



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

14-18 Age Category

The 17th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2022

Enigma

The disappearance of Agatha Christie, the Mona Lisa's smile, Banksy; These are some of the most famous, sometimes infamous, enigmas in history. Whether it's the Mary Celeste's missing crew, the Famous Five exploring a treasure island or the nasty thing lurking in Cold Comfort Farm's woodshed, mysteries have always fascinated us. For the 2022 Elmbridge Literary Competition, The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council were looking for short stories and poems that unravel riddles, disentangle conundrums and resolve enigmas.

Following the success of 2021's 'Music', The Elmbridge Literary Competition was once more open to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, is open to all ages.

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

Category: Short Stories

1st Place: Frolic of The Frau

Aliza Uddin

The hottest day of 1518 begins with one woman whistling for me.

A saccharine tune, broken into intervals of stopping and starting, ties about my ankle like a rope, dragging me from slumber. I shall call it slumber for the time being, because I do not know how else to describe the state of blissful rest that I was in before the twelfth hour of the fifteenth day of July. Sleep does not appeal to me, for when you are asleep a couple thousand others are awake, in celebration frivolous with the decadence of either diamonds or dirt. It does not agree with business, all this shutting of eyes and drifting into worlds where the years of Life lived are multitudinous and fruitful and pearly. My feet never touch the ground, my eyes are prised open eternally, my cloak is washed only by the tears or blood of those which I attend. As I come round, the smell of iron is not in the air, nor salt. I wonder idly what has brought me to the town of Strasbourg in the late hours of the morning. Before I can indulge in thought, the hum of a flute rises from the town at the bottom of the hill, sweet as the woman's whistle. It rings with a magnetic tenor, this music. A tenor like a vein that pumps the fluids of peace to the mind. A tenor that diffuses an ethereal fragrance like crushed hyacinths and a colour like the most gilded of flax; even a spirit cannot help but succumb to it.

I descend the hill, curious of the greying clouds that shift dismally and lay thick above the patch of land that is Strasbourg, curious to look upon the face of the musician. It is godly, this music they make, and I could not be proud if I was summoned on this sweltering day to take the flautist away from their family. I try to identify a trembling weakness in the notes, a wavering in the symphony which might signal a disease of the lungs. But there is none. The breath that flows from the flautist's mouth is healthier than the promise of human expiry. A chorus of eager songbirds congregate on the thatched roof of Frau Troffea's home. The Frau is a familiar face to me; I have visited her thrice this year alone. And each time been rejected, by the working miracles of Life. She is rapt in some flailing, fervent movement of the arms, a criss-cross of the feet, accentuating the mellifluous character of the flute with her bright whistle. Her round face is a beacon of light in the gathering dimness. Her feet flatten the beds of grass beneath her as she skips into the cobbled square. The flautist offers her his hand; she takes it, gladly, twirling herself into oblivion. If I would be so kind as to take you by the arm and invite you to watch the spectre, how you would laugh at its peculiarity! This young woman, dressed only in her nightgown, dancing with a married musician. What is the occasion? I want to ask. Why am I -of all spirits- here, when you dance with such rigour and such joy? I want -with every burning ember in the flautist's eyes- to understand

the darkening of the sky at midday, the sudden outbreak of merrymaking on this sultry summer noon.

I do not have to wait long until Fate gives me my answer.

Hours slip by whilst the malignant swarm swells. One, two, three, twenty townsmen and women join the Frau and the flautist in a circle of joint hands, weaving in and out of it in sync with sugary song. Shrieks of laughter flush the air above and thicken it to the quality of molasses. The town throbs with euphoric clamour that must be heard all the way in Germany. Peoples' shadows stretch and shorten with the passing hours of the day. Heat, glorious, sticky, bubbling heat, soaks the townspeople in sweat, infects the air with its gritty smell. When the sky becomes rouge and heavy with dusk, I begin to bore of their dancing, and I suspect that they do too.

But I am gravely wrong.

They do not stop. They do not even slow to drink, or to eat, or to sleep. By now, crisp obscurity descends upon them, enveloping them in darkness that only I am able to see through. It is a tepid night, made only more stale by the days' worth of sweat that hangs over the oval of dancers. How the murk confuses their eyes, how it crumbles their irises to rings of dull powder. How exhaustion drains the colour from their faces, ashen and waxy as that of the Moon Herself. Watery daylight pales the edges of Strasbourg; the new day is no deterrent to the troupe. An ostentatious sight they are, to say the least, this plethora of bodies and their bleary reflections tap, tap, tapping on the surface of the lucent lake they dance beside.

Frau Troffea collapses on the third day. I glide past the shrieks that have long since mutated into screams, silently bewildered by the fact that no-one stops to inspect the body of the woman lying on the ground. Her eyes are flung open, her lips still twisting into a smile, her face is still vivacious with laughter. Hair like matted hay curls about her shoulders. This was the flaxen colour the music reminded me of on that first day; Frau Troffea's hair. And the hyacinths. I see one now, basking in the moonlight, ripe and purple like the sheet of bruising over her calves, wrapped in one of the tendrils that tickle the Frau's chin. Gently, I tilt her head. She drifts -slowly but surely- into my clutches. Instances in which a soul has slipped from them are rare, but that does not mean that they are impossible. The Frau is not clinging to Life, anyway. She is dead. Well and truly dead.

Meanwhile, women flare their kirtles like a butterfly flares her wings, men dig their boots into the ground and kick up dirt, ink-skinned cats and gleeful children pounce from one dancer to another. They keep at their routine long after the music disintegrates. His fingers still curled about his flute, the musician lays flat on the dew-sodden ground. I must take him from his wife and child tonight,

but I imagine they should follow suit. And here they come now; look! See how the shadows their lashes cast over their brilliant orbs of brown darken whilst they clap their hands? Their cheeks streaked with brushstrokes of dirt, of glittering tears? Perhaps they might see each other again, the little flautist, his macilent wife, their freckled daughter. If Life so decides.

Like flies, they drop, tens at a time. And no-one seems to notice; they are all consumed by a knee-bending, arm-swinging frenzy of dance that will be labelled as all sorts for years to come: demonic possession, stress, food poisoning. Once all four hundred of them are dead after two months, they will decide what curse befell the dancers of Strasbourg on that ill-starred day in July of 1518. It will be too late, but what does it matter to those theorists?

Some dancers mop their palms on their woollen garments, for the sweat that streams from them has swollen their fingers into rubber. But I am not something you can avoid by wiping your hands. I am there in the blade of grass you walk upon, the slither of paper you touch, the very fragments of air which you breathe. I am always there, and I am always working.

