'Do you prefer me standing up?' asked Maudie. 'Or sitting down?'

'What would you normally do?'

Maudie frowned. She didn't know what she would normally do. It wasn't a normal situation, and therefore she couldn't behave naturally.

'If you were alone?'

Maudie tried to think what she did when she was alone. Nothing, really. Solitude made her feel invisible. She would probably surf the internet. She couldn't admit that to Angelica, who lived a different sort of life entirely. Angelica had a long entry in Wikipedia, detailing her honours and awards, her tumultuous affairs with aristocrats and film stars. She was not someone who watched cat videos on Twitter.

'I'd make a phone call, probably,' lied Maudie.

'Do that then. Sit by the phone.'

'Who should I call?'

'Anyone. No-one. Pretend.'

*

Angelica began work on the portrait. She glared at her subject through green eyes that penetrated like lasers. Maudie sat still in the changing light of the Institute's bay window, her thick ankles crossed until her circulation seemed to stop. Every afternoon a wedge of shadow crept over her lap until Angelica said 'Enough'. Then they would drink champagne together and wait for Angelica's driver to arrive.

Maudie always lingered in the great room after Angelica had left, as though she couldn't get enough of its wood panelling and the brass fittings of its wall lights. An ugly room, really, but a splendid space. The grandest Maudie had ever known.

When the cleaners arrived, trailing vacuum cleaners and black bin bags, they scowled at her until she vacated. They knew better than to touch the covered easel or any of the instruments Angelica left scattered over the smeared dust sheets.

'That's my portrait,' Maudie told one of the cleaners, one evening, as she lifted a corner of the dust sheet and peered at the primitive form on the canvas. The older woman snorted. Portrait, indeed! Maudie wasn't special. Monarchs and Archbishops had their portraits painted, not the likes of Maudie: just a plump middle-aged receptionist who had been selected, for some peculiar reason, as a subject. The cleaner suspected that all artists were weirdos, if not perverts.

Maudie thought of the form she'd glimpsed on the canvas as an embryo, unrecognisable as herself but already containing all the material required.

*

'I don't think I could have stood for all these hours,' admitted Maudie, weeks later.

'I do like a standing portrait, though,' said Angelica. 'Do you know Holbein's *Christina of Denmark*?'

'In the National, yes. I love it.'

'It's magnificent. Her soft face, her hands twisting those gloves... You know it was painted for –'

'Henry VIII, yes. Looking for a new bride.'

'She's still alive on that board, humming away. Imagine the match she and Henry would have made!'

Maudie wouldn't strike such a formidable figure. And yet her portrait would be admired for centuries, too, simply because it had been painted by Angelica.

Transmuted into paint, her soul would live on. Monographs would be written and tea towels printed. Students as yet unborn would pin posters to their walls – *Maudie, London, 2024*.

She travelled home by bus, inching through the evening streets.

'What's she like?' asked her friends.

They wanted to know if Angelica was 'nice', and by that they meant modest, unassuming. But secretly they wanted to hear the opposite – that Angelica was a tyrant, a monster.

'Does she actually speak to you?'

'Yes.'

'Telling you to shift around a bit, that sort of thing? Or real conversation?'

'Real conversation.'

The friends all jostled for Maudie's attention. Gifts appeared, with spoken or unspoken appeals to meet Angelica. When these appeals were not granted Maudie felt herself doubly despised – for being favoured in the first place, and then for keeping Angelica to herself. But the friends clung to Maudie and her newly-minted fame, because she was their link to an icon. The more they resented her, the harder they clung.

*

Angelica declined all commissions. She lived and worked among wild cats in a village in Puglia, retreating to the UK when the Southern summers became unendurable. Her wealth was said to be fathomless. She painted anything she wanted, even if that was an ordinary woman she'd spotted behind a desk – a small unassuming woman, an absolute nobody on the fringes of life who had immediately struck the painter as the most soulful, yearning person she'd ever seen.

