

2009

HASSRA Literary Competition



Results Brochure

2009 HASSRA Literary Competition

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2009 HASSRA Literary Competition



Introduction

This is the eighth year that HASSRA has staged the HASSRA Literary competition and once again the entries were of an extremely high standard. We received the largest volume of entries since the competition was launched therefore thanks to all the entrants for making this year's competition so successful. I hope that everyone enjoyed the chance to demonstrate their passion and skill for writing. I would also wish to offer my special congratulations to the winners, runners up, highly commended entrants whose entries are reproduced within this booklet.

I would also like to pass on my special thanks and sincere appreciation to our competition judge, Jacqueline Wilkin, who had the unenviable task of assessing each contrasting entry and comparing style, the effectiveness of the writing and the engagement of the reader. This difficult job, coupled with the sheer volume of material, was a major undertaking and one which was very much welcomed.

I very much hope you enjoy the examples reproduced from this year's competition and that they inspire you to put pen to paper in readiness for the 2010 competition.

Sam Luchmun

HASSRA Central Support

Judges Details



Jackie Wilkin is an experienced literature and creative writing tutor with the University of Manchester, the WEA and residential colleges including Denman. She also speaks on literary and popular language topics, leads Retreats nationwide and works with book groups up and down the country to help them to get the most out of their book selections.

Jackie has just retired from full-time university lecturing in literature and is enjoying having more time for writing. She writes poetry, short stories and articles for magazines, is the book reviewer for the magazine *WI Life* and has just completed her first radio play.

Judge's Overview

The selection of the winning poems has been very difficult indeed this year. Congratulations to HASSRA members on an impressively varied entry of almost a hundred poems. Poems of deep grief and loss, poems of war and Alzheimer's rubbed shoulders with tender poems of family life, comic poems about dentists, wry poems about middle age and even a deeply angry poem about politicians' expenses!

But poetry is a craft and an art as well as an expression of emotion. It channels feelings into a unique pattern which makes the reader, for a few moments, share the poet's world. It demands as much mastery of technique as a dance, a soufflé, a portrait or a Frank Lampard goal.

The best poems among the entries understand this. They say many things in a few words (look at Lindsey Archer's *Her Final Room*). Like the Titanic iceberg - ten per cent on the surface and ninety per cent below- their imagery powerfully expresses emotion by the use of subtlety and oblique suggestion. Neal Jackson's poem, for example, doesn't tell us that he is lonely and grieving for a lost love- the imagery does that.

But poetry is also there simply to surprise and delight us. Many of the entries achieved this and almost all were a pleasure to read.

Keep writing! Mastery of a craft takes practice, even for us ordinary mortals

Winning Poem

Neal Jackson Nottingham (Newton House)

Park Life

See the lonely boy, out on the weekend

Trying to make it pay.

Can't relate to joy, he tries to speak and

Can't begin to say.

'Out on the Weekend' - Neil Young.

In this ugly town there is a park as beautiful as it is unexpected.

The entrance is a secret door in an enchanting children's story.

I sit on a blackened bench, a burnt offering not ascended to God.

A circular path constricts a jigsaw of flower beds;

grass cuttings form tracks of green-grey ash;

daisies and dandelions pockmark the languid lawn;

a sapling in a wooden frame morphs into a giant's cricket stumps.

My mobile phone connects me to you but you rarely ameliorate

my solitude.

Invisible birds trill and squeak like a dial-up internet connection.

A boy bounces his football, his sister walks a scooter, too timid to ride.

I walk the incline to the Great War memorial - its curved wall an

aerial frown, its bronze wreaths dimples on a stony face.

Your face is fading fast, the first feint layer of my palimpsest memory.

Judge's comments

An elegantly arresting opening leads the reader into the poem just as the poet is led into the park. The imagery of burning and constriction takes up the theme of the superscription and suggests the poet's unhappy feelings. The active verbs - 'constricts', 'form' and 'pockmarks' - create an energy which is often missing from descriptive scene-setting.

The poet's lack of connection is suggested by the imagery of the silent mobile phone and the e-mails which haven't arrived. A hint of the woman's feelings is given in 'too timid to ride' and the 'frown' and the 'stony' face of the War Memorial. The use of the unusual 'palimpsest' and the play of 'feint' and 'faint' leave us with a hint of future relationships when this relationship has been rubbed out and the parchment written on again.

Like all good poems, Park Life delivers more as we re-read. A well-deserved win

Runner-Up Poem

Lindsey Archer Romford PS

Her Final Room

It's cold in here.

Too cold for her.

And too clean.

And too empty.

Can we go now?

I'll wait outside,

you take your time.

Just, one last look.

On her smooth face

the promised peace.

Released from pain,

her strength extinct.

It's quiet in here.

Too quiet for her.

And much too cold.

For Mum.

Judge's comments

A deceptively simple poem which again offers more on re-reading.

The opening is dramatic, that is, it gives us immediate access to two characters, a place and a situation. The central tension of the poem is quickly seized, the tension between the warmth and untidiness of a full and loving life and the coldness of the

final room which does and does not contain the writer's 'Mum'. The uncomfortable feelings which death evokes is skilfully suggested in verse two where one character needs to leave and one to stay.

The two final verses wrestle with what should be the case –peace, relief from pain- and the reality, that the mother is absent. The effect of leaving the word 'Mum' until the end is to sum up the contrast between the shell which is in the room and the real person who is not.

As often, a restrained tone creates stronger feeling as might otherwise be the case.

A fine poem.

Highly Commended Poem

Irene Krampf York PS

Drawing Flowers

Drawing flowers, colouring monochrome petals, adding leaves and clumps of black grass across the page, whilst glancing hopefully at the pulsating clock.

Six roses, complete with thorns passes another minute,

Matchstick family stands before a square box house with triangular windows and smoke bellowing chimneystack, a fence enclosed the flowers and black grass

Now a dog has joined the family, a bubble-two-wheeled car hanging in mid-air, waiting for a road to be drawn.

Oh dear! The car has landed in a stream with fish nibbling at its tyres!

A haunted wood lures you near as you follow the winding path to the top of the page, just past the tumbling wall.

Creatures fly out from within – they could be bats – they could be birds – I guess we'll never know as the meeting has drawn to a close!

Judge's Comments

The poem draws us in without preamble, the present participles and long lines reflecting and creating the continuity of the doodling. The 'drawings' are a delight, the diction and active verbs making them vividly present to the inner eye of the reader. Charmingly, the objects take on a life of their own and surprise the writer as much as the reader – 'Now a dog...', 'Oh dear! The car has landed', 'they could be bats- they could be birds'.

The ending is perhaps a little lame, not quite worthy of the rest of the poem. It is always worth trying to end with something striking or memorable, often something suggestive rather than directly expressed.

Highly Commended Poem

Graham Brown Newport IOW JCP

Compulsory Games

It was always Wednesday afternoon

and invariably cold and damp.

I would stand by the touchline

with my feet already growing numb

in my outsize mud-caked Manfield boots,

making stud holes in the hardening ground

and keeping well away from the action.

So, the match went by without me.

Even when it was half-time

I didn't bother to change ends.

"Hey, Brown. Get yourself involved!"

came the distant shout of the P.E. master

but his voice was lost within the game

as were the breathless taunts of other boys.

Instead I stood, shivering,

watching smoke rise from the nearby crematorium

and wondering how long it would be

until the final whistle.