I have just not come to visit you yet.

2nd Place: The Death of Robert Thorne

Alice Glithero

Case File: Death of Robert Thorne - Unofficial Report

(I would like to stress, *unofficial* report. I'm not trying to impersonate you police fellows as well as do your job for you)

Let me set the scene. A writer. A baker. A butcher. A seamstress. A detective.

The writer dies. The butcher cries.

Now this is beginning to sound like a story.

Think of a nice English countryside village. No, not that one. One by the coast. With cliffs. Can you see where this is going? I'm sure you can. I'll assume you're an intelligent person.

But don't let the blissful quiet fool you. Unless you're imagining crashing waves and screeching winds. In which case, you'd certainly be closer to imagining what it was like that night. But I wasn't supposed to be there. Neither was everybody else.

I'll stop using I now, it feels unprofessional. One shall use proper titles. Besides, this way will be more impartial. You won't know who I am until the end. No skipping ahead. You'll ruin the fun.

It was after two in the morning, and the writer had had a sudden flash of inspiration. The only suitable way he could see to harness it was to go to his favourite writing spot immediately, and "let the words fly across the page under the haunting light of the moon." That's a direct quote from his journal that was lawfully obtained. Promise.

So while the writer was sitting on the clifftop, another affair was taking place. Quite literally. The seamstress was with the baker, which the baker's fiancée perhaps wouldn't have been so pleased about. The seamstress didn't know about the fiancée, though the timing of the walk across the cliffs had aroused her suspicions. And indeed, she was correct, as the baker confessed it all. She was quite horrified by this discovery and, unsurprising, an argument had ensued. A loud, aggressive argument. This is when the butcher showed up.

And where did the butcher come from? Well, he had not been brought to the clifftop by any interesting circumstances. A stray cat had taken up residence under his bedroom window, and the sudden screech of bird being preyed on jolted the butcher from his sleep. His gazing out the

window at the disturbance had him notice two figures making their way across the fields. Curious as to why anyone would be walking around at this hour, he went to follow them.

So he arrived as the argument reached its breaking point, and decided to intervene. This only caused more arguing, and attracted the attention of the fine detective, who was also on the clifftops. Now, the detective had no interest telling anyone that he was there that night. That would involve admitting a certain dependency issue on a certain type of beverage, and he was not ready to have that conversation with his wife again. So instead he resorts to late night (or early morning) rambles over the surrounding fields, where no one can hear his renditions of warbled ditties. Although this time, he found himself an audience. His drunken attempt at calming the situation by singing failed, as did his many, unsavoury comments on his opinions of the places of men and women in relationships. His wife needs to reconsider her marriage choices.

We mustn't forget about the writer of course, who was listening to these events with great interest, already thinking about how to transfer them to the written word. Fed up, the seamstress had left with the butcher. Approximately ten minutes later, the writer was dead. You'd think this would rule them both out right? Wrong, because the butcher only walked the seamstress home. There was still enough time to run back up the cliff path and commit the deed. But that really means either one of them could have done it. And there'd surely be witnesses. It's not a helpful line of inquiry to go down. So let's look at what else we have, because there is a much better solution to this problem.

The writer found the entire situation rather amusing, and thought it a brilliant story to put on stage. The baker, most likely upon realising his reputation and therefore life were probably now ruined, was not happy with this turn of events. In fact, he was quite angry. Extremely angry. The writer muttering away to the side did not help. And so, a confrontation took place, a furious one. One that ended in the baker pushing the writer off the cliff. It very much could have been a slip. It's with good reason the police suspected this. The detective was too drunk to know what he was actually seeing anyway, even if he'd admitted he was there. But why would the writer have been so close to the edge? He was melancholy, not suicidal. He didn't have a death wish, not while there was still so much left for him to write. He wouldn't have left his journal abandoned in the grass, the man would take that thing to the grave if he'd had the choice.

Nobody said a word because none of us should have been there. The baker thought everyone would stay quiet because everyone had something to lose. Well, except the butcher. Although with his apparent influx of white knight syndrome, the baker probably hoped that he wasn't willing to risk the seamstress' reputation. So he thought he'd got away with it.

Oh, I still haven't said who I am in this story. I'm the writer. "But the writer's dead!" I hear you say. Well I can very much tell you it's not the butcher writing this. The man, as sweet as he is, couldn't write his way out of a paper bag. Neither could the detective, who is the most impertinent man I have ever met by the way. But I digress. The writer is in fact dead. The great Robert Thorne has indeed departed us. But there can be more than one writer around you know. I had you there didn't I, saying I was 'the writer'? Women have abilities other than sewing you know (yes detective, that one was aimed at you).

So anyway, here you are, the answer to the case of the death of Robert Thorne. It wasn't the accident slip over the cliff top that you all wanted to write it off to be. I assure you that this is all true. The poor chap was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I really do believe it was the baker who killed him. The man has a temper like no other. I know some of this is circumstantial, but you can look at your records and find proper evidence can't you? After all, I had to leave you something to do.

(Unofficial) Case File compiled by: Violet Beaufort (aka the seamstress)

Note from Superintendent Howard;

There's some sound theories here Sergeant, ones that I'd like your department to investigate further. This case always felt too open and shut for my liking. Though you might want to have a word with Detective Cahill. I'm pushing his next review forward in light of these interesting discoveries.

Get me an address for Miss Beaufort. I want to meet the woman who showed up an entire department of officers and solved a murder case like a teatime crossword. That's the type of person I want on my force.

3rd Place: The Dodgy Dogfood Mystery

Milly Kotecha

Dumberton is a quaint English village, set in rural Derbyshire; a lovely place - if you're a pensioner, but with little to offer its younger residents, except that is for a small bench in front of the vicarage. It was here that three young friends congregated one Saturday afternoon in early October.

Sarah sat with a little spiral notebook and pencil in hand, with brother Josh next to her, fielding his Ispy binoculars. Behind them was Mandy, mounted on a little wall, kicking her feet back and forth. From here they had a clear view of the three shops that formed the parade, and anything of interest was duly noted in Sarah's black notebook.

Unfortunately, the page was looking a bit bare after half an hour. "Hey, look at John" said Josh, hoping to inject some excitement. John was the grocer's son and but was only replenishing some shelves with vegetables. Sarah looked back down and relaxed her pencil.

Suddenly, Mandy kicked the bench. "Now that's strange!" She gushed, pointing to a tall grey figure leaving the corner store. 'That's Ol' Willis, I know him. He's looking a bit shifty don't you think? What's that crate he's carrying out?"