One sweltering afternoon, the two women sipped iced lemonade as sunlight thronged the room. Heat drew a suffocating fragrance from the wood panelling. Maudie studied her portraitist, her eyes on the sloping shoulders and slab-like face that fame had rendered beautiful. Angelica wore a navy cotton smock, denim shorts and light black sandals. She fiddled with her spectacles to adjust their focal length, muttering with frustration at getting older. As more and more paint was applied to the canvas Maudie felt something of herself being extracted and conveyed elsewhere, as though she was being transferred across the room cell by cell. She felt lighter, less substantial. People asked if she'd lost weight.

'Have you changed your hair?' Angelica asked her.

'No. I haven't changed anything.'

Angelica lifted a dark curl and rolled it like silk between her calloused fingers. She gave a dissatisfied exhalation, then tucked the curl behind Maudie's ear.

'Something's different. Shampoo? I'd prefer you not to wash your hair at all. Sorry,' she chuckled. 'That's unreasonable...'

'I understand. Shapes – you're seeing me as a series of shapes.'

'No, not at all. The shape's irrelevant. That's not what I'm painting – or rather, I could have painted shapes in the first hour.' Exasperated, Angelica twisted her hands in a gesture that reminded Maudie – although she didn't mention it – of Christina. 'I can never spit out what I mean. I don't know what I mean. Ready to try again?'

Angelica turned back to the canvas as though facing a difficult obligation. Her materials lay spread across the parquet floor, almost reaching the ornate chair where Maudie sat. The scene looked forlorn and rather pathetic.

'I hate this part,' muttered Angelica. 'The middle. Failure.'

Quietly, they resumed their positions.

*

When Maudie saw the completed portrait, at the final sitting in the panelled room, it shocked her. She flinched away from it.

'I don't want you to like it,' Angelica said. 'It's not supposed to flatter you.'

'Am I so terrible?'

'No.' The figure rising from the canvas was restless, glittering with vitality and a sort of suppressed rage, as though she'd been released from long confinement. 'You're just seeing your real self. Very few people ever do that.'

'She's – she's alive. How did you do it?'

Angelica gave Maudie a quick chiding pat on the arm.

'I only had to look at you.'

*

Hundreds of people attended the portrait's unveiling. The crowd was so dense and rowdy that Maudie, standing alone at the back of the gallery, could barely glimpse her own image.

Studded with diamonds, Angelica wore a golden gown which sparkled under flashbulbs. She stood roped off from the crowd like the painting itself. Guests looked between her and the canvas and back again, drinking in her mythic stature.

Maudie had feared to bring anyone along. She didn't want to seem big-headed.

'Who might you be?' a man asked Maudie.

She introduced herself, but he responded without interest and drifted away. Maudie might as well have said she was Angelica's paintbrush, Angelica's cleaning rag, although even those would one day be cherished and curated by galleries all over the world.

I am the subject, Maudie wanted to say – the real thing.

She stood on tiptoe to see across the sleek heads. The crowd boomed and pressed towards Angelica, who greeted each supplicant with a smile, like a goddess dishing out blessings. But she's a devouring goddess, thought Maudie – she'll take all you have, and keep it for herself.

'Are you – excuse me – is that you?' a woman asked, indicating the portrait.

'Yes. I'm Maudie.'

'Good heavens. I can't quite believe it. Actually to be talking to you.'

The woman laughed and hiccupped. She put her hand over her mouth with embarrassment.

'Excuse me! I'm a bit starstruck. Just a minute, I must tell my husband. Gerry, look - over here!' She pointed towards Maudie, and others began to turn and smile in her direction. 'It's really her!'

The room's centre of gravity shifted. With rustles of velvet and linen, guests leaned towards her as though they were flowers and she was the noonday sun. They watched her with expressions of awe and expectancy. The man who had dismissed her wriggled back into her eyeline, his head slightly to one side, as though inviting her to recognise his special claim upon her notice.

'It's like meeting the Mona Lisa,' someone exclaimed, and everyone laughed at the truth of the statement.

Over in the distance, Angelica smiled.

But I'm nobody, thought Maudie - I'm really nobody at all. And now I'm famous forever.

Commended: Cryptic Clues

Seona McKinnon

“Lo, the otter goes back to school.”