Judge's Comments

Compulsory Games creates a vividly remembered situation with accomplished economy. The characters – the boy, the adult narrator and the P.E. master- are as graphically realised as the mud, the cold and the damp. The downbeat ending with its ambiguous 'final whistle' deftly brings the boy and the adult narrator together so that the poem opens out into something deeper and makes us wonder a little about the real meaning of the title.

Special Mentions

➤ **Nicola Beckett** (Bolton JCP)

Angel

➤ **June Gregory** (Lytham St. Annes)

The Puppy

➤ **Humphrey Hardy** (Taunton CSA)

The Unmatched

➤ **Concepta King** (Walsall Brownhills JCP)

Incommunicado

➤ **Nick Lloyd** (Pembroke Dock JCP)

And Then There You Were

➤ **Brian Watson** (Retired. North East)

Sonnet 1

Author	Title	Location	HASSRA Region
MARTIN ALLEN	MY BEST FRIEND	ISLE OF WIGHT JCP	SOUTH EAST
LINDSEY ARCHER	HER FINAL ROOM	ROMFORD PS	LONDON
LINDSEY ARCHER	MY GRAND DESIGN	ROMFORD PS	LONDON
RICHARD ARCHER	POETRY IN MOTION	MIDLANDS DCS	WEST MIDLANDS
RICHARD ARCHER	TAKE IN AWAY PHILOSOPHY	MIDLANDS DCS	WEST MIDLANDS
MOZ BAKER	THE END OF A PERFECT DAY	MIDLANDS DCS	WEST MIDLANDS
NICOLA BECKETT	ANGEL	BOLTON JCP	NORTH WEST
NICOLA BECKETT	ENTWINED	BOLTON JCP	NORTH WEST
NICOLA BECKETT	THE RIVAL	BOLTON JCP	NORTH WEST
GRAHAM BEE	UNTITLED	LEICESTER YEOMAN STREET	EAST MIDLANDS
GRAHAM BEE	UNTITLED	LEICESTER YEOMAN STREET	EAST MIDLANDS
GRAHAM BEE	UNTITLED	LEICESTER YEOMAN STREET	EAST MIDLANDS
JOAN BELLYOU	THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM	HACKNEY BDC	LONDON
ELEANOR BROADERS	FIRELIGHT	PEEL PARK	FYLDE
ELEANOR BROADERS	UNTITLED	PEEL PARK	FYLDE
ELEANOR BROADERS	VICTOR VICTORIOUS	PEEL PARK	FYLDE
HAYLEY BROUGHTON	CLOUDS	TAUNTON CONTACT CENTRE	SOUTH WEST
HAYLEY BROUGHTON	LOVE	TAUNTON CONTACT CENTRE	SOUTH WEST
HAYLEY BROUGHTON	SPIRITUAL SLIMMING	TAUNTON CONTACT CENTRE	SOUTH WEST
GRAHAM BROWN	COMPULSORY GAMES	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST
GRAHAM BROWN	HOTEL	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST

GRAHAM BROWN	SEVEN YEAR ITCH	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST
PATRICIA BROWN	MELLIFLUOUS AND OTHER 'HONEYED' WORDS 'ZZZZZ'	BRADFORD DEBT CENTRE	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
YVONNE BROWN	FAIRGROUND ATTRACTION	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST
YVONNE BROWN	HOLY WAR	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST
YVONNE BROWN	POLAR EXPLORER	NEWPORT IOW JCP	SOUTH EAST
GLYNIS BULLER	PARADISE TOGETHER	BURNLEY JCP	NORTH WEST
KARINA CULLEN	MEMORIES	HEREFORD JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
GAYNOR DAVIES	EXPENSIVE EXPENSES	PORTH DEBT CENTRE	WALES
GAYNOR DAVIES	LIKE THEIR FATHERS	PORTH DEBT CENTRE	WALES
GAYNOR DAVIES	TWENTY YEARS ON	PORTH DEBT CENTRE	WALES
PRAMJIT DHADLI	UNTITLED	MIDLANDS DCS	WEST MIDLANDS
PAUL DOUGLASS	BAD HAIR DAYS	YORK JCP	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
PAUL DOUGLASS	MY PRAYER	YORK JCP	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
PAUL DOUGLASS	THE BLACK GENERAL	YORK JCP	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
PAUL DOUGLASS	TOMORROW, TOO FAR	YORK JCP	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
SUE ELLIOTT	WHAT MAKES YOU SMILE?	LEICESTER NEW WALK JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
CHRIS GIBBON	MY GODDAUGHTER	CARDIFF COMPANIES HOUSE	WALES
CHERYL GRAHAM	WHIT SUNDAY SUNSHINES	STOCKPORT CSA	NORTH WEST
JUNE GREGORY	THE AGE OF THE DENTIST	LYTHAM ST ANNES	FYLDE
JUNE GREGORY	THE PUPPY	LYTHAM ST ANNES	FYLDE
HUMPHREY HARDY	THE UNMATCHED	TAUNTON CSA	SOUTH WEST
NEAL JACKSON	COUNTRY PARK COMMUNION	NOTTINGHAM NEWTON HOUSE	EAST MIDLANDS
NEAL JACKSON	PARK LIFE	NOTTINGHAM NEWTON HOUSE	EAST MIDLANDS
NEAL JACKSON	THE MERRY MAN	NOTTINGHAM NEWTON HOUSE	EAST MIDLANDS
CONCEPTA KING	INCOMMUNICADO	WALSALL BROWNHILLS JCP	WEST MIDLANDS

CONCEPTA KING	LESE-MAJESTE - DISPOSITION	WALSALL BROWNHILLS JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
CONCEPTA KING	MIDNIGHT FEAST	WALSALL BROWNHILLS JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
IRENE KRAMPF	DRAWING FLOWERS	YORK PS	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
IRENE KRAMPF	EPITAPH TO A CAT	YORK PS	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
NICK LLOYD	AND THEN THERE YOU WERE	PEMBROKE DOCK JCP	WALES
NICK LLOYD	LIBERTINE DANCE	PEMBROKE DOCK JCP	WALES
NICK LLOYD	THEN	PEMBROKE DOCK JCP	WALES
LINDA MASON	THE WEATHER	SUTTON-IN-ASHFIELD JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
ROBERT MCVEY	THE SMOKERS LAMENT	GLASGOW MOSSPARK JCP	SCOTLAND
ANGELA MITCHELL	HOW CAN I HELP YOU	NORWICH MOUNTERGATE JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
SHAUN MOWER	FOR HARLEY	LIVERPOOL HUYTON JCP	NORTH WEST
CECILIA NYAGA-ONAMU	MOTIVE TO WORK	TRAFFORD CONTACT CENTRE	NORTH WEST
JO O'CONNOR	REMEMBERING J	ILFORD JCP	LONDON
JO O'CONNOR	THINKING OF YOU	ILFORD JCP	LONDON
KEVIN OGDEN	THE CAGE	HALIFAX BDC	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
OMOLARA OLUKOTUN	IMAGINE A WORLD	WEMBLEY DCS	LONDON
OMOLARA OLUKOTUN	THE HIDDEN	WEMBLEY DCS	LONDON
DENISE ROBINSON	BUCKET OF TEARS	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
SUSAN PETIT	DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT	NEWCASTLE CITY JCP	NORTH EAST
SULTANA PRAVIN	WHAT IS THE POINT	BIRMINGHAM RAVENHURST JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
SULTANA PRAVIN	WHO AM I?	BIRMINGHAM RAVENHURST JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
JULIE SADLER	MOSES IN THE WILDERNESS	WORCESTER BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
JULIE SADLER	PERVERSE	WORCESTER BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
JULIE SADLER	STRONG	WORCESTER BDC	WEST MIDLANDS
KERRY SHARPE	SPRING	SUTTON-IN-ASHFIELD JCP	WEST MIDLANDS

