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Cover photo by Gopi Chandroth

EDITORIAL

The sight of magnolias in full bloom, overwhelming in their beauty and inspiring in their fecundity, rejuvenates me. I stop and stare at this floral profusion as if I were witnessing a miracle, a dense cluster of stars descended to Earth.

It is refreshing to see new members contributing to *Author*. Creative buds are opening all around us. May these new blooms inspire the rest of us to indulge in our favourite and most cathartic pastime – writing for the sheer pleasure of it. Aren't we fortunate that we are not driven by any agenda in expressing ourselves? We have no deadlines other than those we impose on ourselves for our quarterly magazine, *Author*. We are not required to write on specific topics but are free to choose our own styles and genres. Such is our privilege and freedom – we who practise the craft for the love of it rather than for financial reward.

So what stops us from writing? Some members have candidly expressed their reluctance: 'I am not sure if my writing is any good,' they say. It is both heartening and concerning to hear that. Heartening, because it reflects humility and a healthy awareness of one's limitations (more imagined than real). But such self-doubt should be temporary. Improvement comes through practice, until one can finally say, 'Perhaps this is not so bad, after all.'

Yet self-doubt can also prevent us from sharing our work. Rest assured, SCPSW is here to support you. We will publish anything reasonable you send in, provided it meets the word limit and observes our no-politics, no-religion policy.

Our competition secretary has introduced some welcome changes and structure to our regular competitions. In particular, the practice of not publishing the identity of authors other than the top three prize winners is a welcome one. Personally, I cringe at the very thought of receiving a zero in my peers' appraisal. Those of you who are thin-skinned like me will probably agree. So, no excuse not to participate in competitions in the future.

This time we received more submissions than we could accommodate in the spring issue – a welcome problem for any editor. Keep writing, banish self-doubt and use such apprehension as a stepping stone to strengthen your creative voice.

Gopi Chandroth
Editor

FROM THE CHAIR

I am writing this on 28th February while sitting in a very modern bedroom at the Cumberland Hotel near Marble Arch. My childhood friend, Norah, who lives in America, is due tomorrow. She was meant to arrive today, but there were difficulties with her flight, which is why I am here on my own. We will be here until Monday, and I shall feel rather like a tourist in London. Early this evening I explored the narrow streets nearby and was fascinated by two quaint but expensive hatters' shops with wonderful displays, as well as a mother-of-the-bride boutique close by. Hopefully, by the end of our stay, I will have gathered ideas for some future writing.

I could not get a booking at the Civil Service Club for bed-and-breakfast; it has become much more difficult, as its reasonable rates have attracted more people, especially since its refurbishment. The 90th Anniversary short story competition attracted a wonderful variety of entries. Quality was so high that I decided to award a second prize of £50. The two winning stories appear in this issue. Congratulations to winner Nadine Corscadden and second-prize winner David Tate.

Best wishes for a complete recovery to former treasurer Jonathan Atkinson after two recent falls led to surgery. At the time of writing, he is still in hospital.

After a difficult period without a treasurer, it is very good news that Nimmi Channa has offered to take on this essential role. I am most grateful to her. Nimmi has considerable experience in financial matters. If there are any subscriptions still due — it remains £20 this year — please pay them soon so that we can update the membership list. The increase to £30 has to be agreed at the AGM for 2027 I did send out a message that if anyone who has paid £30, they can apply to me for a refund of £10. Add £7 to join the poetry workshop.

Some months ago, Croydon Writers members were approached by a local library looking for speakers, particularly someone who had published a book. Two of us agreed to give a talk. The librarian kindly arranged the slides and assisted on the day by putting them on the screen whenever I gave her an agreed nod. There was no fee, but I was able to sell some books. By coincidence, a women's church group asked me to give a talk the same week. I used the same material, though without the big screen — just my laptop — and made it shorter and less formal. Again, I sold some books. I would therefore encourage anyone with a published book to approach their local library about giving a talk.

I am very much enjoying our editor Gopi's book, *INDISHMAN – Reflections from India, Britain and the Sea*. It is brilliant writing and offers great insight, with much humour and humility, into episodes from his life. I thoroughly recommend it. I hope his long holiday in India will inspire many more stories.

Enjoy the spring. It was lovely to see the sun this week after so much rain. Best wishes to you all.

Ethel Corduff

Chair



SENTENCES FROM STEPHEN

Stephen Bibby

Why did Napoleon Bonaparte lose the Battle of Waterloo?

In mid-June 1815, restored as Emperor, he was in the ascendant. Just one hundred days after his audacious dash from exile on Elba, his army resurgent, he was poised to inflict ignominy upon his pan-European enemies. The rival British, commanded by the Duke of Wellington, had withdrawn to the village of Waterloo. The Prussians, routed at Ligny on 16 June, reeled in temporary disarray. Napoleon preened, predicting decisive victory.

Resuming my visit to the battle site, pondering the question and acquainted with this background, I stepped onto the actual field of conflict. It was springtime. What 200 years ago had been a scene of carnage was now a vast swathe of fresh, green corn. Atop the Lion Mound, constructed 200 years ago, coloured blocks on a helpful plaque indicated the exact 1815 troop formations. Wellington's forces had been massed in battalions along a ridge facing the advance of the larger French army. A mile away, I could discern a small area of woodland concealing the strategically important Hougomont Farm.

At the foot of the mound, formed by robbing earth from the ridge, I watched a firing demonstration. A shiny brass cannon was discharged, releasing a puff of smoke with a pronounced pop. Loaded for safety with only one-tenth of a normal charge, it nevertheless gave a momentary hint of the battlefield's acrid smell and deafening sound.

One of Napoleon's strokes of military genius was his deployment of field artillery, a ferocious bombardment becoming an established and essential preliminary. At Waterloo there were 250 French cannons ranged against only 150 British guns. Unfortunately for Napoleon, due to heavy rain in the small hours of 18 June 1815, the cloying earth delayed the manoeuvring of weighty weaponry. His barrage, the opening attack, could not begin until late morning. Even then its effectiveness was blunted as the iron shot sank into muddy softness instead of ricocheting to wreak havoc among static lines of infantry.

Surveying the scene, I traversed Wellington's mile-long ridge. Although depleted, it nevertheless retains a noticeable elevation. In several spots there are plaques and memorial stones indicating battle positions and commemorating those who fell. At one location Napoleon's elite Imperial Guard made a late cavalry charge.



They encountered British infantry concealed in the growing corn who leapt up to devastate the charging riders with close-range fire.

Finally, I reached Hougoumont at the extreme right of the British line. Partly reconstructed and now preserved, this is a complex of barns, outbuildings, a chapel and a sizeable farmhouse. After occupying the property, Wellington ordered that it be held at all costs, protecting his right flank from lateral assault.

Throughout the day of battle, Hougoumont, stoically defended by the Coldstream Guards, witnessed vicious, close-quarters warfare. At a moment of crisis, its stout double gates were forced open by the attacking French who flooded into the farmyard. The Guards desperately engaged the insurgents in hand-to-hand fighting while three of their number heroically forced the gates shut again. Trapped and surrounded, the French were cut down, as depicted in a famous painting of the incident.