Eleanor Anderson completed the last clue. Loretto. Glancing at her watch she noted that she had taken fifteen minutes to finish and that it was nearing the lunchtime news programme. She switched on the radio and skimmed through the unread pages of the newspaper. Then she laughed out loud. There under Today’s Birthdays was her name, Professor Eleanor Anderson, transplant surgeon, 75. She found it highly amusing that she had been reminded of her own birthday by The Times. As a rule she ignored it, in the same energetic manner that she tried to ignore all signs of aging. Thrice weekly golf games and long walks kept her sparse frame in good shape, though now she found walking less of a pleasure without a dog for company.

She missed her dogs, and most of all she missed Sam. He had been an integral part of both her personal life and her professional success. Eleanor let her gaze hover over the bronze sculpture which dominated her sitting-room, and smiled gently.

Her reverie was sharply interrupted.

“We have just learned of the death of Paul Hayton in a bizarre accident. He was inaugurating a new roller coaster at the Blackpool fun fair when the carriage came off, flew fifty yards through the air and plummeted to the ground killing all the occupants. Paul Hayton was the presenter of many popular radio and television programmes, including Hayton’s Hour, Paul’s Prejudices and Birthday Brain. He was sixty-five.”

Paul Hayton. Birthday Brain. Eleanor knew it had been a mistake to appear on that programme. Sam had died two days before the recording and although it was not unexpected he was quite old, the canine equivalent of seventy seven, she felt emotionally bereft. She had been surprised at how much the autopsy had upset and drained her. Feeling tired and lacking in concentration she had not coped well with Paul Hayton’s arrogant, aggressive style of interview. However she had denied him

the pleasure of reducing her to tears. Fortunately he had made a mistake, and not attacked her on the vulnerable area of her life. He only thought he had. But he hadn't even mentioned her dogs, or Sam. She had not liked Paul. She still could recall every intonation of his over modulated voice and every word of his interview.

Paul had interrupted the mood music, his choice not hers. He had overridden his guest's prerogative of choosing the introductory piece and replaced it with a ballad, banal in its musical repetition, and even worse in its lyrical quality. Debussy's Clair de Lune had been replaced with Memories are Made of This. When she had heard his first words she understood why.

"More magical memories for today's Birthday Brain guest, Professor Eleanor Anderson, this year's winner of the Schweitzer International Prize for medical research. Now then Eleanor, you were obviously a potential star from day one weren't you?"

Her reply had been nervous and hesitant, "No, not really. I"

"Don't be so modest now. You have won a veritable clutch of prizes, The Burgess Gold Medal, The Inskip Scholarship, The McTaggart Prize (never before awarded to a woman) and indeed," he sneered, "the gold star for sewing at Falkirk Infants School."

Eleanor had ignored the insult.

"It's all a long time ago"

"Maybe, but you'd be surprised at how many of our BB listeners are interested in our BB guest's memories. You decided to make your career in surgery. With so many options open to you as top student of your year, what made you choose that branch of the profession?"

"Oh, I think it must have been all those gold stars for sewing."

Paul had not liked the joke, he had given a small professional laugh, but his eyes had narrowed.

“You then followed up your studies with work as a transplant surgeon in Canada, the USA, Eastern Europe and the Far East. A lot of moving around Eleanor, were you not merely just trying to find the best price?”

She had heard him ask the same question of a soccer manager in the previous week’s programme, so she dealt with it crisply and concisely.

“No, not at all. It was a valuable experience in good surgical units.”

“Well then, did successful surgeon equal successful sex life? Lots of boyfriends Eleanor? What about them? Mmmmm? What about them?”

“Well yes, lots of friends, lots of male friends, but not really in the boyfriend sense of the word.”

Paul’s feigned astonishment made Eleanor want to hit him across his smug smiling face, hit him hard.

“So you mean to say you sacrificed a swinging sixties lifestyle for sober surgery?”

“Perhaps.”

“Or did your academic and professional success make you a social failure? The girl who was always the wallflower at parties. In short Eleanor, were you the kind of woman men only associate with to improve their status, their professional status, I mean.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“But someone wasn’t intimidated. You did marry ... eventually.”

Paul’s pause had the effect of making an innocent sentence seem to be in doubtful taste.

“Oh yes I married Roger Wilton, a dentist.”

“Was it a happy marriage?”

Eleanor remembered leaning forward to allow her hair to cover the scars on the right hand side of her face.