SUE HOULIHAN	RESULT!	COSHAM JCP	SOUTH EAST
JOHN STAPLETON	MUM OUR HERO	PLYMOUTH CSA	SOUTH WEST
JOHN STAPLETON	THE BULLY	PLYMOUTH CSA	SOUTH WEST
JOHN STAPLETON	THE POET	PLYMOUTH CSA	SOUTH WEST
TIM STAPLETON	TAKE HOLD OF MY HAND	WELLINGBOROUGH JCP	EAST MIDLANDS
KIM STRETTON	CLOUDS	NORCROSS	FYLDE
KIM STRETTON	NEVER FORGOT	NORCROSS	FYLDE
KIM STRETTON	THE RING	NORCROSS	FYLDE
DAVID SWARBRICK	WAR ON WORDS	LONGBENTON	NORTH EAST
GEORGIA THORNTON	CAT	PRESTON JCP	NORTH WEST
GEORGIA THORNTON	MY WAR	PRESTON JCP	NORTH WEST
LINDA UPTON	NIGHTMARE	SOLIHULL JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
SHARON VAUGHAN	MY BEST FRIENDS	PERRY BAR JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
GEORGE WALTER	A COAT OF MANY COLOURS	BURY ST EDMUNDS JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
GEORGE WALTER	RPT.	BURY ST EDMUNDS JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
GEORGE WALTER	THE KING OF CATS IS DEAD	BURY ST EDMUNDS JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
BRIAN WATSON	LADY IN DISTRESS	RETIRED	NORTH EAST
BRIAN WATSON	LEST WE FORGET	RETIRED	NORTH EAST
BRIAN WATSON	SONNET 1	RETIRED	NORTH EAST
DEREK WHELAN	SUMMER	MANCHESTER DBC	NORTH WEST
MARK WHITESIDE	MY TREE	PRESTON PALATINE HOUSE	NORTH WEST
MARK WHITESIDE	SAND	PRESTON PALATINE HOUSE	NORTH WEST
WENDY WILKINSON	ALONE	LEEDS QUARRY HOUSE	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

Judge's Overview

Successful short stories are probably harder to write than successful novels. A novel allows space for expansion but in a short story every word must count. Plot is crucial. It must be both convincing and shapely, drawing us in immediately and ending with the kind of satisfying, centre-of-the-racquet thump that we hear from a top tennis player. Setting, atmosphere and characters must be quickly sketched and dialogue ring true. Preamble, long description and predictable plots are temptations which we have to resist.

Given the difficulties of the form, this year's stories were a testament to HASSRA members' hard work and talent. The wide variety of ideas and the fact that almost all the stories had something good to offer made adjudication a pleasure.

Congratulations in particular to the winner, Lindsey Archer, and the runner-up, Brian McGuinness, for two absorbing stories, deftly handled and rich in setting and atmosphere.

Winning Short Story

Lindsey Archer Romford PS

Starburst

My Pa could sing like an angel. I loved the times when we all used to sit on the rug in the back porch and listen to him, our four blonde heads gazing at him: Momma with my baby sister, Chrissie, on her lap, Boyd, my eight year old brother, and me. My father taught me to play his guitar and read music too. He said I was a natural. After I played a Hank Williams song to him, one time, he jumped to his feet, and asked to kiss the hand of the legendary Shelby June Shelton. Then he pretended to buy four tickets to see me play the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville on an imaginary phone. Boyd was getting as good as me but he was more interested in bicycles and cars. We didn't have either. We didn't even have a phone. I asked for new shoes one time but the look on my Momma's face taught me not to ask again.

'Money's tight, Shelby, but when you're a big country an' western star, my darlin', you can have all the priddy things you want.' My Pa said once as he carefully took a new shirt from its plastic wrapping. He got six new shirts a year and his Martin always had new strings. He loved that darn guitar. 'I gotta' look good on stage, Shelby.' And he did look good. He sang with the house band in a club in Knoxville, about twenty miles east, four nights a week. One of the boys from the band would pick him up at six pm, just as Momma got home from working in the offices at the tobacco farm, and bring him home around one in the morning, sometimes later. Momma got so tired and was always asking him to get a job with regular hours but with Pa his music came first.

When my father walked out on us he took all our money. There wasn't much but he took it anyway. He must have decided that we were holding him back. I made a decision too, after nights of lying in bed listening to my Momma cry I promised that he would regret abandoning us. I didn't know how or where to start looking for him, Tennessee is a pretty big place but I knew he wouldn't go far. It was May 1970. I was twelve.

News got round the town like a bushfire that he'd gone. Nosy neighbours called to see Momma and they all asked her the same question:

'What happened to make him run, Ellie?' She kept telling them over and over 'til she was sick of saying it:

'He just up and went in the night with our money and his Martin.'

With my Pa gone there was no one to watch Chrissie during the day, so Momma had to ask her Momma, Grandma Owen to help out. Grandma never liked Pa. 'All he thinks 'bout is hisself. Leaves it to others to make sure you kids get fed. Ellie shouda married Samuel Kent when she had the chance. Only she thought Samuel was too boring. Well, see his fancy house and those smart cars? They don't look so boring now.'

Momma said nothing she just kissed us all then tied her hair back before going off to work. She tried to make our little house nice with flowery curtains in the kitchen and corn dollies arranged on the window sill of the musty bathroom. The walls in our house were covered in orange coloured pine and Momma said it was too dark so she hung patterned blankets on the walls to cheer it up. In the winter, when the wind blasted through the gaps under the doors, shaking the windows and screens, those blankets came off the walls and onto our beds.

The next time I heard my pa's voice was on the radio one Saturday afternoon as I was working at Applewhite's Mini-Mart. It was a real cold day in November 1971, I was wearing Momma's brown sweater with the sleeves turned up under my blue one and an apron over the top but still I shivered each time a customer came in. The transistor radio was on, as usual, and I was putting cookies and Christmas cakes on display, taking deep lungfuls of their sticky sweetness when the DJ announced, in a drawling, deep voice.

'And next up is a local boy. Now, he's whippin' up quite a whirlwind. This is his debut single: Missing my Country Girl, which is stormin' up the country and western charts. See what you think.'

For three whole minutes I could barely breathe. I stared into the grey mesh covering the front of the radio and imagined I could see my father's face. I knew his voice so well. He used to sing to me once upon a time. Was he singing for me now? As he sang about the smell of the poplars I remembered how we used to play in the woods or steal peaches and melons from the farmers market, too many to eat sometimes so we'd pile 'em up in the woods, lie on our bellies and shoot 'em. Momma didn't like us messing with guns so it was our secret. I looked around the store there was only deaf old Mr Frazer cleaning his glasses. I started to mouth the chorus. There I was singing along to my Pa's song. I wanted to run and tell everyone that my Pa was on the radio. He's made it! Now he's gonna' come back for us. Maybe he'll turn up in one of those stretch limousines, Momma will forgive him, he'll buy us all new clothes, and Boyd can have a bike. It'll be wonderful.