Most poignant was the farm's small chapel watched over by a carved wooden crucifix damaged during the assault. It was sobering to realise that the bodies of the dead and dying were laid here, their blood mingling with the colour of the red brick flooring still in place. Poppy wreaths presented annually add to a sense of reverence and respect.

As the day wore on conclusive victory eluded both sides. Casualties rapidly mounted, reaching over 40,000 dead and wounded by nightfall. Fortuitously for Wellington, in late afternoon a Prussian advance guard, the first regrouped troops to complete the 17-mile march from Ligny, arrived to engage the French flank. More Prussians poured in during the early evening. Napoleon was overpowered. He fled from the battlefield vainly hoping to fight another day. However, his abdication became inevitable. Exactly a month later he surrendered himself to Capt. Maitland aboard HMS Bellerophon.

There are various theories as to why Napoleon's fortunes suddenly soured. Undoubtedly Wellington's troops fought valiantly, but even he acknowledged that the encounter was "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life". His judgement of why Napoleon lost pinpointed one crucial moment. He later wrote in correspondence that "the success of the battle turned upon closing the gates at Hougoumont."

However, to my mind it was nature's variability which proved pivotal. If rain had not fallen in the early morning of 18 June 1815, at daybreak Napoleon's artillery would have been deployed to deadly effect. Battle would have commenced by breakfast. Before the Prussians arrived the British would have succumbed and the course of European history would have unfolded very differently.

It seems ironic, but ultimately Bonaparte was beaten by unseasonal bad weather.

POEM COLLECTION

Kevin Morris

I Hear Church Bells in the Rain

I hear church bells in the rain
And think I will go there one day
To sing hymns and pray.

I have lost count of the times
When, lost in my rhymes I have
passed graves in sunshine and rain.

I shall walk there again
And may go to pray.
But the gods in each churchyard tree
And the old wood I so love
Call to me of nymphs who sing
Of budding spring.

The birds call
In the graveyard and the wood alike
And night falls
Over all.

The church bells tell of long ago
When men believed in something higher.
When I hear the thunder roar
I think of Thor
And how civilisations rise and fall.

I know that I must go
To the church one day.
And one day
I shall remain
And be as one
With sun and rain

In The Quiet Time

In the quiet time
Before I go online
I see the sunshine
Fall on my office walls.

If I could stay
And watch the sunlight play
I would be happy,
Temporarily.

I have seen another January
Come and go
And trust I will see
The coming spring
Bring flowers to me.

But man's hours
Are brief as flowers
And I may go
And not know
January or spring

POEM COLLECTION

Andy Millican

Another Voice for the Vatican

He sits at the back of the tiny church
Monsignor from Rome in the purple garb.
He secretly smiles that his constant search
has yielded success yet again. This boy,
whose voice is as sweet as a nightingale's
and bears the face of an angel, won't fail
to move the Cardinals. He will bring joy
to the Vatican and the barbaric
ancient Fate he shall have to undergo?
He shall endure it, this new castrato.

The church bells ring, the villagers are glad.
They only hear fine words the envoy says.
The father is so proud: the mother sad.
Both close their minds to what the present holds
and think ahead to what the future brings.
Their son shall be a famous man who sings
in the Sistine Chapel and give untold
praise to God. For thirty five piastres
they have sold their son. A soprano
who will grow a frustrated castrato.

Monsignor calls the surgeon in from Rome.
The surgeon and his knife have both received
their papal blessing. In the peasant home
of the poor boy there are mixed emotions.
Anger, fear, tears. The mother weeps, the boy
gasps at the crude tool that their God employs
to keep his voice. Why has he been deceived
by his parents? For now there are oceans
of blood..... and pain... and father's angry cries.
And once more, papal integrity dies.

POEM COLLECTION

Kevin Morris

ICE-SIS

It is there: in the pronunciation,
that similarity that overlap.
Where the soft lush sounds of susurrations
are difficult to distinguish. Its wrapped
up between the sounds of an s and a c.
Yet both organisations execute
the removal of persons who shouldn't be
in their domain. One hangs beheads or shoots
its targets. The other is keen to see
much use of its new nationalist jackboots.
So when you hear of Uncle Sam's enforcement ICE
let the c linger, then roll a quick SIS
from between your teeth. Be clear, be precise.
Then imagine the dangers in their kiss.



HUT IN THE GARDEN

Valerie Tigwell

Days of wind and rain formed a wall
between our home and Mr Bailey
housed in a hut in the garden next door,
but on fine days we saw him propped up,
watching us play, frail fingers sketching
or tossing crumbs to the scattering
of tame hens pecking in both gardens.

Often he called to us, eager to know
how we all were, or wanting the radio
on our kitchen window-sill turned up -
until his consumptive cough and
bubbling in his chest grew worse.

When summer turned humid we noticed
he turned away from us wanting
only to sleep. We played on chatting
to the humped restless shape,
missing his gentle humour.

Then one morning both doors were
propped open, the hut empty;
just rust dents from the bed's wheels
on white linoleum.

We were puzzled when hushed strangers
Said '*he's been called to a better place*'.
Too young to mourn, we idly watched
fine trimmings of his dark hair blow
across the gardens and settle in
cracks of baked earth.





NUMBER 3 WIMBORNE TERRACE

Tony Oswick

January Short Story Competition: First Prize

No great person in history has lived at Wimborne Terrace, no cultural expert has included its features in a learned book and no Japanese tourists have ever stood in groups to be photographed before its Georgian façade. Not that Harry and Doris complain. They've lived in Number 3 on the second-floor for over fifty years.

Wimborne Terrace is a four-storey, grey-brick building, its greyness embellished by two hundred and sixty years of urban grime. It has long ceased to be used by London's nouveau riche and, despite having been converted into apartments in the 1920s, still exudes solidity and modest grandeur. Now, at the start of the 21st century, Wimborne Terrace consists of four ordinary self-contained flats for ordinary people to rent. Ordinary people like Harry and Doris Brewster.

Harry had been a bus driver working all hours to provide for his family, while Doris had stayed at home to look after the twins. They moved there when they were married in 1952 after Harry was demobbed, their first and only home.

The rooms are high, so high that Doris needs a stepladder to reach the ceilings when she dusts, the vast expanse of the windows affording panoramic views of grey rooftops and drab chimneys. The living and dining rooms have been converted into one huge room which makes it draughty and expensive to heat, whilst the tiny kitchenette is half the size of a bathroom which boasts antiquated fittings and rumbling pipe-works.

It hasn't been easy raising a family at Number 3. When the twins were young, their pram was permanently parked in an alcove on the ground-floor, and Doris often tells of the times she struggled up the stairs with two young babes and three bags of heavy shopping. The yard at the back is just big enough for a washing line so, when the boys were young, they played in the street, even though cobbled stones proved difficult for riding bikes and dribbling footballs. Now Harry and Doris, nearing their eighties, are on their own. Daily they descend and ascend the concrete stairs, thirty-six down and thirty-six up, twice each week to shop at the local corner shop, and every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday to go to the community hall in the next street to indulge in their newly-found passion of old-tyme dancing.