Josh immediately took up his binoculars, "Tinned dog food, chunky, fortified with iron, zinc and..."

Mandy interrupted him. "So *many* tins? You know he's always buying dog food from Lalloos' - but he doesn't even have a dog!"

"That *is* odd." Josh agreed, screwing up his face. Sarah quickly scribbled in her notebook, "Willis, dog food, no dog."

Josh then noticed a poster pinned to a nearby post with a photo of a dog. "Missing, Blackie," He read, "Small reward offered for return."

Sarah put her pencil in her mouth and pondered. "That's it. I bet he's kidnapping dogs to get the rewards!" The three children quickly concluded this to be the only plausible explanation.

They watched as Ol' Willis loaded the crate into the boot of his Volkswagen Golf. "We have to follow him and rescue Blackie," said Mandy, speaking gravely. The three friends promptly jumped onto their bicycles.

The grey man got in the car and signalled right to pull out. It began to proceed slowly down the street. He didn't notice the three small figures following behind.

The car turned into Mount Road. Sarah, Josh, and Mandy freewheeled down as there was a good incline, and then had no difficulty navigating the roads out of the village as they knew them like the back of their hands. The car then turned into Derby Road which was busier but had a cycle lane. After a while it began to slow down. It indicated and pulled into a narrow lane on the left.

At the top of this small road were some heavy wooden gates. Ol' Willis got out and pushed the gates open. He drove his car through and disappeared into what looked like a field. The three youngsters dismounted their bikes and went up to the gates. A large dust-covered sign read

'Scraptoft Allotments' in bold black lettering and underneath in smaller red letters, 'Private Land- Keep Out!'

Mandy pushed open the gates with some effort. "Come on," she beckoned.

Sarah was unsure but Josh grabbed his bike and wheeled it through. Sarah reluctantly followed. "We could get in a lot of trouble for this" she murmured.

"Don't be such a scary cat" said Mandy, "Remember we *have* to do this - for Blackie."

Ahead of them was a small brick building which had a notice board outside. The children dropped their bicycles behind some thick bushes and went up to the board. There were some faded posters about horticultural shows, some items for sale and a chart of the plots on the site.

"There's so many," sighed Sarah, "We could be here all day."

Mandy scrutinised the diagram carefully. "Where would you keep kidnapped pets?" She wondered. Eventually, her face lit up. "It has to be this one." She put her finger on a large, isolated plot away from all the others." You wouldn't want everyone seeing you taking dogs in and out of the place would ya? No, you'd want privacy to carry out your criminal activities, don't ya think?"

Suddenly, the door of the building opened, and a big burly man came out. "Hey, wot you lot doing here? Can't you read?" he said, nodding to a big sign with the words "No unauthorized visitors. All trespassers will be prosecuted."

"There's a man - he's kidnapping dogs, he's got Blackie s you see," Josh began, but the other two quickly shushed him.

"Clear off!" The burly man wasn't listening, "Or I'll have the lot of you."

His manner seemed to strike them with fear, and they bolted to their bikes. Without another word, they departed the site.

As they arrived back in Dumberton, Mandy gathered them round for a little meeting. "You don't know who's in with Ol' Willis in this dog racket," she explained, looking at Josh, and then continued, "We have to go back in the evening when no-one's around."

Sarah didn't like the sound of this at all but knew there was no arguing with Mandy when she was in this mood.

Rendezvous was at six-thirty and the three friends assembled again at the bench; this time equipped with supplies for their mission. They set off as the sun was setting. A cold night breeze chilled their cheeks as they began their journey. The roads were unusually quiet, and this made for an eerie atmosphere. Eventually, they turned into the road of the allotments, arriving soon after at the big gates.

They dismounted and took out their torches from their backpacks. To their surprise the gates were unbolted. They pushed their bikes through and wheeled them to rest at the bushes as before. The brick office looked sad and abandoned at this hour.

"This way." Mandy directed her torch to light up a path to their left and moved forward. The other two followed behind in single file. A gush of wind rose up and rustled through the leaves of the trees and bushes. Josh drew up his hood. An owl hooted and there was a strange

shuffling sound to their side. Josh swung his torch around to light up a huge rat scuttling near his foot. He let out a little yelp.

“Stop messing around!” Mandy scolded him. She pointed out a large wooden shed a little way in the distance. The light was on inside and through the window they saw the silhouette of a tall man.

“It’s him” cried Josh excitedly “It’s Ol’ Willis’ He’s still here!”.

“What do we do now?” asked Sarah, sounding a little faint.

“We wait.” Mandy was resolute.

Josh got his binoculars out. They watched and waited as Mr Willis worked at the window. “He’s opening the tins!”

After what seemed like an eternity Ol’ Willis stepped out of the shed, pushing a loaded wheelbarrow. He then quickly disappeared into the darkness.

“C’mon.” Mandy moved towards the shed and urged the others to follow her. They stepped inside the wooden building and directed their torchlights around the contents hoping to find evidence of the presence of the kidnapped dog. But there was nothing, except a load of gardening tools and bags of compost.

On the worktop on one side was a collection of empty cans of dog food. And on the wall were an array of certificates, rosettes and trophies from plant shows. No evidence at all of any animals.

Suddenly there was a loud noise, and the light came on. It was Ol’ Willis. He’d returned and wasn’t looking very happy. “What on earth!” he thundered, seeing the three little children in his shed. They looked like little rabbits caught in the headlights of a car.

“We’ve come for Blackie, wot you done with him?” said Josh, bravely.

“Blackie? What are you on about?”

The three children, cornered as they were, were forced to tell all. Ol’ Willis gave out a little chuckle.

“The dog food isn’t for dogs,” he laughed, and then seemed to hesitate. “It’s actually a secret.” After a while he continued. “You see these,” he said, pointing out his trophies - they’re all down to my secret ingredient – Hammonds Dog Food. I add it to my fertilizer, you see. I have to come here at night as everyone is always spying on me. In all these years, no-one has ever been able to find out - except now, except for you three! There’s only one thing to be done now.”

The kids quivered as he turned darkly to open his cupboard.

“All I can do now,” said the tall man, “...is to try and bribe you!” With that he pulled out a tray of the most sumptuous fruits: ripe cherries, plump plums and best of all some succulent, prize-winning strawberries!

Highly Commended: The Priced Apple

Rishika Srivastava

When I was little Mom told the story of Alice Banks, her classmate in high school. On the annual treasure hunt, twenty-one years ago, she vanished without a trace.

I always thought Alice just ran away. Not anymore. Not after I saw Jake lose both legs at this year's hunt.