Then the DJ said; 'That was our good ol' local boy, Del Shelton. I reckon we're gonna be hearing a lot more from him.' Wait a minute. Del? Who was Del? That was my Pa, Willy Shelton. I didn't understand why he changed his name.

No matter how long Boyd and me stared at the distant curve in the road outside our house and no matter how much we wished for him, Pa never showed. We only whispered his song out in the poplar woods and in bed at night but we stopped after a while, because Boyd got to feeling angry. Momma must've heard him on the radio too but she never said a thing so neither did I. In fact, I never heard her say his name again. I didn't say a word to anyone 'bout my father, but I didn't have to, his music got played more and more and he appeared in all the music magazines. Kids at school started to sing his songs in my face and laugh, 'Hey! Shabby Shelton! You missing your country Pa? Well, he 'aint missing you!'

One day in October 1973, I was at home browsing through one of the old magazines Momma sometimes brought home from the beauty parlour she cleaned in the evenings: it was four months old, when I saw an ad for the Grand Ole Opry. It listed the up and coming shows and my father's name was there. On 24th December he was playing a special Christmas Eve broadcast. I knew he'd played Washington DC and Carnegie Hall, New York but there was something magical about the Opry. As I let the pages spring from my thumb I saw his name again. I looked at the article but the words didn't sink in because I couldn't keep my eyes off the picture of my father. He was wearing a fancy embroidered shirt, white Stetson, blue jeans looking every bit the country and western star. He looked handsome, still skinny mind and his hair was longer. Next to him was a glamorous blonde woman and she was holding a baby. He had his arms around both of them. The caption read; 'Country sensation, Del Shelton with his fiancée, Lauren and their son, Garrett Delray Shelton.'

What? I felt like my insides had been vacuumed away and all I could hear was my heart thumping in my skull.

'Momma, have you finished reading this?' The words struggled outa' my mouth. Her head appeared around the kitchen door. She was prettier than Lauren but she looked so worried and tired lately.

'Yeah. It's garbage. Don't know why I don't throw it out.'

Why hadn't she thrown it out then? She'd known about Pa playing the Opry all this time. She knew about his girlfriend and baby too. He 'aint never coming back now. Momma had this look, thoughtful or suspicious even. She searched my face. I reckon she heard my thoughts.

On Christmas Eve, I got on the bus to Nashville. The drone of the engine was soothing as I passed through slowly darkening towns. I sat swaying looking out of the window but hardly saw a thing. Holly swags were strung up on the buildings, people were still hurrying in and out of stores loaded up with bags, Christmas lights coloured the shop windows but they didn't touch

me like they usually do. I filed off the bus and walked towards the Opry Theatre. I took a deep breath then walked up the steps of the theatre. My ticket was ripped in half and I was in.

I couldn't believe I was here, in the Opry. The famous backdrop of red and white barn doors were decorated for Christmas, rows of foot high lights ran around the front of the stage and the DJ's stood at their podium, broadcasting on WSM; reminding everyone that the sponsor was Martha White Muffin Mix. I took my seat. It got to nine o'clock, two bands had been on, and now the stage was being set for the main event. A voice filled the theatre;

'Now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the Grand Ole Opry a very special Tennessee boy. He's a rising star, excuse the pun, come a long way in a short time. Let's hear it for Del Shelton.'

The lights dimmed. A single spotlight fell on the boards and everybody in the theatre went quiet. My heart was racing. Del Shelton walked casually into the spotlight and the audience went crazy. He opened with his first hit, 'Missing my Country Girl'. There was screaming, whoops and whistles, mostly from girls who flocked to the front of the stage. He played to them, teasing them and holding out his hand to be touched. He moved expertly around the stage, striking poses with his guitar, breaking into line dancing steps and smiling the whole time. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He sang a version of 'Coward of the County', before launching into three of his best selling hits, 'My Destiny'; 'Too Late for Regrets'; and 'Rising Star'. I pushed down to the front of the stage amongst the other girls who were holding cameras above their heads, snapping away. This was worth the extra shifts I'd done at the store; it was almost worth the teasing at school. Here I was, not ten feet from my father, it was the closest I'd been to him in three years.

Looking at his face was like looking in the mirror. I stared hard at my father's brown eyes, willing him to see me. It worked! He looked straight at me. He was shocked because the smile froze on his face and for a moment I think he forgot he was a hot, new star without a history. I reached out to take his hand. Instead of reaching down to me, he bent and kissed the hand of one of his fans. Then, he moved to the other side of the stage and stayed there, I had to stand on tip toes but, he didn't look over to me again. I put my camera up to my eye and saw him perform with his charming smile and slick moves. When I pushed the shutter my Pa stopped singing; he stopped moving. He staggered then swayed forward and fell into the audience. Girls were screaming and I felt the confusion all around me but I shoved through the crowd to get to where he was laying on the floor. He'd landed on his back his left hand clutched the neck of his Martin. His face was blackened by a single bullet hole in his forehead. That's when I realised something. Del Shelton wasn't my pa and Willy Shelton was gone for good.

On Boyd's twelfth birthday in April 1974, Grandma bought him a brand new bike and he got a telephone call from Ma. She was missing us bad but Samuel Kent's lawyer was working hard to get her a shorter sentence. He was real good to us and was especially kind to little Chrissie, seeing as how her Momma was in prison, an' all. Pa's record company asked me to make a record, sorta' in his memory, so my debut album, Starburst, is gonna' be released in July and, thanks to Pa's royalties, we've got it pretty good.

Judge's comments

An absorbing short story with an imaginative setting which effortlessly draws the reader in to the Country and Western world. The characters are swiftly realised in their small-town milieu and the dialogue convinces. The climax, with its genuine surprise is skilfully achieved without over-explanation.

Well done!

Runner-Up Short Story

Brian McGuinness Liverpool Ice

A Time for Faith

Detective Leary clasped a filthy handkerchief to his face and approached the altar, carefully negotiating the tangled, smouldering debacle that fanned out across the church's marble floor. He reached the rail and gripped it tightly, listening to his thumping heartbeat above his gasps of breath whilst counting the decimated bodies. Many still had their hands joined together in prayer, so quick was the attack. Telephone warnings were confined to the last century, a fact Leary's more experienced, weather-beaten colleagues had recalled, often with aloof affection.

Leary felt faint. His throat constricted from both the smoke, and the thick bile in his throat, produced from a compound of anger, horror and sorrow. He took a moment to compose himself and looked skyward momentarily at the church's ornate ceiling and through the damaged stained glass windows that were now illuminated by emergency service blue. He looked for hope but found none; *not even up there*. Any lingering faith he had in his fellow man had been obliterated four days earlier when he was confronted with the devastating aftermath of the Coney Island funfair attack. Then, Leary's only comfort was in foolishly thinking that the extremist's passion for destruction could never be more callous. But this, a communion procession, with innocent children the primary target was unprecedented, at least on American soil.

Leary was shaken from his thoughtful trance by Sergeant Riley; his huge frame cannoning against the vestibule doors, before he shuffled unceremoniously to Leary, his customary clipboard in hand.

'How many can you make out Leary? We got them all accounted for?'

Leary winced at Riley's wanton disrespect.