As they go up and down the concrete stairs, they pass the first-floor flat of the young couple who play loud music, or chat with Mrs Johnson on the ground floor whilst trying to avoid her four unruly children. But they never bump into the mystery man on the top floor who is invisible during the day but continually paces around his flat at night.

The letter was unexpected when it arrived. A planning application to demolish Wimborne Terrace and four adjacent buildings in order to construct a supermarket. It spurred a flurry of lobbying from architectural groups and preservation societies, while the Member of Parliament presented a locally-organised petition to the Minister concerned.

But the Council agreed the planning application and, despite appeals and local pleading, two hundred and sixty years of history was trumped by the needs of big business.

Demolition work on Wimborne Terrace is due to start in six weeks' time. All the residents have moved out, all except Harry and Doris. The Council has allocated them a bungalow on the outskirts of the borough and they are due to move tomorrow.

They now sit in their living room knowing that, within hours, Number 3 Wimborne Terrace will no longer be their home.

"You know," muses Harry, "we'll miss all this. Walking up and down those concrete stairs every day. Mrs Johnson's noisy children. The loud music downstairs. The night-time footsteps of the chap upstairs."

"And we'll have to get used to having central heating and double-glazing, too" says Doris, "as well as a power-shower and fully-fitted kitchen."

"Not to mention having to look after our own little garden, of course," adds Harry, smiling.

He places his glass of champagne on the table and gets up from his chair. He takes Doris in his arms and, for one last time, they waltz around the living room of Number 3 Wimborne Terrace.

A FEW POUNDS

Helen Lowry

January Short Story Competition: Second Prize

‘For the last time, I am not making any stupid resolutions!’

‘Ok, chill. Forget I mentioned it.’

An uneasy silence took over the table, even those on the next table seemed to be choosing their words carefully.

‘Another pint?’

Steve shook his head, ‘Had enough, going home.’

‘But it’s only ten thirty! At least wait until midnight. Next year!’

‘See you - next year!’ And with that, he threw his coat and scarf on and fled the pub, leaving Mike sat there on his own. He half smiled at the people on the next table, but they turned back to their drinks. Who could blame them.

Outside the chilly air grabbed the back of his throat and he coughed. That’s all he seemed to do these days, cough and clear his throat. He was mighty sick of it. Cough sweets didn’t help and it wasn’t as if he smoked. There were so many bugs and that doing the rounds and working in a school didn’t help. When one child caught something, it went round the classroom, gaining momentum as it did, until they’d all had it, teacher included.

Maybe time to see the doc. But what could he say, I clear my throat and cough regularly. He’d probably just laugh.

The doctor didn’t laugh, far from it. In fact, he just wanted to know why it had taken him so long to come and see him in the first place. Somewhere, deep inside, Steve felt an unfamiliar feeling of worry and concern. So much so, he couldn’t even speak to the doctor properly, not without gabbling anyway.

‘I’ll send an urgent referral to the hospital. It’s probably nothing to worry about, but let’s check to be on the safe side.’

Steve walked out of the doctors, immediately heading for the pub. A drink was called for, urgently. The doctor had managed to avoid using the C word, but what if it was. Cancer, there he'd said it. Cancer. He repeated it to himself several times, just to show he wasn't scared of it.

'I won't be beaten,' he said, a bit louder this time. The young man behind the bar looked at him, 'All right, Mate?'

Steve nodded, 'Large Whisky, please.'

He sat looking at the drink for what seemed like ages, more likely about five minutes. Should be really be drinking it? Maybe that was the problem, he did like a drink, not every night, but it was getting a bit regular these days. A couple of pints after five a side practice, another couple after history club, then out with the lads. It was so easy to get into a bad routine. No, he didn't drink every day, just most days. He was trying to convince himself but failing miserably. Finally, he took a mouthful. The amber liquid burnt his throat as it went down. No more, for a moment he couldn't abide the taste.

Look on the bright side, he didn't and had never smoked. He kept telling himself this.

Laughing out loud, he suddenly found Mike's non-stop going on about New Year's resolutions mildly amusing. Perhaps it was time he made a few. It was only January 3rd, still time, in his humble opinion. Might keep that thought from Mike though!

The following day Mike did text him, asking if he fancied a pint. They hadn't spoken since Steve's rapid retreat from the pub on New Year's Eve.

Steve's reply floored Mike. 'No thanks. On the wagon for a while. Trying to do dry January!'

It took a while for Mike to reply, which amused Steve no end. If he but knew...

'Oh. Ok.'

Meanwhile, the dreaded hospital appointment had arrived, meaning a day off school, but his Head of Department was completely understanding. Not much else he could say, was there?

So far, he hadn't told anyone about the hospital trip, not even his parents. My God, how would he tell them. Saturday and Sunday were spent at his flat in a state of despair and despondency. Somehow, he managed to avoid seeing his folks over the weekend, even giving Sunday roast dinner a miss. He had no appetite. He vowed that if everything was fine, he would change his diet, lifestyle, the works. Maybe it might be the kick up the backside he needed to start being healthier. Time would tell.

Sunday night was not the best night's sleep he'd ever had, and he was rather pleased when the alarm finally sounded. Figured he must have dozed off at some point in the early hours.

It was all over in about an hour. Loads of questions, loads of looking down his throat and finally, a biopsy. He got the slight impression they didn't seem too worried. He couldn't face going into school, so headed off home via the supermarket. He could expect the results in a week to ten days.

It was more like a fortnight, but he was in the clear. All benign. He'd never felt relief like it.

It was tempting to call up all his mates and go for an almighty booze up to celebrate. But, there was something stopping him. This time he'd been lucky, if that was the right word, and he was ok. He might not be so lucky next time.

Quietly, he had to admit he felt so much better not drinking as much. He had more pounds in his wallet, and he'd lost a few other pounds. There was something to be said for sobriety. It also seemed far easier facing a classroom of unruly children every morning. Had he had a drink problem? Best not answer that one.

A text. 'Fancy a pint.' It was ages before he could reply to Mike. It would be a test. Two pints, then home. The burning question, could he do it...

ABSENT FRIENDS

Diane Hope

Chairs scrape the floor as we stagger to our feet and raise our glasses. After a sumptuous meal and copious amounts of wine, it's an effort, but now all the speeches have been made, there is only this, the final toast. The most difficult toast.

'To absent friends,' says Jake, a quiver in his voice.

'To absent friends,' we chorus, not quite in unison.

I sip my champagne, force a weak smile as I nod at my fellow guests. We have gathered together to celebrate Aisha and Jake's wedding. My husband, Billy, Jake's big brother, is our absent friend. The wail of an ambulance siren breaks the silence as we stand together in sombre contemplation, remembering the man who isn't here.

The reception has gone well. The speeches were mercifully short, but Billy's absence is tangible. He was such a presence. Larger than life in every sense. Over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and size 12 feet, a head of dark, unruly hair, a laugh you could hear from three rooms away.

The hall closes in around me. Only an hour or so ago, it had been resplendent, decked with ribbons and balloons. The tables set for the feast with extravagant flower arrangements, fine bone china, and silver cutlery. Now it's carnage. A mess of wine spills and crumbs scattered across the once crisp white tablecloths. The wreckage mirrors the desolation I'm holding inside.