The treasure hunt started as it always did. Old Tom stood on an upside down wooden box placed in the middle of the big cul-de-sac at the end of our neighborhood, Moon Row. He spoke in that ridiculous voice he put on when being official, talking about how great Moon Row was. Which kid was on what sports team and who's gotten a promotion. Tom saw me in the crowd and gave me a wink.

He always had a soft spot for me but I never knew why. I'm lucky he did or I would've been dead.

Then he talked about apples. Moon Row is famous for them. Every garden here has a few apple trees. So of course the goal of the treasure hunt is to be the first one to find three golden apples. Old Tom was a pensioner and hid a bunch of them while we were in school and our parents at work. My neighbor, smug Jake White, with his rich parents that let him do whatever he likes, has won two years in a row. No one has ever won three in a row before and I heard Jake brag at school that his cousins were coming to visit just to help him win.

Well, I wasn't about to let him.

This year I had a secret weapon, Bismarck. Bismarck is my German Shepherd puppy. She's not grown yet but she's big enough to go running around with me. Here's the genius part. I bought the same spray paint I know Tom uses and I spray painted a bunch of tennis balls. Don't worry, I never let Bismarck chew them but she's great at finding them.

Jake is going down.

Tom said, "No apple tastes as sweet as those in Moon Row." It's the signal to start the hunt and all the families went running. I took off with Bismarck leading the way and soon found my first golden apple. It had been shoved under the stairs of Jackson's porch. They don't normally like people to run over their perfect lawn but anything goes on treasure hunt day.

I scratched Bismarck behind the ears and let her get a good sniff of the apple again.

There's an alley that connects the four parallel streets that make up our neighborhood and I ran through it over to the next street. It was dusk and a bite of autumn cold was in the air. Halloween was just around the corner and the trees were heavy with perfect red apples. I got to the second street and scanned the front yards while Bismarck sniffed the air. Something hit my shoulder hard. Jake ran past.

"You two girls try and keep up." Jake held up a golden apple. His two cousins, a bit younger than Jake, came up next to him. "Take this street, and you take the next one. I'll run to the last one."

When they didn't move fast enough he snapped his fingers in their faces. "Come on!"

Jake set off and I ran after him. I knew I was faster than him and he couldn't stand it. I reached the fourth street together with a happily barking Bismarck just before him.

I took out the apple from the pocket of my hoodie and held it up to Bismarck. "Go on girl, you can do this."

"Cheater," Jake panted.

I ignored him and ran after Bismarck as she set off, ears flopping. I could hear Jake following but I ignored him. If Bismarck found an apple, Jake wouldn't be fast enough.

Bismarck reached the end of the fourth street and ran onto a grassy path that disappeared into a small cluster of trees. There was an abandoned house back there. You weren't supposed to go there so of course everyone who thought they were cool did.

I caught up to Bismarck just as she reached the house. There was an outside staircase that led down into the cellar. A bunch of leaves had gathered down there.

I pulled Bismarck back but through a broken window pane I could see the glint of gold on the cellar floor. An apple.

Jake caught up to me, looked through the window, and raced down the stairs.

"No," I hissed. Not knowing why I was being quiet.

"Finders keepers!" Jake ran down the stairs and yanked open the broken door.

Then the thought that had made me itch became clear. Why would Tom hide an apple where he knew we weren't supposed to go?

A twig broke and I turned around, heart in my throat. There was no one there. When I looked back Bismarck had raised her hackles. Her eyes were fixed on the cellar window.

The apple was gone and so was Jake.

I waited for a moment, holding my breath. I couldn't hear anything. No footsteps, no leering Jake happy at his price.

"We have to go down there." Tugged at Bismarck's collar. She didn't want to budge at first but when I went down the steps she followed.

I tried to sneak but the dry leaves crunched underfoot. The cellar door was still ajar.

I poked it open with my foot and looked inside. It was getting darker quickly and it was hard to see anything in there.

"Jake?"

No answer.

I wanted to run away but Jake might have slipped and hit his head or something.

I stepped inside.

It was freezing in the cellar, much colder than outside, and my breath hung in the air.

"Jake?"

As my eyes got used to the dark I could see a faint purple glow coming from around the corner. There was a sound too. It's hard to describe but it was like the opposite of noise, a sort of rhythmic hum that I could feel more than hear. A pressure was building against my temples, as if I was going to get a headache.

I rounded the corner with Bismarck at my heels, her tail between her legs.

Jake was on the floor. The golden apple had rolled from his outstretched fingers. His eyebrow was open and bleeding. The blood was smeared across the floor as Jake was slowly dragged forward.

Tentacles, glistening and dark, were wrapped around his legs.

They reached out from a doorway on the wall, edged with purple runes. The surface of the doorway rippled slowly as if made of oil.

Bismarck leapt forward and bit one of the tentacles before I could stop her. That tentacle writhed and curled back but another one lashed out.

It caught her on the flank and she flew into the wall. A tentacle made its way towards my puppy. I grabbed a broken plank from the ground and smacked it as hard as I could. I raised the plank again but it was yanked from my hands from behind.

Old Tom stood there. The dull purple light made deep pits of his eyes. "Don't fight it, Juniper. A price has to be paid."

I was stunned. "A price?"

"No apple tastes as sweet as those in Moon Row. The families here are happy, prosperous, but nothing is free. It's only a life every seven years. It's not much to ask, is it?"

A tentacle wrapped itself around Bismarck. Jake's legs had disappeared into the portal.

"Come now. In seven years' I might not be here and someone else will have to do this." He reached out his hand to me. I took it. Then I kicked his chin as hard as I could.

Tom shouted in pain and surprise. He lifted his leg, losing his balance. I pulled him forward with all I had.

Tom stumbled over Jake and fell face first through the portal. The runes flared and then went dark. I couldn't see anything but a purple afterglow. The odd noise was gone.

I felt around and found Bismarck. She licked my hand and nuzzled up against me. She seemed to be okay. My vision started to come back and I saw Jake's outline on the floor. He was still unconscious but breathing.

In the days that followed I told the story of what happened in that cellar but Jake said he didn't remember. Only Mom believed me. In the end we moved.

If you don't believe me then go see Jake. As far as I know he still lives on Moon Row, learning how to walk with new prosthetics. When the doorway disappeared so did his legs, just below the knee. No blood. Just gone. Explain that, and while you're at it, try to find Old Tom.

I don't think the apples in Moon Row will taste very sweet in seven years.

Highly Commended: Belvedere Hall

Katie Robinson

The coachman handed me down from the hansom I had hired at the village. It was then, as I raised my eyes to the house which stood in front of me, that I first saw Belvedere Hall. Little did I then suspect that this house would play such a crucial part in the course of my life, that this house would soon become an obsession of mine. Little did I know that this house, inanimate though it seemed, was plagued and tormented by all that it had witnessed within its walls.