'I can't tell Riley, first count seventeen at the altar, then sixteen on a second count. I can't figure out the numbers in the aisles. We'll need more light over there'

Riley noted on his clipboard, 'seventeen kids confirmed, adults unknown. '

Both men looked out on a devastated church. The front rows were strewn with well dressed relatives, their bodies fused. The sweet stench of burnt flesh, too familiar to Leary swamped the air, an hour since the blast. With the fire out, both men were almost ready to allow a second wave of investigators access to the scene; the quicker the better Leary thought.

In the short time that had elapsed since Leary had been on the scene, he had already deduced striking similarities with this atrocity and the Coney Island attack. From the several thick, black indentations across the marble floor, and the three separate fiery mounds produced from the blasts, Leary knew this was a further grenade attack. His deduction grew a wry smile on his face. Once more there were suspects to trace; this was no suicide attack.

David Leary had been with New York's counter-terrorism unit for three years, and was considered a novice in many people's eyes. That was until the recent escalation of terrorist activity on America's Eastern shoreline meant most graduates had been requisitioned into front line prevention and investigations. This was the third attack in the city in as many weeks and he knew he wasn't ready for it all. The carnage, inhumanity and now this; anything was possible.

Leary and Reilly each took a breath before lighting cigarettes on the front steps of the church. Leary embraced the city's noise hoping it would eventually drown out the hysterical calls for retribution, baying from the gathered crowds. Saint Jean Baptiste Church stood at 76th Street on Lexington Avenue and masses of people had already blocked its intersection. New Yorkers continually bonded together as one with each passing atrocity, which comforted Leary immensely. He exhaled a much needed drag of his Marlboro and flicked it far down the church steps, wondering why he had felt the need to come outside to smoke. Surely God wouldn't have minded, considering what had occurred in his house today.

'Reilly, I don't want anyone in here until the photographer has had at least twenty minutes' Reilly nodded as Leary slipped back inside.

He stood at the back of the church, growing increasingly concerned at the silence that surrounded him. His thoughts turned to the countless funerals that this cowardly act had caused and the nightmare prospect of policing each of them. At twenty-eight Leary was as experienced

as any battle weary troop out in the Gulf. He walked toward the altar and noticed blood spattered robes draped over it. Not for the first time over the past month, Leary questioned his own catholic faith. Would a higher being let this devastation happen anywhere in the world? In an act of bravery he lit a cigarette at the scarred altar, a rebellious act that he wanted to snigger at, but still daren't.

Through the rising cigarette smoke, Leary noticed a solitary shape sat in the choir loft at the opposite end of the church. He chased the smoke away to improve his view. He could make out a figure; a person that appeared to be dressed in white, knelt at a pew facing the stained glass, looking directly at him. He kept his eye on the figure while manoeuvring bodies and timber on his way towards it. As he moved precariously the figure rose very slowly; half turned and faced a stairway exit. In a split second flash photography half-blinded Leary and by the time he had regained his full vision, the choir loft was empty.

'Sorry Detective, I needed a distance shot, you know, for perspective.'

Leary rubbed his eyes and ran up the church aisle towards the photographer whilst keeping his sight trained on the loft. 'YOU', he roared,

'My name's Robson, Detective'

'Get that camera over here, NOW!'

Leary kicked open the door of the stairway and vaulted up a spiral staircase, reaching the loft in seconds. The figure was nowhere to be seen. The loft seemed serene compared to the mess downstairs; peaceful and detached. Leary gazed at the pew that he was sure the figure was stood at and felt a chill as he saw a solitary hymn book, carefully folded over. Robson fought his way past Leary, weapon at hand, fighting for breath.

'There was someone here! I want shots of every pew up here before you start on the carnage down at the altar'

'Who.....did you see?'

Leary hesitated before answering, 'I saw someone...something...'

He looked down to the bodies lay at the altar...*sixteen or seventeen...?*

'Detective, there is only two ways out of this loft – the staircase or over the side. We have to be forty feet in the air and I sure didn't hear anything hit that marble floor on my way up here. You sure you seen something...Detective Leary?' Robson's irritating, whiney Brooklyn accent reverberated around the loft. It was at best annoying, but it helped Leary to stop thinking thoughts that were unreasonable, ridiculous.

Leary shaped to answer Robson but the words stayed buried in his throat. He looked as if he was caught in a car's headlights. Robson imagined framing him; what a picture. Leary was transfixed, rooted to the spot where he stood. Robson followed Leary's icy stare, down to the church floor and into the shadows. Leary was transfixed. Robson raced to the front of the loft to gain a better vantage point, his thumb unconsciously primed on his shutter. Both men gasped in unison and then the camera's flash lit up the scene. The figure was only half in sight, standing partially hidden behind a pillar halfway along the church. Robson saw an arm swaying; a child's arm, and stepped back a pew, clicking his Cuban heels on the steps. Before he could ask if his superior was seeing it too, the figure stepped from behind the pillar. It stood clicking the heels of its Communion shoes together, gently but loud enough to produce a faint, whimpering echo. A thin, white veil covered its face while its arm continued to sway, spinning a Communal purse.

'We got a child survivor Detective! How did the investigators miss her?'

Sixteen or seventeen...Leary felt cold...was it sixteen or seventeen...?

'I've got to get this on film. She looks like she just got here, it isn't right I tell you', Robson aimed his camera, adjusted the zoom and took a shot. Both men looked at the result on the viewfinder. It was waving at them.

Robson took another snap and this time the flash startled the figure and it scurried down the aisle, hurdling uneasily over the lifeless bodies before ducking behind the scorched altar. Leary sensed something uneasy about its movement, something very unnatural. Leary thought again, *I know there was seventeen! There WAS seventeen!*

He pushed Robson aside and fell against a pew. Leary was a rational man, he was trained to be. He was also trained to think logically; and logic told him *there are no such things as ghosts, David!*

Leary instantaneously shook himself back to reality. This had to be resolved now.

There had to be eighteen. No other explanation. The numbers were wrong; this kid is shell-shocked and needs help.

'Robson, stay here, do not leave the loft. If this', he hesitated, 'person comes back up here I want a photograph. I don't want it leaving this church.' Robson nodded in agreement, he felt no desire to leave the choir loft just yet. Logic was pecking away at him too.

Leary reached the bottom of the staircase and noticed the church had inexplicably become deadly silent. The crackling from smouldering wood had subsided and the thick, towering, solid oak doors behind him had reduced the cumulative howls of a petrified Manhattan to a murmur. He walked across scorched books and broken glass until he reached the centre aisle. Bodies lay like rag dolls less than eighty feet in front of him, surrounding the altar, apart from one adult sprawled upon the raised pulpit, its face obscured in a hymn book. He recalled his First Holy Communion twenty years earlier. How proud his parents were of him as his procession proudly marched down the centre aisle, posing with his classmates for cherubic photographs and watching his family drink to excess before they fought neighbouring protestants, outside a Staten Island hall. He still couldn't make sense of any of it. Now, as an adult, he made a more than comfortable living tracking down fanatics who were murdering in the name of religion and wondered if there was any fundamental difference between the mentality of the monsters responsible for these recent atrocities and drunken third generation Irish Americans from recent 'bygone age'. Still, as much as he had questioned its very doctrine, Catholicism was in his genes, running through his veins, something he could never really be free from. And now, here in this decimated church David Leary needed his faith to restore his sanity, as well as his increasing, unrelenting fear.