I feel faint and grab the edge of the table to steady myself before sinking back into my seat. I clasp the gold locket around my neck. It contains a picture of me with Billy taken on a day trip to Blackpool. We're squashed together in a photo booth, wearing ridiculous Kiss Me Quick hats and big grins. It brings me comfort. An echo from happy times.

Today has been such a glorious day. A storybook day, with classic blue skies and the sound of birds singing as we gathered outside, all dressed in our wedding finery before we crowded into our little country church for the ceremony. Jake looking so handsome in his morning suit beside his beautiful bride, Aisha. She is wearing the dress I wore when I married Billy.

'Are you sure?' she'd asked, as I pulled up the zip and smoothed out the skirt.

'I'll be honoured,' I replied.

'It can be my something borrowed,' she said, running her finger around the delicate lace on the fitted bodice, dotted with tiny pearls. With its full skirt and train, and flattering sweetheart neckline, it was fit for a princess, and that's how I'd felt on my own wedding day, perhaps how every bride feels, but seeing it today has been harder than I'd expected.

I give myself an imaginary shake. This is their day. I mustn't spoil it. I force myself to sit straighter. To plaster a smile onto my face. This is the last hurdle I have to negotiate. I will do it for Billy.

We met at work. Me in the office, him in the loading bay, putting his muscles to good use hefting boxes and crates. Always laughing and joking. Sporting a tan that first summer. How could I resist his easy charm?

He was the proverbial gentle giant. Buying me flowers, sending me poems. Not very good poems. He was no Robert Browning, but they were from his heart, and I have them still, locked in a small wooden box, lined with blue velvet. Other things nestle there, too. A dried red rose, a crumpled festival programme, a pink plastic ring from a Christmas cracker. 'Must be an omen,' he'd said as he knelt on one knee and slipped it onto my finger.

Not long after that, he replaced it with a single solitaire, the best he could afford, and we started planning for our future.

'I've been thinking of joining the army,' he announced one evening. We were curled up together on his ratty old sofa in the tiny bedsit he rented.

'I want a better life for us, Bex,' he said. 'I've been checking it out. The training they give is world class. After the basic training, I can work towards a qualification. The list of courses is amazing. I could be a driver, or even a chef.' We'd laughed at that idea. He was hopeless in the kitchen. 'But there are trades, too,' he continued in more serious tones. 'Plumbers, carpenters, all sorts of engineers. I'm thinking of going for an electrician.'

There's always work for a sparky. Might even start my own business.'

He was so excited, he lifted me off the ground and spun me around and around.

It started so well. The army suited him. Already physically fit, he excelled in basic training, learning military skills, weapon handling, and fieldcraft. Phase two, working towards a formal qualification as an electrician, was more of a challenge. 'Never was much good at school,' he said. 'Too busy messing around being the class comedian.' But he persevered.

He made new friends and loved the camaraderie, and when he graduated, we were beyond proud. We travelled to his passing-out parade together. His Mum and Dad, Jake, and me. This was before Alisha was on the scene. It was a fabulous day with military bands and displays of synchronised drills, even a spectacular fly-past. Our excitement when we spotted Billy. He looked so impressive, standing tall in his full dress uniform, his face unusually serious as befitted the occasion. "Oh, George, just look at our boy,' said Margaret, his Mum, dabbing her cheeks with a hankie. His dad had a tear in his eye too, although he denied it, turning his face away, wiping his cheek on his sleeve.

Following his graduation, he was assigned to a unit where he would further his training. As a married man, he had a small allowance, and we found a sweet little apartment near the barracks, and we soon settled down to a new routine.

'This is the life,' he said. 'They work us hard, but it's going to be worth it, Bex. Just a few years and we can get a place of our own, start a family.'

The future looked bright. We were so happy.

But then he was deployed.

Afghanistan.

His last tour was the worst. We endured almost nine months of almost unbearable worry. Communication almost non-existent. News bulletins reporting roadside bombs and horrific injuries. Loss of limbs. Loss of life. Knowing he was in constant danger was torture for those of us patiently waiting at home, powerless to help, imagining the worst.

The joy and relief when he came home. Physically, he looked unchanged, maybe leaner, but the spark in his eyes had gone, replaced with a deadness that chilled me.

‘The things I saw, Bex,’ he said in a whisper. ‘So many dreadful injuries. Dead bodies. Women and children...The constant dread of stepping on a mine...’ and his head flopped onto his chest.

‘But you’re home now,’ I said, reaching up, wrapping my arms around his shoulders, searching for some silver lining. ‘We can make a fresh start. No more soldiering. Let’s find all those people looking for electricians.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ he said, even managed a smile, a tiny glimpse of the old Billy. I was optimistic. He was over the worst, I thought. With love and support, he could get his spirit back.

But after his discharge, he was plagued with bad dreams, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t get a job. He started drinking, taking drugs.

A demon seeded inside him and grew and grew until the wonderful Billy we knew was gone, replaced by an angry bear of a man. Always looking for a fight, taking offence when none was given, other times morose, pushing everyone away, refusing to speak.

An image pushes itself into my mind. Billy slumped in his favourite chair, his skin grey. Needles and empty pill bottles scattered beside him. A note with the single word: Sorry, a hammer blow pounding in my head, screaming that this was deliberate, this was not an accident. He was not even 40. If his brother hadn’t been with me, heaven knows what I would have done.

I’m shaken out of my reverie by people moving around me. They are getting ready for the disco. Jake makes his way to me. He puts his arms around me, gives me a squeeze. I cling to him, biting my lip, fighting to hold back my tears.

‘Hang on in there, Bex,’ he says. He has his brother’s eyes, the same tousled hair. I feel a stab in my heart. I know he feels it too. We miss our absent friend.

‘It’s going to be OK,’ he says, holding me tight. ‘We lost him for a while, but we’ve found him now. He’s in the right place, getting the help he needs. We’ll soon have our Billy back.’

ARE THERE BLACKBIRDS IN RHODES?

Vivienne Orr

Few cars passed as she walked to the station for the train to Gatwick. Other people like herself on their way for an early flight or maybe a six o'clock work shift. No one on the dark pavement, shining from an overnight shower. A glorious, solitary time of day, the trundling wheels of her small suitcase the only noise. Then close by came a brilliant burst of song. A blackbird. She stopped to hear more, but after her disturbance of the silence and stillness the bird fell silent. I wonder, she thought, I wonder if there are blackbirds in Rhodes.

Lunchtime had been extended to accommodate late arrivals and she relished the Greek appetisers and glass of local red wine, softening the rough edges inside her. A pattern was beginning to take shape. A morning walk and relaxed lunch before taking a book to the poolside for a little sun, a swim and probably a doze. She and Danny would probably have stopped off at their room before taking the sun at the poolside. Things would be different now.

At dusk she was entranced to see an aerial ballet performed by swallows and martins. They swooped and dived to skim an insect from the surface of the pool before sweeping and steeping away in a flurry of beating wings, the deep turquoise of the pool reflected on their tiny breasts.