As I fished in my purse and dolefully handed my remaining shillings to the coachman, I contemplated my gloomy environs. The house stood nine miles from the nearest village, desolate on the moors, shrouded in fog. It was certainly an imposing building, tall and large, built of solid stone. But the heavy fog could not disguise the crumbling crenelations and the cracked mullioned windows. I exhaled a sigh and squared my shoulders, tucking my wispy blonde hair behind my ears and setting off towards the curved door. Since the death of my parents, I had lived on the charity of distant relatives; I knew that this situation, working as governess to the noble family of Thackeray, was my chance to be self-dependent, to earn my own living.

After knocking several times upon the carved oak door, and receiving no answer, I gave it a slight push. A resounding creak echoed off the flagstones as it swung open. I found myself in a cavernous entryway. As I deposited my ugly mackintosh on a nearby coat stand, I felt my eyes drawn upward to a considerable portrait of a man. It exuded arrogance and grandeur, leaving no doubt in my mind that it was my employer and the owner of Belvedere Hall, Lord Thackeray before me, although I had never seen him. I contemplated the painting; there could be no question that the man's face was beautiful. And yet, there was something about the leering curve of his smile that was suggestive of cruelty, something about the accosting stare of his eyes that gave me the urge to avert my own.

'You must be the new governess.' I jumped, and whirling around guiltily, saw the outline of a man. As I had been staring, transfixed, at the picture, he must have approached me from behind. As he moved out of the dark and the candlelight fell upon his features, giving him a ghastly, ethereal look, I was able to identify him as the gentleman of the portrait. The likeness was unmistakable but gone was the glint of malice from the eye, gone too was the sneering contour of the lips.

'I am sure you must be fatigued from your journey, but you must join me for dinner tonight. Seven o'clock; don't be late.' He said this brusquely, as though he found these formalities tiresome, and when he had concluded, he turned abruptly on his heel, retreating into the unlit gloom.

Promptly and rather hesitantly, I made my way to the dining room at the hour he had named. He smiled as I awkwardly edged into the room. His easy manner and carefree demeanour couldn't have been more different to our previous interaction. I began to regret my labelling him as discourteous; certainly, there was nothing discourteous about him now. I enjoyed that evening with him more than any other in my memory. Our dinner consisted of venison with an

array of sauces and platters of side-dishes, such splendour as I had never tasted. Admittedly, I had little experience of male companionship, but nevertheless, as I walked to my room late that night, my step was buoyant, my eyes radiant with happiness and my cheeks rosy with the first flush of infatuation.

The next morning, I dressed quickly, fumbling with my shoelaces in my haste, and could scarcely keep from running to the breakfast parlour. But when I arrived, and my eyes, surreptitiously scanning the room, found the object of my search absent and only the housekeeper present, my heart sank.

'Won't Lord Thackeray be joining us?' I asked. I had tried to deliver the question as casually as I could, keeping my voice offhand and my posture nonchalant, but my heart skipped erratically as the housekeeper narrowed her eyes and examined me intently. I was sure my voice had betrayed my girlish fancy and she would now ridicule me for my delusions, her voice saturated with contempt and mockery. Such treatment could only drive away all tender feelings, leaving in their place a heart heavy with shame and confusion. I waited, tortured by anxiety, for her reply, but nothing could have prepared me for what she would say next.

'Lord Thackeray? Oh, my dear girl, Lord Thackeray has been dead for over two years, didn't you know? He murdered his wife, you know, and he was hung for it! She was about your age, blonde too! It was a terrible business, yes, truly awful. The publicity it brought really was too much to bear, and, of course, their little girl was inconsolable!'

My mind was a whirl of confusion. I could scarcely breathe; such was my shock. Had I been deceived? If not Lord Thackeray, who had I supped with the night previous? Had I dined with an impostor? Yet, the actor must have played his part well, for my host had possessed aristocratic manners, had talked with confidence about the family history and the house. Moreover, who would play such a devious trick upon a lowly governess? No, I decided, it could not have been a joke.

'Lady Thackeray was such a charming woman' the housekeeper continued 'at the inquest nobody could imagine any motive Lord Thackeray could have had. Of course, I suppose some people are just mad!'

Mad, mad, mad. The word echoed back and forth in my mind. I felt faint. I was going to faint. 'A dreadful pity.' Her voice dropped to a whisper 'would you like to know how he did it?' Here she flashed me a morbid grin, and I recoiled in horror. 'Poison. That's what they concluded at the autopsy. He must have slipped it into her dinner the night before. Roasted venison, it was.' She gave a hideous cackle.

Roasted venison. Venison. I could almost taste it. As my throat constricted and my pupils dilated, my hands went to my throat.

Commended: Listen and I'll Lie To You

Heather Chapman

The envelope is pushed under my door, draft pushing the fold open, so it rises and falls as if with breath.

The Blackbird Estate, it reads.

No other address. A line about accommodation; two rooms available, a startlingly cheap price, and, at the lip of the paper:

Ask no questions, speak no answers.

When a car pulls up outside my house the next morning, I feel anger at my own lack of evasion before I feel fear.

I'd lied about my address on my job application, told each co-worker a different age. I liked to think I was good at evasion, better at enigmas. I pretend it's because of the price, not the words which undo my suitcase's clasps - *don't ask, don't tell*.

I would get into a stranger's car, to a stranger's house. I would be hurt, probably, but I was not myself. I make sure of that.

I pack slowly - amber ink, pressed butterflies, jade marbles. Random trinkets of no personal importance, collected only for disguise. Props for a disappearance. I picture the police finding me, slumped on ebony floorboards in a pool of blood, treasures pulled magician-like out of my sleeve.

My suitcase rattles down the path, into the passenger seat. The driver pulls off as soon as I close the door, and I'm too stubborn to glance at them, to snatch so obviously at answers.

We drive out of the city. If asked to find my way back I wouldn't have been able to say - if I answered at all, it would be in someone else's accent and the lie would sound like music.

It is dark when we arrive. I realise there's another car behind, barely visible - the only indication of its presence are polygons of black paint, cut out between tree branches.

The house comes into view, built almost haphazardly of dark wood. I imagine it pressed together like scenery in a play, panels stamped with domed windows, folded upright.

The door isn't locked. The driveway is so thickly gravelled my shoes sink into it. The second car slows. I shouldn't be staring but I am.