“I suppose you could say that it was.”

In fact the marriage had been a disaster.

Roger Wilton was only interested in Roger Wilton. He had married Eleanor to work through the substantial inheritance her French mother had left her, and had done so very efficiently.

Eleanor had not only brought her mother's fortune to the marriage, she had also inherited her cooking ability, and her ferocious temper.

It had all come to a head on the evening of her 30th birthday. Roger had suggested that they celebrate at the weekend, and she was making a coq au vin for the party when he had arrived home.

"Happy Birthday Eleanor."

"It's nearly over now."

"I know. I'm sorry. I forgot." He proffered the bunch of fading flowers and a box of chocolates in compensation.

She had not replied.

"What are you making?"

"Coq au vin for the weekend."

"Good, it's never best on the first night is it? Mind you, with your cooking it's never best on the second, third or fourth nights either." Roger laughed and Eleanor realised that he had been drinking, drinking heavily. He continued to laugh as he watched her dissect the chicken and chop the mushrooms in her precise meticulous manner.

"For a super surgeon your chicken-chopping technique seems to be somewhat lacking. Here, let me help you," he added jovially as he held out his hand for the knife.

Not only the temper but her mother's culinary skills were deeply engrained in the daughter.

"No Roger, you don't have to impress me, I'm not a nurse, a patient or even a colleague."

“I don’t know why I bothered going out of my way to come home. I’m going to be late for my meeting.”

“But it’s my birthday.”

“I know, I’m sorry. But this committee meeting is very important. Professionally.”

“Liar.”

“What?”

“I said liar. I’m not stupid.”

“For a person with a good brain, you are extraordinarily thick. Like your ankles,” he added gratuitously. “You are inadequate, paranoid and possessive. What man in his right mind would ever want you. I’m off.”

He left, kicking Sam out of the way as he went. Sam, the poor delicate puppy that Eleanor had reared with care and devotion, the puppy with the delicate heart whose medical problems she was trying to solve.

Paul Hayton’s voice was incisive.

“However in a life of seemingly total success, you too have faced tragedy. On the eve of your Schweitzer prize-winning breakthrough, Roger, your adored and adoring husband, left you.”

Like an actress in a long run the lines were automatically in place for Eleanor.

“It wasn’t quite like that. Roger just disappeared. He went on a trip and didn’t return.”

“And there has been no trace of him?”

“No, over the years there have been sightings in Bali, South America, Australia, but they were all false, unfortunately.”

“One final point Professor. It has been suggested that your experimental research was not entirely original, after all Christiaan Barnard had performed heart transplants in South Africa in the preceding years.”

“Transplants yes, from human to human, animal to human, but not the reverse human to animal. I was the first to see the potential of replacing the animal heart with that of a human. This procedure has given the animal in question, a dog for example, a much longer life potential. Indeed, it would be”

And there Paul Hayton cut her off to tell his listeners of the next week’s Birthday Brain guest.

Now, he too was dead. Of all those in the story, she was the only one left.

Commended: A Quest For Fame

Matt Read

The man crept along the stone passage, armour clicking and clacking as he fought the knock of his knees. Pulling his spear and shield close, he swallowed and tried to ignore the rising heat as the sweat trickled down his spine.

No turning back now.

His sabatons sent coins and jewels skittering, but he kept his eyes up, away from the gold and treasure. Even as piles of the stuff rose around him, he scanned the place, wide eyed beneath the visor.

This was nothing, anyway. His brother had a bigger horde at home.

He made a point of showing him every bloody time he came to visit...

One of the coins, an ancient, rough-hewn galleon caught his toe and flew through the air, landing on its edge and rolling forward. When it fell, it did that usually quite satisfying thing where it keeps rocking and spinning and rocking and spinning, the noise climbing in pitch as the revelations quickened until it flattens itself against the bare stone with a final click.

Only this time, it wasn't satisfying. It went on and on, for far too long, echoing through the ages and all around the cave, before rising back to the man's ear.

He swallowed again. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Ahead, one of the larger piles of plunder began to shift. Cascading silver and gold ran like molten liquid, pouring off in buckets and sending shimmering patterns playing along the banks of ruby scales, row upon row, that ran the length of the room and disappeared out of view.