The next morning she crossed the road to the beach. Some fine luxury hotels were situated at intervals along the quiet dusty road, some with swim-in bedrooms on upper floors. How Danny would have laughed at such opulence. They would potter in and out of nearby hotels and convince themselves they had chosen the best one. These hotels were barred and barricaded against any such interference. The previous evening she had ventured into the entrance of an adjacent establishment only to be challenged by an unfriendly guard. Extensive grounds with manicured lawns and a variety of pools stretched out at the rear, securely protected by high wire fencing and dense foliage at the beach border.

She set off towards the far side of the bay. It was early in the season and there were few people walking or using the slatted beach loungers. At some distance ahead a tall thin man was walking purposefully towards the distant promontory as if on a mission. He had the long stride of a seasoned walker, his long legs swinging easily from the hip.

She would always walk behind Danny as they explored their holiday surroundings along rough roads or amid vineyards or olive groves. Or along a beach like this one. Following his footsteps, his back towards her. His back was towards her when he told her it was over and that he had met someone else.

The water lapped gently at her feet and the sea looked inviting. Perhaps tomorrow she would wear a swimsuit and take a dip.

The walking man had disappeared. Intrigued, she continued along the shingle. There were no paths leading off the beach, only long stretches of hostile wire fencing. Where had he gone?

At the far side of the bay the promontory rose steeply, in shadow now with tumbled rocks at the foot and waves curling around them. There was no apparent pathway leading around or over the top and it looked grim and dark. Drawing closer she noticed the beach was littered with bottles and plastic, dirt and dust where the waters could not reach. How ironic that such natural beauty and elegant luxury could be so tarnished.

Quickly turning away, she retraced her steps. Halfway along the beach some instinct made her stop and look back. At the top of the promontory could be seen the outline of the walking man. He was standing quite still and appeared to be looking at something on the ground. As she watched he bent down and doubled up, almost disappearing from view. Was he ill? There was nothing she could do and in any case it was not her business. Danny often said that she worried and cared more for strangers than for him. She would laugh and say that he could look after himself and hated a fuss.

The following morning she set off a little earlier. There he was again, not so far in front. He might resent her talking to him and prefer to be left alone, but her curiosity would not be satisfied. Drawing up alongside him she looked up into his face. A good face with chiselled features and dark deep-set eyes. A camera hung around his neck.

‘I hope you don’t mind my asking, but is there a path from the beach to the top of that hill?’

He smiled down at her. ‘Indeed there is, I’ll show you.’

They walked on for some way and then he pointed to an archway, barely visible and covered in creeper. A gate was set deep within the arch and opened on to a pathway alongside one of the luxury hotels, with an adjacent gate clearly designed for guests with a security key.

‘It’s like a secret passage,’ she laughed.

‘If you can climb up that hill, I’ll show you another secret.’

As they climbed the steep path he talked about the island of Rhodes, the history, culture, physical features and way of life. It was plain he loved the island and wanted to share his knowledge and own particular interest.

The beach was now out of view and the air cool and full of sweet scents. They reached a high point and stopped. The bay once again came into view. At their feet grew a flower, perfect and beautiful. A little miracle of a flower.

‘This wild orchid is very rare, but can be found on the island of Rhodes,’ he said.

‘Tell me, please, do you find blackbirds in Rhodes?’

NEWS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, NOTICES

Notice of Annual General Meeting 2026

The Annual General Meeting of the SCPSW will take place on Saturday 9 May at 1.30pm – 4pm at the Civil Service Club, 13-15 Great Scotland Yard, London, SW1A 2HJ. Members are warmly welcomed to attend the AGM and to enjoy a light buffet and refreshments in advance of the meeting at 1pm. Members will have an opportunity to read out short pieces of their work during the latter part of the afternoon. The AGM will close at 4pm.

The timetable will be as follows:

1.00pm – refreshments, tea, coffee, fruit juice in the Trafalgar Room

1.30pm – Annual General Meeting

3.00pm – Tea

3.30pm – Members invited to read a poem, short story or short article (no longer than 300 words)

4pm – AGM close

AGM meeting papers will be sent out by email and post. The Meetings Secretary, Bernie Bickerton, hopes to make the meeting available online via Zoom.

Please email Bernie Bickerton at scpswmeetings@gmail.com indicating your wish to attend, in person or on Zoom, and whether you will attend the light buffet. Please indicate food allergies or dietary requirements. Please also indicate if you intend to read out your written work. Alternatively, please call Ethel Corduff on tel 0208 656 3891 if you'd prefer to have a telephone conversation about this.

Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary

SOCIAL MEDIA

We are on Facebook – please “like” us and contribute posts:

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/Society-of-Civil-and-Public-Service-Writers-255424157928851/>

Data Protection

We value your privacy. Your personal data is used only for communication purposes and to send you copies of *The Author*. Your information will be deleted if you choose to end your membership.

Zoom evening on Poetry

We have a monthly Zoom meeting on poetry. If you wish to participate please contact the Meetings Secretary, Bernie Bickerton at scpswmeetings@gmail.com.

SCPSW competitions 2026

All entries to scpswcomps@gmail.com

SCPSW COMPETITIONS 2026

All entries to scpswcomps@gmail.com

Month	Format	Word limit	Theme
January	Short story	1000	Making a change
March	Herbert Spencer Poetry	Max 50 lines, 2 entries	Open theme
May	Lewis Wright short story	2000 words	Open theme
July	Flash fiction	Max 250 words	Open theme
September	Vee Bradley humorous poetry	Max 36 lines, two entries	Humour
November	Non-fiction piece	Max 1000 words	Open: e.g. nature, memoir, travel
December	No activity	N/A	N/A

AUTHOR DEADLINES AND SCHEDULE

ISSUE	Submission	Publication
Spring	1 March	15 March
Summer	1 June	15 June
Autumn	1 September	15 September
Winter	1 December	15 December

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR *AUTHOR*

POEMS submitted for publication in Author must follow these guidelines:

Minimum: 12 lines or 75 words

Ideal Range: 15 - 25 lines (100 - 300 words)

Very short forms (haiku, couplets, etc.) must be submitted as a collection reaching the minimum indicated above.

Maximum: 1600 words.

PROSE should be between 300 and 1,600 words.

POETRY WORKSHOP NEWS

Chair: Mike Boland (Address below)

Treasurer: Ethel Corduff –10 Malcolm Road London SE25 5HG ecorduff@hotmail.com

Zoom Events Coordinator: Bernie Bickerton – scpswmeetings@gmail.com

Editor 'wavelengths': Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow, Middx, HA3 6JU – gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

GREETINGS FROM THE POETRY WORKSHOP.

Well, spring is now with us, and with the lengthening days, summer will soon be here. So much to look forward to, after the dismal months of winter, now thankfully behind us. I hope you have all managed to stay warm and dry, and maybe those dark days and long nights have boosted creativity among our readers. Don't forget, PW members, to send poems to me for inclusion in our own quarterly magazine, *wavelengths*.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

A gentle reminder that subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on **1 January 2026**. To renew, complete the form enclosed with the winter issue of '*wavelengths*' and return as requested to Ethel Corduff, 10 Malcolm Road, London SE25 5HG. The cost of membership remains unchanged yet again at £7 for Full membership (i.e. for members of the SCPSW) or £8 (Associate Membership).