A girl, testing the ground as if preparing to walk on water. The bag swinging from her shoulders is made of clear plastic, a circular bubble. I picture tropical fish sunning themselves inside, imagine her into an animal smuggler, snatching rare specimens out of celebrity ponds and into her carry-on luggage.

"I'm Alexander." I present my hand. She doesn't look at me.

The imagined fish opens its mouth to release a storm of bubbles.

“Lulu.” She speaks after a pause, voice quick. She moves towards the door before I can think of a lie.

We go inside. A small table stands at the hall’s centre, a sheet of paper laid on top. I move forwards, pass a hand across the ink. It blurs black moss across my fingertips. Still wet.

*Explore the house as you see fit but leave the door under the stairs alone. Remember:
Let enigmas be enigmas.*

I round the edge of the stairs, where the hall curls into rooms. At the centre of the staircase’s base is the barest outline of a doorframe.

I leave, and don’t look back, bracing to shoulder my suitcase upstairs. When I turn on the final step, expecting to meet Lulu’s eyes, she is looking away.

A morse code pattern of closed and open doors dots the upstairs hallway, no indication which is mine. I pick one at random, close the door behind me.

Darkness filters through a tiny window, fringed in lace. I didn’t realise how late it was, could have sworn it was day outside. My legs ache from sitting down, my fingers barnacled with calluses from gripping my suitcase. Sleep comes almost immediately, dreams scattered with tiny golden fish that wink through my skull, sunning themselves against the underside of my closed eyes.

I unpack in the morning, lay my things across the wardrobe, cracks in the floorboards to keep the draft out. I drop some into the pockets of my jacket; knuckle dice, a bible with gold edged pages; so I can feign clumsiness and let them fall during the day; clues, scattered across rooms

I pass the door and half pause. I imagine pressing my ear against it, feeling for a heartbeat fluttering underneath the marble.

I go upstairs.

On the third floor, I try to map where the bedrooms lie beneath my feet. I call back the image of the hallway with its code of doors, see which floorboards feels warmer, if the tiny flares of each fish’s heartbeat can pulse through the wood.

Off one of the rooms there is a balcony - light patchworked between wrought iron. A person, sunlight forcing them into 2D papercut, sits at a table, bent over a notebook. I hover in the doorway, watching.

Her notebook, pages spread like lungs, and practiced concentration gives the impression of a surgeon performing a difficult procedure. The wind whittles her hair to wood shavings. She adjust pieces of paper on the pages, re-apply glue, add a comment in careful, backwards sloping handwriting. I imagine what she’s writing - and the first word to mind is *secrets*, syllables a dragon’s hiss. A tiny scrap of newspaper sticks to the edge of her thumb, a dragon’s scale.

I imagine a paper exoskeleton stretching up her arms, rippling with each pulse. She sits on the balcony so she can feel the sun even with eyes collaged over.

"I'm Brennan," I'd tell her.

"Molly," she'll reply. A good name for her; solid, constant.

But I don't move, and so the routine continues, dizzily, paper to glue to page. I wait as long as I can before returning to my room.

I close the door wondering whether night fell because I returned, or I returned because night fell. When I call on memories of the sky, hanging from wires above the balcony's stage, the images come sluggishly, through rippled glass. For a second when I turn my props out my pockets, I forget they are not mine.

I wake up early, sunlight greying the ceiling. In the numb half waking, I paint pictures across the walls. Molly, sat at the base of my bed, sticking coloured paper over the violin string tendons of her neck. She smiles, paper origamiing at the corners of her mouth. Huge yellow fish, bellies lifted in a cabaret line between Lulu's ribs, swallowing the early morning sunrise and glowing strawberry.

The house, maze-like, leads me back to the door, the house's white marble iris. I press the back of my hand against the stone, like you're told to do in a fire, checking for scraps of heat, but it's cold.

The days fluctuate past. My hands are made of paper, thin and feather light. The door is the only thing which feels real beneath my fingers.

"Don't ask, don't tell," The girls chorus, and I wonder if others stayed at the house before me. If they left or died or fell prey to this wandering sickness, not able to not wonder.

I am at the door again. I hold a glass ballerina in one hand, a locket in the other, but they refuse to provide disguise. All light passes straight through me.

I take the handle of the door, turn it.

The room behind the door is small, softly lit. The ceiling tapers to a dome, sunshine confettiing through stained glass, bright and sharp and honest. At the centre, a box, ribbed with leather straps, lid and base two lips pressed tightly together, and I am next to it touching the walls, the box, the clasp.

Behind me, movement, sharpening into a flurry of footsteps - two people, walking out of time. Not the characters puppeted into answers, but real people, movements blurred with enigma. Rippled away from the doorway, eyes not quite meeting mine. My hands burn cold. Surely they will shake their skeletons out my cupboards. Surely they will teach me to not ask questions, let me lie and believe me when I do.

But as I watch, they turn, eyes dropping to the ground, heads lowered. They disappear upstairs, round corners, footsteps fading to echo, until the sound cools on my fingertips and the house is silent again.

Commended: The Portent
Eleanor Harvey

He places the easel on the canvas and begins to wait. It is always the most boring part of the process, the waiting. Often, his sitters are temperamental. They believe they are paying him to do whatever they want, and if that includes waiting in their luxurious drawing rooms for the moment they arrive three hours late, then so be it. He looks around the room, wondering which colours he will use for the background. A mix of browns and black, for the wood panels. He will avoid putting the floor into the image unless she insists; the carpet is a difficult pattern, one that he does not wish to replicate.

He looks up, and realises that a woman is staring at him. This must be his client, Lady Emma Shaw. She has striking red hair, and is wearing a long black dress, which trails behind her a little as she walks. He wonders if she is in mourning, but in that case the dash of red on her sleeves would hardly be appropriate. She says nothing for a moment, seemingly appraising him as he is her. Then she steps forward.

‘Good morning, sir. You are the artist I commissioned, yes? You painted a picture of Lady Elizabeth Townes recently?’

‘Yes, madam. Do you know Lady Townes?’ It is generally best to ask a few questions of the sitter early on, to make them less nervous that an unknown man will be staring at them for days on end as they have to sit stock still. But she simply nods, and clicks her fingers. For a moment, he is confused; is she clicking her fingers at him, expecting him to perform some task like a servant? But no. A barn owl flies in through the doorway, landing neatly on her outstretched hands. She begins to stroke its head.

‘I want you to paint him as well – sitting on my hand like this.’

He can hardly speak for a moment, he is so shocked. He has never seen anything quite like this before, let alone painted it. But he forces himself to respond. He cannot risk being dismissed from such a lucrative job.