A ghastly pair of wings rose into the air, stretching taunt as a gaping maw yawned and snapped, showing off several rows of pearly daggers, bathing the room in a torrent of moist, rancid air.

A burning orange eye, the size of the man's shield peeled open and the inky black pupil locked onto his face. Muscles moved tightly beneath the bright red carapace, and the man was sure if the beast had an eyebrow it would have been arched fiercely enough to rival the one his mother had given him that very morning.

'Can I help you?' The dragon said, the voice rumbling through the cave and sending several passing birds squawking for cover.

The man's jaw worked, until he remembered why he was here and quickly got a grip. He tried to take a deep breath, but quickly thought better of it.

'Well, to be honest, I'm here to slay you.'

The dragon regarded him blankly. Then an eyelid, that could have been used to dress a table, slid over the burning gaze and back again.

'I'm sorry?'

'Not half as much as me, mate.' The man sighed and shook his head. 'But it's got to be done. The only way.'

The dragon nodded slowly so as not to upset him. 'Ah, I see. It's just that most people don't announce themselves before they try. Normally, its "Die foul beast" and all that, before I can get a word in.'

The man cleared his throat and looked down at his armoured feet, adjusting his grip on the evil-looking spear. 'Oh. I didn't want to be rude, is all. Nothing personal, you see. Got to be done.' He said again, though for who's benefit it wasn't really clear. The dragon brought its other bewildered eye to bear and furrowed a brow that could have mantled several fireplaces.

'May I ask why?'

Now it was the man's turn to frown, going slightly red beneath the helmet. 'Do you normally?'

'No,' The dragon, who was already quite red anyway, admitted. 'But *normally* it's just about the gold. And you don't exactly seem to be in any short supply of that.' It removed a claw the size of the man's forearm from beneath itself and gestured at the spear in a way that could have disembowelled an entire field of cattle. 'Lambhoc Ironprick's spears are all forged in the Lake of Eternal Fire, and after his heating bill went up, those cost an arm, a leg and everything in between. And that armour's no cheap fitting, either.'

With a sigh, the man reached up, unbuckled the chin strap and dropped the helm to the floor.

'Fine. Yes. Alright. Its not about the money. It's... well, it's the only way to prove to my family I'm not a complete wastrel.' He shrugged, armour groaning as the plates slid over one another with the motion. 'I want to be remembered, too!'

Patiently, the dragon folded its front paws.

'My oldest brother, see, he's the apple of Dad's eye, gonna take over the family business and everything. Whole fleet of ships and all that. He's set for life, gonna have his mug over everything. My sister made a go of it in the army, won all her fame and glory that way. She sits on the King's Privy now, got his ear and

everything.’ The dragon opened its mouth to correct him, but the man plowed on. ‘My younger brother joined the church and they gave him this big hat ‘cos he can do miracles or something. Doesn’t even have to walk now, they carry him. Statues everywhere!’

‘Yes, sounds like a tough old time...’ The dragon said, starting to regret its decision to speak instead of devour.

The man laughed bitterly and kicked at the helmet, sending it sailing over a stack of golden dinner plates taller than he was.

‘But me? I still live at home with the parents and they never let me hear the end of it. Three degrees, eight years! And for what? Can’t get a job nowhere! Every time I wake up its: “Oh, your brother’s healed that village again” or “You’ll never guess what plot your sister’s just foiled.” I mean, how much can a man take, I ask you?’ Seeing its opportunity, the dragon shifted awkwardly, gasping sharply as it kicked its back leg that had gone numb with pins and needles.

‘Well, I’m not sure if I can help. Sounds like you really should be talking to a therapist...’ Knowing this wasn’t strictly true, the dragon looked away and cleared its throat, sending a bit of goat pelvis sailing towards the back of the cave to join the only heap that wasn’t coveted or shiny.

In fact, the dragon was a trained Draco-therapist and Lóng-psychologist, but it didn’t understand humans. They didn’t make any sense. Dragons thought in aeons and epochs, about the real questions of life. Like how much gold would it take to make the most comfortable bed. And how to attract the right kind of adventurer, without too much unnecessary brain or gristle.