FOLIOS

Postal Folio

The PW organises a circulating postal folio in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. There is room for any member of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. If you are interested, please contact me, **Mike Boland, at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex, HA3 6JU** or by e-mail to: gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

e-folio

The PW also runs an e-folio for members who have access to the internet.

WAVELENGTHS

This is the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine which is issued free to all its members and consists of twenty pages of poems, articles on poetry / poets and all the news of the group's activities. It appears regularly in the spring, summer, autumn and winter. The editor is always looking for new material from members of the Poetry Workshop.

THE POETRY WORKSHOP

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our 20 page magazine wavelenghts each year
- the chance of publication in Waves, the PW's annual anthology
- access to the popular circulating Postal Folio scheme
- access to the e-folio scheme

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, **Ethel Corduff**, at the address above. The cost of membership is £7. Cheques should be made out to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

DATES TO REMEMBER

30 April 2026	Deadline: summer issue of 'wavelenghts'
Jun 2026	Publication of summer 'wavelenghts'
TBA	Waves 2026
TBC	2026 AGM

TARPAULIN

Andy Millican

His hands shook uncontrollably as he looked down at the lifeless body of his wife on the kitchen floor. Something to wrap her up in, he thought. Tarpaulin. Heavy-duty. Wickes wouldn't stock that. He'd have to drive to Perkins three miles away. Use his trade card.

He became aware of Classic FM playing one of his favourite pieces. He remembered the first time he heard it, where and with whom. It wasn't Karen whose eyes just stared at the ceiling.

He locked all the doors, moved her body so it couldn't be seen through windows, found his car keys, grabbed his wallet and checked his phone. The grandkids wouldn't be here for five hours yet. He had a lot to do.

Traffic was light and he made it to Perkins in ten minutes. He found an electric blue tarpaulin, shouldered it to the counter. A very large tattooed character in front turned round. Stared at him. He stepped back, stood the tarpaulin on its end and hugged it like a brother. At the counter he used his credit card to pay, oblivious to CCTV.

He forced the item into his dinky Toyota. He sped towards the exit and turned sharply the wrong way and went straight under a large HGV speeding past. The scrunching of glass and metal. Someone phoned 999. The emergency services were there in minutes.

Upon arrival the fire chief took one look at the scene and said to one of the firemen, "Ollie, get that tarpaulin out of the back. We'll use it to cover the car while we undertake the body extraction."



THE GHOST OF CHARLES I

Tom Oulton

*He nothing common did or mean
Upon the memorable scene,
But downward laid his comely head
As on a bed.*

Andrew Marvell

There was patchy snow on the ground here the morning of 30 January. It had me thinking of the story we were told about the execution of Charles I in Whitehall, that he requested an extra shirt, so that he would not shiver and be thought to be frightened. My mind usually goes to that other 30 January, in 1649, because at times in my life the event has seemed strangely close. Not that I commemorate it in any way, unlike that hot-headed republican man of letters Walter Savage Landor, who for some years met his young chum Charles Dickens on the day to celebrate both the execution and Landor's birthday.

A few hundred yards across the fields from my first childhood home stood a crumbling Elizabethan mansion called Marple Hall. A previous house, probably dating from the reign of Henry VII, had been replaced when the property came into the possession of the Bradshawe family, who also acquired another local manor house called Wybersley Hall.

Marple Hall was demolished in 1959, so I was very young when my father took me inside and talked to a man whom I thought was a caretaker. All I recall of the interior is a large entrance hall, a staircase and a sense of empty decay. We were not allowed to look round because the building was in a dangerous condition, but my father gave me my first history lesson – about the regicide John Bradshawe, son of the owner of the Hall.

John was somehow persuaded to take the post of President of the Court that was set up in order to try Charles I following the King's defeat in the Civil War and subsequent failed negotiations. Charles refused to recognise the Court and quite right too – trying a monarch for treason was a nonsense and everyone knew it. But murder by judicial process had to proceed, and the King was convicted and sentenced to death. John could not escape the responsibility of being the first to put his signature on the death warrant. In doing so he became our main local historical celebrity.



The Bradshaws subsequently became the Bradshaw-Isherwoods, and writer Christopher Isherwood was of the family. He was brought up in Wybersley Hall and was frank about how cold and uncomfortable it was. In 1940 he inherited ownership of Marple Hall, but he preferred to live in California as earlier he had preferred to live in Berlin, and quickly passed the property on to his brother.

Before I leave Marple Hall, I feel impelled to mention Agatha Christie, whose sister had married into a wealthy Stockport family with a large house and formal upper-class way of life that informed some of Agatha's books. In 1929 she and her sister attended an auction at the Hall, where she bought two Jacobean chairs. Her grandson has produced correspondence that clearly establishes that Agatha's spinster detective was named for Marple Hall. On Marple station there is a blue plaque commemorating the Marple connection, so it must be authentic.

Over the hill from where we now live, in a dip in the High Peak moors, is the church of the small settlement of Peak Forest. The church is one of a handful in England that are dedicated to Charles, King and Martyr. The original was erected only in the 17th century as a memorial chapel to a young man of the prominent Cavendish family killed fighting for the King in the Civil War. It stood on land that belonged to the extensive Royal Forest of the Peak established by William the Conqueror, and it may be for that reason that it was outside the jurisdiction of any bishop. This enabled the priest to choose his own rules for marriage and build up a lucrative trade in marrying eloping couples in the manner of Gretna Green. Parliament put a stop to that sort of thing in 1804.

The current church is a 19th century replacement much too large for the tiny village, and it stands separated even from many of the houses, which are away down a side road. Surrounded by its graveyard and its trees and under the wide sky of the uplands, to me it gives off a curious air of detachment. Another church dedicated to Charles King and Martyr that I passed in Tunbridge Wells, seemed merely suburban.

Not far from my mother's last home in Northamptonshire lies the battlefield of Naseby. The name may mean navel or centre, reflecting the idea that here was the middle of England. And that is what it feels like if you stand by the commemorative obelisk and survey the wide, shallow valley of farmland that was ancient when the battle ranged across it on 14 June 1645. It was a morning's employment for Parliament's New Model Army to inflict a decisive defeat on the Royalist forces and push the English Civil War into the endgame.

The King fled westwards, but he was still on the run when he was back in the vicinity eleven months later. On 2 May 1646 he appeared at Little Gidding rather further east in the then county of Huntingdonshire. By then the game was up, and Charles was

trying to get to a Scottish military camp near Newark to surrender on favourable terms. The owners of the manor moved Charles on, and he handed himself in to the Scots.

Like many, I was drawn to Little Gidding by T.S. Eliot, specifically the poem *Little Gidding*, which is the last of his *Four Quartets*. The final section of the poem is probably my favourite passage of poetry.

Eliot was a convinced Anglican, and he was likely attracted to Little Gidding by the place's history during the reign of Charles I, when the extended Ferrar family restored the manor house and chapel and operated as an Anglican religious community with a strict regime of prayer and worship. The King had visited a couple of times before that last, desperate journey; another visitor was poet-priest George Herbert, a close friend of the community's initial leading light, Nicholas Ferrar.

Eliot is very strong on the physical appearance of the place – the pig-sty, the chapel and so on, and he notes the historical visit of Charles I: *If you came at night like a broken king*; but he finds that place has a peculiar spiritual significance.