He looked behind him to the choir loft to see Robson perched at its edge, peering through his camera that was pointed toward the altar. This was his safari, and his sights were primed. Reassured, Leary walked slowly down the centre aisle, feeling the pews become increasingly hotter as he approached the blast area. He came to a halt as the figure stood from behind the altar, stared directly at Leary before disappearing behind the block just as quickly as Robson's flash burst into life. Leary called out a pathetic greeting to the figure but received no reply.

Twisted debris forced him to move along a front pew into the left aisle, giving him a view of the figure's legs behind the altar. As he reached the end of the pew, the figure turned its head toward him. Leary felt faint as he traced a smile from beneath its veil. It turned fully toward him, lolled its head to one side and knelt before beckoning him with a crooked, lace-gloved finger. Leary muttered something holy to himself; a line from a prayer that he had not heard since his schooldays, and sank to his knees. A glance to the loft confirmed that the figure was out of Robson's view. For the first time since he joined the Unit, he felt compounded by fear, unsure of how to handle the situation.

The figure turned and sat against the altar once more, Leary watched as its heels clicked together, childlike. He moved forward until it was in full view once again. Watching its profile, Leary sensed something was really untoward with the figure. Its clumsy movement betrayed its size. It clumped about now, shifting its weight to gain a more comfortable position before gazing at Leary once more. Unseasonable rain hit the altar through blast-damaged windows, comforting Leary as he observed the figure shielding its veil from the angled raindrops. *Surely, thought Leary, there had to be a rational conclusion! There was seventeen! I counted seventeen!*

Robson was now darting from left to right across the choir loft displaying the attributes of eager paparazzi rather than that of a crime scene photographer, until he settled, perched in the rafters. From his blurred, panoramic view of the church he could see a crouched Detective Leary slowly reaching the side of the altar, on his hands and knees, like an animal bearing down on its prey - but his face portrayed the hunted more than the hunter. Robson's flash kicked into action again producing a stony grimace and an angry mime from Leary. Robson clambered from the loft, bouncing down the staircase, to try and get a good shot from the opposite side of the altar from where Leary was approaching. There was little debris and far less natural light and within seconds he was adjacent to Leary. Robson's thumb was primed for action once again.

The altar floor seemed cold to Leary although it was strewn with charred timber. His hands left a sweaty imprint on the marble with each tentative move towards the altar. He rested his back against it, on the other side from the figure. Robson's position was oblivious to him such was the darkness at that section of the church. It was silent now but for the long deep breathing coming from behind the altar. Leary focused on the loft, he couldn't make out where Robson had gone, and hoped he had managed to position himself for a good picture of whatever was to

come. He hadn't heard the oak doors open and a quick scan of the church floor failed to pick Robson up. Leary felt he had to move soon before panic set in. The bile in his throat returned. He looked up to the church rafters and blessed himself, deciding to spin round the altar. *It never goes away.* He unclipped his holster and took out his service revolver.

He moved swiftly and stopped two yards directly in front of the figure, arms stretched out with his gun in hand applying a standard counter terrorism stance. Leary gradually lowered his gun. The figure looked drained, withdrawn. Its hands were folded almost lazily prayer and he could hear a faint whimper. Leary felt a compelling paternal instinct towards the figure. He laid his gun on top of the altar.

'Hello', Leary bowed his head and fanned open his fingers in a peaceful approach. 'I want to help you, please don't feel afraid'. Leary knelt beside the figure and it shuddered.

'Please, I am your friend. This is all over now.' He paused for several seconds, playing over his next sentence in his head. 'If you are here to leave a message you can tell me, honey'.

He held his hand out to the figure and it finally responded. Its hands clasped his. Its thin, long fingers and prominent knuckles stretched the lace apart on its hands.

Leary bolted as the church's oak doors banged open spilling forward countless armed NYPD officers and ashen faced counter terrorism officers who quickly formed a crescent human shield at the top of the centre aisle. Leary heard a spokesman call out his name but couldn't see him. He unexpectedly felt the clothed fingers surround his hand. A small yet thick crucifix was placed into his palm by the figure and he clenched his fingers around it. The figure lay back against the altar as Leary's eyes welled up with tears of unanticipated relief. The spokesman became louder and came into view ahead of the other men.

Leary tightened his grip on the crucifix and felt the child's soft cheek through the rain soaked veil. His faith had not betrayed him.

'Leary, we found their safe house in Harlem. There's a second wave Leary, but they're not bombers. They are assassins!

That was all he needed to hear. He clenched his eyes as everything clicked into place. The smile behind the veil grew wider than before as thin strands of saliva swung beneath its chin. Leary could see the blackened, jig-saw teeth of an adult. The figure's sudden shriek of jubilation drew the officers nearer to the altar and made Leary visibly shake. He fell back onto his backside and looked down at his clenched fist. Warm tears stroked his cold face as he flicked out each digit to see the grenade's pin sat central in his palm. The veil was now removed from the figure's face. Leary spat out silent screams, shock tearing through his every fibre, as the woman before him rocked gently and prayed as Robson's flash lit up the altar before the grenade had taken its chance to.

Judge's comments

An excellent opening sentence which makes us immediately want to know where the character is, what is going on, what has happened. Notice how elegantly the time is suggested in the last sentence of the first paragraph. The suspense is beautifully maintained by the fleeing figure and the ending cleverly prepared for.

A compelling read.

Highly Commended Short Story

Concepta King Walsall Brownhill JCP

Understudy Required

There! She'd said it. She needed a break, time alone. Oliver stood, rigid, anger marking his chiselled features; his breathing shallow, fast. When he spoke his voice sharp, 'Why alone? Why now? What's wrong?.... Short staccato sentences, fired at her like ammunition. All her - oh so reasonable- well-worded excuses failing as though unheard. She should have been more considerate; given him time to adjust to the idea. And now – now, she couldn't.

Timing was everything.

Jane drew a deep breath and began the process of calming, placating him. Being as loving as possible she reiterated all her well rehearsed points. 'I've been so tired of late, it will give me a chance to rest. Unwind a little, take stock. When I come back I'll be my old self again, I promise.' This last said as she hugged him, nuzzling into his chest, feeling his resistance and his accelerated heartbeat. Her husband would, she felt sure, come around in time.

An hour later, a truce of sorts established, her point gained, she ran quickly upstairs.

Hurriedly she packed a few essentials, changed, and hiding her excitement, came sedately down for their goodbyes. Oliver, holding her at arms length, searching her face, saying nothing. A hug a kiss, a 'Phone me' and she was gone.

Driving along her thoughts went back to a few weeks before. To Suzie's. Rather to Suzie's Baby Shower party. How, with her friends around her; she'd forced herself to be lively, her usual self. Oohing and aahing over the tiny outfits, booties and teddies. Her face wreathed in a smile so false, the skin on her face stretched taut, as though by an invisible face mask. Muscles aching from the effort. Seven long years of trying; ever since Oliver's promotion to senior partner – and nothing. Thirty-five years old, she'd gladly submitted to all the tests, her health excellent – so why? Oliver had declined being tested, muttering something about them being demeaning. He said that she worried too much, no hurry. That terrible ache, a hopelessness, omnipresent; always worse when visiting friends, friends with children, babies. How she had stayed behind. One too many glasses of wine. The heart to heart with her long-time best friend. Dear Suzie a mother, soon to be a mother once more, her third, she had understood. An idea. An idea forming into a plan. Another secret between them. 'Why not?' Suzie agreed. 'Lateral thinking works.'