Humans, on the other hand, were obsessed with sex. And Death. It was all they ever really thought about. And apparently, as it was unfortunately discovering right now to its immense displeasure, fame.

‘So, one morning,’ The man continued, unaware of the atmosphere he was sucking from the cave. ‘I thought to myself, you know what, bugger this for a lark, I’m going to do something. So I got some armour hammered together, got a special spear, and came right up here. I told everyone on the way out, “Just you wait, I’ll come back with proof!” So here I am.’ He finished, smiling up at the dragon, a weight apparently lifted from his shoulders.

It took the dragon a moment to realise the story had ended.

‘Oh, right. Sorry, proof of what?’

The smile faltered.

'I just said, didn't I? You know, kill a dragon! That'll really get my name in the history books. And show all my snotty siblings what!'

The dragon nodded carefully, weighing up its options. 'Yes, I suppose it would.'

The man beamed. 'Ah, you're a real sport, I knew you'd get it.'

Still nodding, the dragon continued. 'And wouldn't there be any objection if I defended myself? It's only fair.'

The man looked quite affronted. 'Of course! I could hardly tell everyone I killed a dragon if it just rolled over and let me stab it, could I?'

On firmer ground now, the dragon kept nodding. 'Very kind of you, I must say. As you've been so good, I'd just like to warn you that I do indeed breathe fire, so that's one to watch for.'

The man adjusted his grip on the spear and raised his fingers in mock salute.

'Much obliged, I'll keep an eye out.' He lifted his leg and began to stretch. 'Are you ready now? Only, I've come all this way...'

The dragon kicked out its legs and stretched like a cat that could pounce half a mile.

'Whether I'm ready or not, you've been more than sporting.' It paused, tail coiling over the floor.

'Right, well...'

The man he lifted the spear and raised his shield. 'Best of luck to you.'

'And to you. You'll be needing it.'

Fire roared; steel sung. Somewhere, a mother looked up towards the distance cave and rolled her eyes.

Category: Poems

1st Place: Rowing Machine

Kristen Mears

They must hurt, those mornings at the banks
of the Cam—the sky turns pink, your socks get wet
with river water, blood. Yes, I've seen you on TV,
standing on new podiums, head bowed
only for the moment that you're crowned. But
I've seen your feet, too, the way you drag them,
raw and red, leaving streaks across our tiles.
I've seen the black erg in the corner of our kitchen,
the training plans on every medalled wall. I've seen you
going bare against the metal, to be one
and machine: without shoes you're bursting
bubbles on your soles, your skin the inside
of a chewed-up cheek. And then I hear you
through the floor, the back and forth whir
of cables lulling me to sleep, knowing
how you'll row through the night, racing
against yourself.

2nd Place: Sharon Olds Aria
Shoshanna Rockman

We share the same first name.
A small history of 'genteel flogging'.²
A post-divorce largesse — And a life.
 A lifeline — that is vocation.

You are better at it though —
 and famous. For poetry.
Great poetry is a line-by-line
proposition — for me, at least.

By which I creep closer and wind
around my reflex angle.
 But your verse —
I confess, it chinks open in me.

 All while it compresses
that which is filial and fond
Self-assured. The atomic weight
of your wor(l)ds. The electron bonds

 attract repulsion. A Shakespearean
draught — a viridian compound. Poison
in my right ear. A biblical flow of honey
in my left. The mark of Cain

upon my golden calf — and you split
 the red sea again and again,
until great gushes of ions, Na⁺ and Cl⁻,
diffuse my stain — razing and lifting

blood and rust and grime. It seems
I'm to forgive myself — in surges.
Keep releasing — keep loving.
 And keep on reading you.

² *After closing up my mother's house, Arias, Sharon Olds, 2019.*

3rd Place: Conversation With The Motya Charioteer, *British Museum*

Theresa Gooda

Here you are, standing haughty-eyed, jaunty-hipped.
Through to the limestone bones of your arrogant legs
you have the X-factor preserved in muscled marble.
Pert buttocks pose in hardened faux-fabric tunic folds
which a plaque calls your 'xystis'. I'll choose my own
pronunciation. Your toil is over, your race won:
fame forever. Well done.