I have never been anywhere with an atmosphere quite like that of Little Gidding. The settlement was depopulated by the Black Death of 1349-50, and at some periods afterwards the population was zero. The Ferrars bought the estate and restored the manor house and chapel, and the chapel and a large house are still present; but the feel of the place is partly of sheer remoteness. More than that, I had a sense that I had stepped out of time and was somehow standing in the history of England all at once.

Going back to the poem, it was clear to me that Eliot had felt the same. I could choose a number of examples to illustrate this, but here is just one:

*...for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light falls
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.*

The Scots sold Charles to his English enemies, and we know how that ended. My sympathies for him are limited: like his grandmother Mary Queen of Scots, he brought his fate on himself. He had attractive personal qualities, and few wished to have the blood of God's anointed one on their hands, but he would not negotiate in

good faith with his captors. That's the trouble with believing that you have a divine right to rule, I suppose: your every decision is justified, and you can't share your power without betraying God's trust.

I tend to regard England's four Stuart kings as a line of intelligent idiots. Charles I's sons Charles II and James II were as unwise as their father in being drawn to absolute rule like that of Louis XIV in France, and to Catholicism, neither of which held any appeal for most of the English. It took the openly Catholic James only three years as King to undermine the Protestant ascendancy to the point of getting himself deposed in 1688.

Down the road from where we live is the vast park, huge house and many treasures of Chatsworth, seat of the Cavendish family and suitable monument to the rewards of treason. In 1688 the Earl of Devonshire, subsequently the first Duke, was one of six lords and one bishop to sign the invitation to William of Orange, Dutch Head of State, to assume the English crown. Cavendish and the others were risking their necks, but William invaded with a large army that James could not match.

No one wanted another Civil War. England's sense of nationhood was sufficiently developed for the one that we did have to be seen as a national catastrophe. Proportionately more people were killed than in the First World War. Nor was there any appetite for killing another king. James was placed in captivity, but it was made possible for him to escape to the continent, which he did, to sighs of relief all round. A glorious Revolution? Maybe not, but a very English pragmatic solution.



BURNS NIGHT 2026

Mike Sedgwick

Up in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka, lives a Scot. His love of Scotland is expressed every year in a Burns Night celebration. This year he found a piper to pipe in the haggis and an actor with command of the Scottish vernacular to address in the traditional style. It fell to me to offer the toast to Burns' Immortal Memory.

Oh, our Chieftain, Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests, and if there are any undistinguished guests, I include them also.

Why do we have a Burns Night? Why, as darkness travels across the globe from Japan, Singapore, Lahore, Lesotho, London and the New World, do the Scots diaspora engage in clinking glasses to a lowly born ploughboy?

The English have Shakespeare, the Irish have Joyce, the Germans have Goethe, the Americans have Longfellow, and even the Sri Lankans have Martin Wickramasinghe. Still, none hail these men as the Scots celebrate Burns.

Perhaps it is because he was the most vital and alive of poets; the most devoid of hypocrisy and pretence; the most able of all of them to drill down to the reality of life.

He had notable contemporaries. Did any of them come close?

William Blake, born two years before Burns, a mystic and a visionary. He was considered mad by his contemporaries. One cannot imagine a convivial evening with him.

*Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?*

Not the sort of thing you wish to consider as you enjoy a bowl of Scotch Broth with mutton.



Thomas Gray, (1716-1771) was a contemplative melancholic. He spent most of his life as a Cambridge Don and regarded many of his colleagues as illiterate drunkards. He is known as one of the 'Graveyard' poets.

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day
The lowering herd wind slowly o'er the lea
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

Yawn – lovely but we're nodding off.

William Cowper (1731 - 1800). Now we are getting closer. He wrote about religious themes in later life after suffering a religious psychosis.

Oh, for a closer walk with God, is his most memorable religious line, but the hymn about bathing in a fountain of blood suggests someone mentally on the edge.

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains*

Like Burns, Cowper had many girlfriends and menfriends, but unlike Burns, he had no carnal knowledge of them (as they quaintly put it). Lady Anna Austen, one of his friends, told him to get a grip of himself during one of his depressive episodes, and write a poem for her about a sofa. Not an inspiring subject at first thought, but 774 lines of blank narrative verse later, he had a work widely acclaimed as *The Task*. In it are the lines:

*There is a pleasure in poetic pain
That only poets know.*

Burns read the poem and commented:

'Is not The Task a glorious poem? The religion of The Task, barring a few scraps of Calvinistic divinity, is a religion of God and Nature: the religion that exalts and ennobles man.'

The Task is close to Burns, but lacks his directness and vitality. We can all see, but few observe, and fewer still can write their observations; rare indeed is the one who writes them all in verse. Burns was the rare one.

While in church, he observed a louse crawling along the back of one of his women friends who was sitting in the pew in front.

*Ha! whaur ye gaun, ye crowlin ferlie?
Your impudence protects you sairly;
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,
Owre gauze and lace;
Tho', faith! I fear ye dine but sparely
On sic a place.*

And the last stanza:

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!*

Burns gets down to the truth and actuality with this and its sister poem about the wee timorous beastie.

So, let us drink a toast with joy, pride, and reverence, as others have on this night since the first Burns Night in Greenock in 1801. Raise your glasses high to the Immortal Memory of Robbie Burns.



THE FORTUNATE ISLES

Geoff Parkes

For years I have suffered from a powerful addiction to the Canary Islands. A four-hour flight can transport you from the misery of a cold, damp British winter to warm and sunny climes. The volcanic archipelago stretches nearly 300 miles from west to east, and Punta La Entallada on Fuerteventura lies just 60 miles from Morocco.

The eight Canary Islands are listed below in ascending order of popularity.

El Hierro, the westernmost and second-smallest island, is the only one I have never visited. The journey by ferry from Los Cristianos in Tenerife takes around 2.5 hours. It is a UNESCO Geopark, evidently packed with fascinating features: natural rock pools; surreal, wind-sculpted juniper trees; outstanding scuba diving; wonderful hiking trails.

La Graciosa, the smallest island, with just 700 inhabitants, is reached in 25 minutes by ferry from Lanzarote – an outstandingly beautiful journey. The island is almost entirely treeless and features sand, scrub and a couple of volcanoes. Well-marked hiking trails criss-cross the island, but the main attraction is a coastal walk, taking in fine, unspoilt beaches. Outside the capital, Caleta de Sebo, there are no facilities and **no shade**. A day trip is enough to gain a good impression.

La Gomera is a quiet, unspoilt place with rugged mountains, deep ravines, and energy-sapping trails. It is known for dramatic rock formations, waterfalls, the *silbo gomero* – a unique whistled language – and black sandy beaches, though this is not an island for a beach holiday. Most visitors come to go hiking. If you're nervous about volcanic eruptions, this is your best bet: there has not been an eruption here for two million years!

La Palma lies 56 miles north of El Hierro as the crow flies, depending on how old the crow is. Like La Gomera, it is visited mainly by hikers.

In 2006, I spent three weeks on the island, staying one week in the capital, Santa Cruz in the north, one week in the south, and one week in the west.