The long drive finally over, she pulled on to the wide gravelled driveway. Suitcase in hand, she viewed the façade of the wonderful old building. Mellowed by age It managed to look both gracious and welcoming. She sincerely hoped so. The high cost judiciously halved for Oliver's benefit – would be worth every penny. The splendid anonymity that money could purchase; so important for this brief stay.

Later, as she made her way down to dinner; she paused for a moment, surveying the elegance of her surroundings. The tasteful understated décor. A fitting stage for her to play a part; a stage, a setting for her new, albeit temporary, persona. A way to step outside herself. To do what needed to be done.

Reflecting that the new dress, the silk underwear and the sleek new hairstyle, all made her feel different. Somehow, the pretence itself made the deception feel less disloyal in some subtle way. 'A means to an end,' she said to herself, 'Simply that and no more'. So taking a deep breath and continuing on down the stairs, she exhorted herself, 'Relax and enjoy'!

That evening seated at her table, courses ordered, she sipped her wine, gazing out unseeingly over the terrace and ground. A frisson of excitement ran through her, as, wrapped up as she was in her private thoughts; she met the gaze of the good looking man being placed at a table adjacent to hers. She hugged her wicked thoughts and returned his smile. Secured from embarrassment, as though acting a part, which of course in a way, she was. Later, as she strolled out on to the candle lit terrace, she quite deliberately made eye contact with him and smiled (she hoped) alluringly. His glance frank and admiring, his answering smile as he rose to follow, easy confident as relaxed as his movements.

As Jane took a seat, he introduced himself. 'Hello I'm Mark, may I?' he said, indicating joining her.' The view is so much nicer if it's a shared one.' He remarked

as he took the seat opposite her. He continued to chat, easily, his voice as dark as he was, melodic, musical even. 'Staying long? Business or pleasure? Brandy? 'Yes, yes please.' As he beckoned the waiter, she studied his profile. He really was exactly right, physically so like Oliver. An actor by profession, 'resting' hence, free to choose his pursuits. This last said with a glint of humour lacing his tone. The unspoken- the fill in job of escort, hung in the air between them, a teasing sense of anticipation, or something very like it.

They agreed to take a moonlit stroll along the banks of the river. As they walked he drew her arm within his. Perhaps heightened senses, a change of pace, body language or simply being relaxed by good food, wine and company. .Every word seemed to hold a promise; an intimacy had formed. It was obvious to Jane that Mark found her physically attractive and was enjoying everything as much as she was. Returning to the hotel, a leisurely nightcap and almost without her realising it, they were walking upstairs to her room. Hand in hand, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Jane awoke on that first morning from a deep and dreamless sleep, to find a scarlet rose by her pillow, a note; a time, a place. She felt wonderfully relaxed, a little wicked and wanton, but oddly free of guilt.. This was not adultery in its broadest sense. This was a fling, and she fervently hoped – a fling with consequences!

Hurrying to ready herself for her assignation, she relived their lovemaking. His

neediness and hers. How anonymous and free she had felt.. Suzie would be expecting a phone call and Oliver had sent her a text; but there was no time for either right now.

Funny thought Jane, as she ran eagerly downstairs, and out; men were thought to be

the single-minded ones and yet.....Her need to procreate was absolute. This stolen

time. A week of nights, To be shared between two strangers. The differences, the

similarities, the unaccustomed language.. The exhilaration as each experimented;

seeking ways to give the other pleasure. All simply a means to an end. And, too late, a

hope already born; maybe a new beginning.

Time now to part. Each feeling a little awkward, having shared six days and nights of

intimacy, each freer than the last, over. Lovers have futures, they plan, think ahead,

dream. Their union would end as abruptly as it had begun. No plans to meet again, no

future at least no future together.. They hugged briefly, she had almost said thank-

you.

Mark blew her a kiss as she pulled away. 'Give my love to Suzie, safe journey.' And

turning as he spoke he went back inside. Jane sighed. Her first and only affair, over.

Suzie's escort of old, on his way to rehearsals for a Chekov play.. She, on her way

home, to a husband she loved deeply.

Five weeks later, pacing impatiently, waiting for Oliver to return home, hugging her

thoughts. As he arrived she ran across the hallway to meet him. Blurting it all out,

'Wonderful news! Guess what? Guess what?'

Oliver picking her up and swinging her round and around. Then both of them laughing and crying and holding one another, feeling the joy spread deep in their being. A baby, at long last.

Later that evening as Jane was on the phone to Suzie, Oliver sat deep in thought.

What best to do? His test results had come ten days ago. Ever since then he'd sought to broach the subject, with no success. He had found it impossible to tell Jane. To dash her hopes for a family, so completely. He vaguely remembered having mumps as a child and when he'd mentioned this to their G.P. he'd organised the fertility tests.

Oliver had expected it to put his mind at rest, but of course now, he felt to blame. And to blame for the delay in finding out.

Jane was not alone in her deep, profound need for a child. His own family, two brothers and a sister, had been a happy one. He remained close to all of them and enjoyed seeing them start their families and grow.

He would say nothing. He too ached for a child, maybe the tests were wrong. Maybe he didn't want to think about that too deeply. He loved Jane and she him. Their strong stable relationship would provide a loving home. He would keep his secret and it would seem Jane would have hers. Whatever she had done – it was a means to an end.

Simply that.

Judge's Comments

A well-written story which convinces through concisely realised concrete detail, attractive characterisation and a classic 'twist in the tale'. The shortish sentences give the story pace and readability.

Highly Commended Short Story

Paul Hulford Guildford JCP

Boot

They gave me back my boot today.

It sits there now, on the chair beside my bed; taking the place of the visitors that will never come.

It looks the same as it always did, except the aglets have gone. Those little bits of plastic at the end of the laces were removed by the army.

They replaced them with tiny GPS chips so that they could monitor our location at all times.

They said it was so that they could find us if we were captured by the enemy. We all know the real reason was to find those who deserted in this god-forsaken land. A soldier may have his gun stolen or ditch it when he's out of ammo, but he'll fight to his dying breath to keep his boots.

Our enemy doesn't take prisoners; they simply try to kill or maim, preferably the latter. You can leave a dead body on the battlefield, but an injured man takes 3 men to evacuate him and numerous medical staff to nurse him back to health. It's simple economics – an injured man takes 3 more off the battlefield and tens of thousands of dollars to rehabilitate.

They're not going to win by killing us all; they're going to win by bankrupting us.

I reach out and pick up the heavy leather boot. It's still in remarkably good condition considering what it went through. You have to hand it to the US Army; they only give us the best. Not like those moccasins that the Brits have to wear. Ninety years after the First World War and they still have soldiers suffering from trench foot.

There's no way this boot's going to leak; though I doubt it will ever be worn again.

The thick black sole looks almost new, as if someone has washed all of the desert dust away. It's completely impervious, in stark contrast to the fragility of its last wearer.

I run my fingers over the deep tread patterns as if the ridges are strings on a guitar. Perhaps that's what I'll swap my gun for – I'll have a lot more free time now.

The black leather still shines and I can see my reflection in the toecap.

The man that looks back at me still looks like a soldier; the short military buzz cut, the firm jaw and piercing eyes. Yet behind those eyes, the pain is now visible. The fire has gone as if something is slowly extinguishing the soul.

The face is pale, too pale, through loss of blood. I casually wonder exactly how much I lost in the moments that followed the blast.