‘With respect, madam, I cannot. I do not paint animals. Only people.’

‘But with equal respect, Mr Valentine, that is exactly what I am paying you to do. I am sure if you are unhappy with my demands, I can find another artist who will be more obliging. I admired your portrait of Lady Townes, but there are most likely plenty of other talented painters I would find equally impressive.’

She speaks calmly, but he has no doubt that she means what she says. After all, this is London; you are rarely more than a few yards away from some aspiring, yet struggling, artist who he is equally sure would seize the opportunity delightedly.

‘Of course not, madam. It is just that barn owls like this one are used as symbols of death in many paintings. You would not, I am sure, want people to draw incorrect conclusions from

the completed work, especially alongside your black dress.' He has improvised this, saying each word at the exact moment he thought it. Still, he hopes it will have some effect.

'I am sure no one will think anything of the kind. Anyway, is it not true that painters such as yourself often use redhaired women as symbols of danger or slyness? And yet I am sure you would not like me to get a pair of scissors and shear my own hair off.'

He decides he must abandon the subject. She stands still, stroking the owl. She does not look at him, but the bird does, its eyes seeming to follow him as he moves. He begins to sketch, capturing the woman's hand midway through the air, just touching its soft down. She looks at the bird with a strange affection and amusement, as if she can sense his discomfort and is enjoying it.

'Would you not prefer to be looking directly out of the portrait madam? That is the more traditional and generally preferred position to take in such pieces.'

She doesn't answer him, or even look up, although she must have heard him. He decides that to repeat himself would perhaps be pushing his luck just a little too far. He is sure he has annoyed her enough already.

He sketches on, outlining and shading the woman and her owl, the wooden plates, and a small potted tree that stands behind her.

'What kind of fruit does that tree bear, madam?' he asks, attempting to smooth over the potential awkwardness.

'It is a pomegranate tree. It will grow too large to be kept in here soon. Did you know, the ancient Greeks called it the fruit of death? Hades, the god of death, gave Persephone one to eat so she would be forced to stay in the underworld and marry him. If you ate in the underworld, you had to remain there forever, you understand. A rather unpleasant story, really.'

Once again, she speaks without emotion, slowly and calmly, as if she was describing the weather. He resolves to be silent. The owl, the black dress, the fruit tree; everything seems to lead back to death eventually. Perhaps the poor woman is dying, he thinks, and she wants to leave some kind of clue behind. Or perhaps she is preoccupied by her fate, and has inadvertently surrounded herself with symbols of it, taunting herself with the loss of her life at such a young age. That may explain her attitude, her coldness, her attire: she is grieving for herself.

He returns to the house several times over the following weeks. She doesn't seem to get increasingly ill or have trouble standing so long, never asking him to come for any reason. Perhaps he was wrong about her; maybe it is simply a coincidence, or she is somewhat eccentric. On the final day, he thanks her for her patience and shows her the painting at last, asking if she likes it. She smiles, seeming genuinely happy for the first time, and nods approvingly. Perhaps she likes the owl, which he has depicted staring out, as it did for the

entirety of the process, its black eyes the focus of the piece. He has made the picture darker than he originally intended - maybe the talk of death affected him – but he is satisfied overall. 'I will take it home tonight madam. There are just one of two things to change slightly. I will return it in two days.' She thanks him, and he leaves.

That night, once the minor alterations are complete, he stares at the painting by candlelight. He knows it is vain, but he finds the work captivating. Lady Shaw was right; redhaired women are often devious and cruel in paintings, tricking others to their own ends. That, combined with the fact it seems to be a portent of death, means it probably won't be very popular with viewers; art connoisseurs may be confused by its unclear mix of meanings, and acquaintances may not like that Lady Shaw is turned away. She will have to keep it in the more personal rooms of her home, although presumably that is her intention considering her specific demands for its design. He turns away, but feels compelled in some strange way, to turn back. He feels light-headed suddenly, hot and cold at the same time. He shivers, but begins to take off his jacket. He cannot catch his breath, gasping and reaching out to something to lean on for support. He misses the edge of the table he is aiming for, and falls to the ground. He stares up at the painting above him, taunting him. It really is one of his best works. Finally, he understands. A portent of death, but not hers, as he had thought. Confused thoughts rush around his mind: Persephone, pomegranates, death, mourning, wooden panels, deviousness, an unpleasant story. Then the voices in his head fall silent, and everything goes black.

Inspired by 'Il Barbagianni/The Owl' by Valentine Cameron Prinsep

Category: Poems

1st Place: The Unknowable Mystery of Two Best Friends

Megan Loftus

J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis

Were the best of friends;

Until they were not. What happened in those empty spaces, marble pages, between two matching souls and warring yew trees bitter on their berries?

A mystery.

A hundred years, a young bisexual wondering

Why her heroes never looked like her - Tolkien, Lewis

Her childhood was in their brains, muddy feet and leaves in hair and broken sticks for hunting orcs; pressing all the way to the back of every wardrobe in the hope

Of Narnia;

Now she's sixteen, jutting chin, angry

That historians still claim Achilles and Patroclus were just friends

Angry, and she knows

There's more to this tale than there seems.

J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis

Would doubtless hate to read this; staunchly Christian and 1930s sensible

Did this flint a lovers quarrel? Deep in the endless rabbit holes of Wikipedia,

Disappointment. Endless proclamations, love for sensible female wives. Stepping-stone keyboard-

Lewis is suspicious, relationships with older women? Boarding school (male) sweethearts?

But

Tolkien converted him to Catholicism, maybe only a heterosexual could write Legolas and Gimli and not laugh. I travel, down cobbled streets,

And through the gabled halls of Oxford, my magnifying glass distorting

Their lives in hopeful queerness.

Why did they fall apart? Was it the steady rusting of friendship, gnawing jealousy, rather than the hot broken bite of love?

I read between every line until there is more between than line and I begin to wonder

Did I make it all up? Is it me that needs someone to be gay like I need a sun to grow under?

Search.

Brush away the dust from attic boxes, letters spill out like secret blood

Moonlight letters that smell of love.

2nd Place: Miss Moore's Wallpaper
Allison Xu

On a rain-slicked Saturday,
Lily and I were playing hide and seek on the wooded hillside
when Miss Moore invited us into her clapboard house.
The aroma of freshly baked Danish pastries
was too alluring to resist.
Her small gray house perched at the bottom
of the hill, lonely and dismal.
We sat on the carved wood loveseat
and savored the pastry's buttery and flaky texture,
our eyes roaming around.