My xystis is a crumpled apron. My chariot a pram.
My existence is my children, who swarm the museum.
I sweat to think they might touch something
of your white antiquity. Hooded eyes, aching hips
frame sagging flesh to form my victory stance.
And pert buttocks? After three kids, not a chance.
Why would I want to be statued anyway?
Who would seek paralysis through petrification
to be stared at in blindness every day?
I only get turned to stone for transgressing.
Enjoy your pillar of salt. This Iodame lives
and demands not stone, but fire..

Highly Commended: There's Bloom's Beyond

Lucia Kiersch Haase

Beyond the forest clearing, there's a stage.
She squints in thought beyond her cabin's view.
As though a season, life has turned a page
from everything she thought she loved and knew.
An audience applause is ringing clear
re-echoing of accolades she's known.
Acknowledgement? Well, budding trees thrive near,
a welcoming of nature's peaceful tone..
It's not an act, just simple carefree time
away from city lights and rushing crowds.
Now, plays take on a different kind of rhyme
with brighter skies and weightless floating clouds.
And friends or fans? Well here she fills that need
in garden flowers nurtured, seed by seed.

Highly Commended: The Flavour of Fame
Sherri Turner

The crowds move like toffee,
oozing through the stands and stalls
to get a better look
at jams they haven't tried before,
cinnamon biscuits,
cheeses with bits in,
coveting the festival fare
as though the ordinary food
in their pantries at home
is no longer good enough,
not representative of who they,
in their over-fatted hearts,
know themselves to be.

Behind them, walls gleam pink and soft
with offerings of words,
metaphor and syntax, and sounds
I haven't tried before.
Gentle mouths feed me
and when my name is called
the taste is better than any
organic,
hand-filled,
water-crustied pie,
made locally
or not.

Highly Commended: Jammy Delights
Charlotte Hall

When it came to baking, both my grandmothers took the cake.

My nannie's jammy Victoria sponge,
Famous in Pembrey,
Famous in the local church,
Famous in the whole family.
Passed down to the keen pâtissier that is
my auntie Alison.
the sponge was, in my opinion, a bit dry,
but the slightly sweet, homemade strawberry jam oozing out of the centre
balanced it out.

My grandma's sultana scones
never touched my tongue.
The recipe book with flour marks on the pages of the most used recipes
The binding falling apart, from love.
Carefully handed down to her daughter.
I got to taste my auntie Karen's version of her mother's,
The shop bought strawberry jam
But the homemade cream
on top of a somewhat crumbly, but still sturdy
sweet and savoury bun

I only have a sweet, serendipitous slice (or bun) of their memory,
Now that they have departed
And gone to the bakery in the sky.
But I do have my memories
And my tastebuds left
To remember them by.

Commended: Portrait of The Poets

Joolz Sparkes

– a snapshot framed in the Faber and Faber offices

Here they are in black and white, five peerless peers
chaperoned into a stairwell to avoid the
pecking
order of
spines
on
bookshelf

The first poet is iridescent.

The third yearns for solitude.

The other one is humbled.

The fourth covets the iridescence of the first.

The second is a stag.

Captured as a cool gang –
the eyeing and the eyed.

All are ink. All paper.

Faintly ridiculous, except
these pens have laid bare
the souls of mankind.

And what of the female group shot?

None. No one recorded the fruit
that doesn't have a rhyme.

Commended: Rumpelstiltskin At The Year 11 Parent Teacher Do

Christian Donovan

I ask: And what are your plans for next year?

*I'm gonnabe famous,
she gurgles.*

Mum purrs: *Famester.*

I ask: Famous for what?

*Famous for being famous.
And rich,
she breathes.*

Mum mouths: *Famesque.*

I ask: Perhaps I can help? Your English work promises.

*Influence is where I'm at.
Get me.
Her bangles wobble.*

Mum whispers: *Fameflower.*

I ask: What about a job? You know, experience peps up a c.v.

*Not gonna do drudgery.
See.
She winces.*

Mum puffs: *Famulus. She's a myth-chick.*

But London's spenny, doncha know?

I say:

Let me alchemise your fable,
spin it with cats' whiskers,
weave it with goldcrest down
until it scintillates.

I'll run your Insta
for fifty percent.

For free, if you can spell:

chrematistic.

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 30 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