Some of it has seeped into the laces, which are now mottled with patches of purple. I wonder whose blood now courses through my veins. Will it alter me as a person? Will it infect me? Did it come from one of the monsters that pretended to be our friends, but who secretly laid the mines in the path they knew we'd be taking?

They weighed me today and the medic joked that I'd lost 8 kilos in 24 hours. I smiled back at him fiercely and suggested that losing a leg will do that to you. He shut up after that and found a quick excuse to leave – walking rapidly on his two feet.

I never thought I'd be jealous about anyone else's body, but now everyone I see has something that I want. They can do things that I can't – may never be able to do again.

Next to the bed is a set of crutches. I'm supposed to start using them from tomorrow. I need to learn to walk again. Not that there's anywhere to go.

Stuck in an army base at the arse-end of nowhere in a country that no-one seems to care about - not us, not the UN, not even the indigenous population. It's slowly turning into hell on earth and no-one gives a damn.

I wonder when they'll ship me back home, or even *if* they'll ship me back. We're so short of manpower I wouldn't be surprised if they drafted me into the comms unit and made me sit behind a radio for 12 hours a day. Can there be anything worse than doing that to a man who just wants to fight, was trained to fight, who knows nothing else but to fight?

What if they do send me home? Will I be stuck in a military hospital for weeks on end? What if they discharge me? What will I do then? Will I get a pension?

My mind drifts to images of the Vietnam vets who still populate the street corners in the desolate parts of town. All of them homeless, most of them either insane or extremely disturbed. Am I going to end up like them?

I take a deep breath and inhale the scent of leather and polish from the boot still in my hand. I get a waft of something unpleasant and realise just how long I'd been wearing these boots. Still, I'll save a fortune on odour-eaters, I suppose.

I can't stand the sight of the thing anymore, but somehow I don't want to get rid of it. It still feels a part of me, even though it will never be used again.

I reach over to the crutches and draw one towards me. Turning it on its end I place the boot over the rubber base of the cane and place it back beside the bed.

It looks a bit like a tombstone and I turn away from it and begin to weep.

Judge's Comments

An unusual story which uses the soldier's boot as the focus for a moving reflection on the fortunes of war. The tone is well-maintained, its restraint contrasting effectively with the narrator's underlying anger and despair.

Special Mentions

This year's higher standard was attested by a clutch of stories which had much to offer and deserve a special mention.

- **Margaret Ghلامي** (HQ Wellington House, London) submitted *New Beginnings*, an amusing and well-written slant on the transforming power of chat room anonymity.
- **Sharon Haston's** *Christmas Sparkle* neatly turned around the fortunes of a wife and mother who dreads the exhaustion of Christmas demands.
- **Jo O'Connor** (Ilford JCP) with *That Evening in the Snow* managed the difficult feat of creating a romantic and descriptive piece which genuinely touched the heart.
- Two stories among the submissions offered a modern take on two traditional tales: **Peter Rogers** (Longbenton, North East) re-told the Midas myth in his animal story *The Midas Bunny* and **Sarah E Rosser** (Pembroke Dock JCP) submitted *1001*, a modern version of Scheherazade's Arabian nights. Both were cleverly and amusingly told.

Author	Title	Location	HASSRA Region
KATEY-FAYE AQUADRO	DRIVING	TOTTON JCP	SOUTH EAST
LINDSEY ARCHER	STARBURST	ROMFORD PS	LONDON
PHILIP AXFORD	FOUND AND LOST	WARRINGTON PS	NORTH WEST
JAS BAHIA	STALKER	DUDLEY CSA	WEST MIDLANDS
VANESSA BARLOW	CASTLETON	INDEPENDENT LIVING FUND	EAST MIDLANDS
CARRON BENNETT	DEAR FANNY	BLACKPOOL PEEL PARK	FYLDE
CARRON BENNETT	FATE	BLACKPOOL PEEL PARK	FYLDE
JONATHAN BETTESS	VINE AND VENGEANCE	BURNLEY PS	NORTH WEST
ROBIN BEVAN	THE EMBANKMENT	RETIRED	SOUTH EAST
PAULA BURMAN	LILLY SITTING	BASILDON JCP	EAST OF ENGLAND
STUART EVERETT	BETRAYAL	MANCHESTER RUSHOLME JCP	NORTH WEST
MARGARET GHLAIMI	NEW BEGINNINGS	HQ WELLINGTON HOUSE	LONDON
MARGARET GHLAIMI	THE INVITATION	HQ WELLINGTON HOUSE	LONDON
SHARON HASTON	CHRISTMAS SPARKLE	FALKIRK CSA	SCOTLAND
SHARON HASTON	COOKING UP A STORM	FALKIRK CSA	SCOTLAND
SHARON HASTON	SOMETHING IN COMMON	FALKIRK CSA	SCOTLAND
PAUL HULFORD	BOOT	GUILDFORD JCP	SOUTH EAST
PAUL HULFORD	ONE JANUARY MORNING	GUILDFORD JCP	SOUTH EAST
KATE LEADER	GEORGIE	WORTHING JCP	SOUTH EAST
KATE LEADER	WOW	WORTHING JCP	SOUTH EAST
KATE LEADER	ZOO	WORTHING JCP	SOUTH EAST

CONCEPTA KING	UNDERSTUDY REQUIRED	WALSALL BROWNHILL JCP	WEST MIDLANDS
IRENE KRAMPF	GHOSTS	YORK PS	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
NICK LLOYD	THE BURGER, THE BREVILLE AND THE YALE LOCK	PEMBROKE DOCK JCP	WALES
STEVE MCCALL	LAST ORDERS	NEWCASTLE COBALT HOUSE	NORTH EAST
BRIAN MGUINNESS	A TIME FOR FAITH	LIVERPOOL ICE	NORTH WEST
CHARLES MCVEY	THE THOUGHTS OF A BABY ABOUT TO ARRIVE	CLYDEBANK JCP	SCOTLAND
ELA MISTRY	A DISTANT ECHO	HYDE JCP	NORTH WEST
PAUL NORMAN	PLEASE MIND THE DOORS	LEICESTER PS	EAST MIDLANDS
ADENIKE OBISANYA	THE DOOR	BALHAM JCP	LONDON
JO O'CONNOR	THAT EVENING IN THE SNOW	ILFORD JCP	LONDON
MARTYN RAWLINSON	HISTORY LESSONS IN LOVE	PRESTON JCP	NORTH WEST
DENISE ROBINSON	A MOTHER FOR ALL SEASONS- AS TOLD BY MOTHER EARTH	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	EAST OF ENGLAND
PETER ROGERS	THE MIDAS BUNNY	Longbenton	NORTH EAST
SARAH ROSSER	1001	PEMBROKE DOCK JCP	WALES
MARTIN SMITH	JUNGLE OF THE DEAD	WREXHAM BDC	WALES
MARTIN SMITH	THE BEAST WITH SIX BILLION BRAINS	WREXHAM BDC	WALES
MARTIN SMITH	THE F IN J.F.K.	WREXHAM BDC	WALES
ANNIE SPENCER	THE BIRDS HAVE FLOWN	SHEFFIELD KINGS COURT	YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
ANNE TEASDALE	I CALL HIM EGG	ROCHDALE JCP	NORTH WEST
CAROL TURNER	KELLY'S STORY	LYTHAM ST ANNES	FYLDE
WILMA WILSON	THE FUNERAL	FALKIRK CSA	SCOTLAND