Something made my heart stutter—
not the dim light, not the musty smell,
not Miss Moore's pointed long nose or her lopsided smile,
but the wallpaper that covered every inch
of the wall—briars woven with strings of brambles
and spiky leaves, as if thorny snakes twisting and crawling.
A fly landed on the wall and was immediately
wrapped in vines, sinking into the floral pattern.
Startled by the sight, I grabbed Lily's hand and we thrust out of the door,
dashing down the rocky road until we had to gasp for air.
I tried to explain what I had spotted,
but Lily swore the wallpaper was only pretty pink roses.

Since that day, nobody had seen Miss Moore—
she vanished inside her own house.
Rumors spread that she was a witch
and one of her potions had gone wrong.
At night, people heard a whispering pitchy cry
with the scratching sound of fingernails echoing from her house.
I knew they must be from behind the wallpaper,
but nobody would believe me.

3rd Place: The Whitechapel Streets
Caitlin Satchel

Streets upon streets of cobblestone roads
intertwine, a malodorous stench emanating
from the sewage. Beggars line the maze
of alleyways in daylight; destitute women
rise with the moon. The tacit law of
those who pass through: keep your head
down on the Whitechapel streets.

I lower my hat, casting a sinister shadow
to disguise my features. Hidden in the depths
of my coat pocket, my slender fingers grip the
handle of a kitchen knife. Darkness is my
co-conspirator, hiding the soaked fabric from the
gaze of the restless vagrants – there's been another
murder on the Whitechapel streets.

First was Mary on a hot August night, Annie
followed seven days later. If my time with
Elizabeth was not interrupted, there would be
no need for Catherine the next hour. Fifth
time is the charm, or so they say, and thus
dear Mary Jane Kelly will be the last to catch
the eye of my treacherous husband, or perhaps
I will break the pattern to make him the final
murder of the Whitechapel streets.

The morning papers will deliberate my identity, as
rumours of my sobriquet, Jack the Ripper, disperse
in whispers. I will fake a gasp and join the crowd –
after all, they envisage a Jack, not a Jill, to be the one
to kill the hustlers of the Whitechapel streets.

Highly Commended: Credits For A Film About Missing People

Caitlin Satchel

call sister, sister – cleave the vowels like saccharine soap suds
ears keened in to the cracked laugh of the newsman on the radio
incidentally, my sister once wrung herself giddy on the bathroom floor
and I found
her belly-flat like a rusalka¹, big
in her own skin and open to all hands
sister, I'm relearning the thrill of teething
into the dough of my skin in our salvaged baby books and the ugly
symmetry of our toothed grins, watching the indents form and fade
like an amaryllis dilating
you told me to wait, said I might be scolded for feeding
something already festering between the seams, don't you know, ripening takes time,
dear. I waited and now my blood walks like a wooden ghost, every day my hands
replacing yours at the dinner table
sister, I'm finding you moon-faced at daybreak
honey leaching from your eyes, over and over again in the gamey
warmth of a big cat in the briar, the little girl all gone.
but this time my footsteps give me away and I tip forward on my toes,
walk on my knuckles. forgive me, I can't help romanticizing your slurred speech
knowing in the pit of my stomach that I could blow through the ceiling if only I could
hold enough breath, watch it bruise, cirrhosed like lace, and give in –
the small dead space in the crook of an arm.
sister, every day mother's finding you in pictures of pruned
skin at the baptismal font but I'm too quick to remember the crucifixion scene beyond the
terminus of our church's sanctuary, the open palms splayed on the cross like butterflies
in an entomologist's case,
and am all too guilty for it.

¹ In Slavic folklore, a *rusalka* is a malicious water spirit of a young woman or unbaptized child who has died in a river.

Highly Commended: Crow
Martha Iris Blue

still state, rainy days,
shadows of summer, silver
twilit moon-ravens

waltz;

snowdrop snow-clocks count
frosted days by my teardrops,
drop endless dew-drips,

frozen

silhouette-hewn trees,
midwinter skeletons, hide
black clots of bleak crows

sniggering

whose explorations
set shaded rainbows deep in
winter's faint starlight

searching

for red fox, spill of
slinking rust of slipped mishap,
blur of furred form,

-furtively-

this spool of black crows
uncoils in black feathered thread-
hoar-frost-fringed white-scapes,

watch

still-breaths cloud me
as crimson-bleed sunsets quit
skies, leaving brown frowns,

peace

explodes cluttered crows,
winter's silhouette recedes,
Earth's backbone stretches

Commended: We're Flying At 1000 Feet
Lily Whitelock

A Pacific breeze floats in the air, Thick
with the scent of do and dare.

We must be on you,
but cannot see you.

There the single kestrel floats, Watch
her soaring high.

Feathered fuselage - wings spread,
Silver wingspan wide.

-but gas is running low.

The gage swoops,
The moment tilts south,
The slipstream steels
Cold words from her mouth.

Have been unable to reach you by radio.

One - heart sinks.
Two - nose dives.
Three - plane plummets. Running
south - four by five.

We are flying at 1000 feet.

Wind screeches in her ears.
The game is up, she's losing height. A
dial whirrs and beats its wings, The
spinner sinking out of sight.

Now the aquiline body plunges,
The engine losing heat,

Deep below the melting waves

Beneath the sea

1000 feet.

Commended: The Enigma Machine
Isabel Herbert

Somewhere in dull incandescence
Of wheel twist and cog revolution
A formula cast in iron
Untangled by Bombe resolution

Left rotor, centre rotor, right rotor,
Twenty-six steel cables
Switch on the motor
And wait. To start
Again tomorrow.

The demythologised cryptogram
Types its lonely Morse dance once again,
When Bombe's metallic clock strikes
Its efforts are all in vain.

One-hundred-and-fifty-eight
million-
million-
million-
combinations. Brought to the ground
by foreign civilians.

Over and over, rhythmic on steel
The twist of a key and clunk of a wheel.
But the system is solved, the code is cracked,
The World War decoded; the alliance hacked.

Commended: Rubik's
Evie Alam

Rubik's cube haunts me,
Perches high upon my shelf,
Smirking taunts of blue and
Green and red.
It writhes with impatience to be solved,
And every time I leave the room,
Each perfectly yellow square inches
Closer to another in twisted pity
Of my incapability.
Hours and minutes and seconds
Seep through the small block
Like an epidemic,
Teeth snared and devouring,
Until Uno!
Wrong game.
This kaleidoscope of entertainment's,
Chokehold grows tighter and tighter,
Or perhaps I grow weaker.
Rubik's sphere no longer haunts me,
Bundled away in the corner under my
Laundry.
I think my grip may have been too tight
But, still,
Checkmate.

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 25 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.