Strolling through Santa Cruz, one is struck by the colourful wooden balconies, reminiscent of those in Portugal, Malta, and Havana. The vibe is pleasantly relaxed, though it's somewhat disappointing to find that, instead of a beach or a promenade, the seafront is occupied by a long, thin car park.





I joined five organised hikes here. The most memorable was along the north-south ridge walk – the Ruta de los Volcanes. In 2021, I watched on TV the fearsome volcanic eruptions and curtains of fire that ravaged that very ridge – an eerie feeling indeed! Around 400 people were evacuated to the hotel where I had stayed.

Fuerteventura is the second-largest island and is most famous for its vast, sandy beaches. Cofete in the south is perhaps the most spectacular, but it is too dangerous to swim there. Rumours abound concerning a ruinous house on this beach, Villa Winter. Was it a secret getaway for Nazis in WW2? Nothing is proven.

I spent four days in the nearby, low-key resort of Morro Jable. As a keen swimmer, I always ask locals about sea currents and was told with a laugh that there were none. I swam north for 20 minutes and took 50 minutes to swim back. Islanders often know very little about their own oceans.

Further north, most of the east coast is characterised by long, sandy beaches, many favoured by naturists. One should be particularly careful of the rapid incoming and outgoing tides, c.f. Morecambe Bay in England.

Traditionally, Germans have flocked to the peninsula of Jandia in the south whilst Brits have favoured Corralejo in the north. In recent years, Italians have discovered Fuerteventura. Many of the cafés and restaurants in Corralejo are now Italian-run, and very good they are, too.

The main drag in Corralejo is a monument to consumerism, with shops, cafés and bars shouting at you from both sides. I started off hating it but ended up loving it. Turn down any side street, and you're away. On the seafront, there are three or four pleasant bays suitable for swimming, and they're not too crowded. At the harbour, there is an excellent fish restaurant, and a 15-minute boat ride takes you to what should rank as the ninth Canary Island: Isla de los Lobos. This boasts a great volcano to climb, several good beaches, and a fen-like wetland with bold, photogenic lizards.

My favourite area is the Corralejo Natural Park, a short bus ride from the centre. This is a Sahara Desert outside Africa, and without the stifling heat. Wander at will among the extensive, rolling sand dunes. They are largely empty, but you will not get lost, as a road runs parallel nearby. One morning, I thought I spotted two ostriches in the distance, and was annoyed not to be carrying a camera with a powerful zoom. They turned out to be *Canarian houbara* – a rare type of bustard, which is the emblem of the park.





Lanzarote This is the island which shows most evidence of volcanic devastation. About 25% of it is covered by lava spewed out in eruptions that lasted from 1730 to 1736. Altogether, there are now more than 300 cones, the last one of which I climbed was Montaña Roja, near Playa Blanca. Here you can descend into the verdant crater and marvel at the flora and fauna enjoying the microclimate afforded by the crater's rim.

Apart from moonscapes, what marks Lanzarote out from the other islands is the work of the genius César Manrique: artist, architect, and conservationist. His extraordinary creations dot the island: *Jameos del Agua*, a lake-filled underground cave converted into a concert hall; *Mirador del Río*, a lofty viewpoint restaurant overlooking the whole of La Graciosa; his amazing house in Haría; Islota de Fermina, an outdoor swimming-pool and café in Arrecife; and around 20 more.

A bus tour of the Timanfaya National Volcano Park is a must – you can dine on food cooked over volcanic heat in the El Diablo restaurant designed by Manrique.

There are only three main resorts: Puerto del Carmen, Playa Blanca, and Costa Teguise. Does anyone remember the late Pat Roach, who played Cornishman Bomber in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*? I passed him once on the pavement in Puerto del Carmen in 1983. I'm 6' 3" tall and had to look up at him! Puerto is the biggest resort, and the place to go if you want night life. I have stayed in all three but now prefer the capital, Arrecife, which has far more of an international feel.

Gran Canaria is situated in the middle of the archipelago. Its capital, Las Palmas, with over 380,000 inhabitants, is by far the largest city in the Canaries with the best range of cultural offers: a world-class aquarium, the historic Vegueta old quarter, an impressive cathedral, and the Christopher Columbus Museum. The iconic beach, Playa de Las Canteras, runs alongside.

The centre of the island offers the same hiking opportunities as described for other islands, the circular Roque Nublo being the most famous.

For most holidaymakers, the best-known feature is probably the broad expanse of the Maspalomas sand dunes in the south, with the sea beckoning beyond – a sun worshipper's paradise. Puerto Rico and Mogán are the other standout resorts.

Tenerife is the largest island. With almost one million inhabitants, it is also the most populous. The island is dominated by Mount Teide, the highest peak in Spain at 3718 metres – almost three times as high as Ben Nevis. In 1974, I wandered around the rocky summit, where the uneven rocks of yellow, grey and brown emitted strong-smelling, sulphurous steam from scattered fumaroles. It was a riveting, ghostly atmosphere, but one which few can enjoy today. Nowadays you need a special permit to access the summit. Coachloads of visitors are hoisted by cable car as far as a lava-lined walkway which affords excellent views on clear days, but it's more than 160 metres below the peak.



Puerto de la Cruz is the premier resort in the north, with rough seas, black sand beaches, and good shopping. It also has a splendid botanical garden and a series of stunning swimming-pools next to the coast, designed by Manrique. La Orotava town, an ancient dragon tree at Icod de los Vinos, and Anaga Park in the far north-east are excursions worth considering.

Thanks to the proximity of Teide, the north of the island is often cloudy and rainy, which is why tourists flock to the south. Los Cristianos, Playa de las Americas, and Costa Adeje run into each other and form the epicentre of tourist Tenerife. Playa de las Americas is a bit like Lanzarote's Puerto del Carmen, but on steroids.

Apart from the crowds, two things are particularly striking here. First, the golden, sandy beaches. There are around a dozen of them along a seven-mile stretch, and they are all artificial, created in the 1990s by importing vast quantities of sand from the Sahara. They're long, wide, and never as crowded as the adjacent promenades. Ideal if you like a lively beach holiday.

Second is the consideration given to the disabled. A broad promenade runs the whole length of the tourist resorts: brilliant for mobility scooters and wheelchairs. At the bigger beaches, walkways lead over the sand to wooden terraces with sunshades. There are even large, wheelbarrow-like vehicles in which lifeguards take disabled people into the water should they wish to swim. It's truly heart-warming.

The Canaries have something for everyone, from bustling, brash resorts to sleepy villages with tranquil coves. Pick your destination carefully, and you can find the ideal winter escape.

SCATTERSHOT

Nimmi Channa

There was never any peace in her space. It was a scattershot existence, haphazard & chaotic. Sara set up charts, lists and plans but they became redundant as soon as the ink had dried. So to speak. Maybe that was just her nature. She was disorganised but she certainly didn't need interference telling her what to do; how to do it and when to do it. In fact, she always delivered, maybe late, but the delivery was always on the plate.

It was honour therefore to be asked to be the chief organiser for Rani's wedding. Rani was her best friend and nothing made her feel happier than this honour. She had bags of time too. The wedding was a year away. A whole year of lists and plans. Sara and Rani started making lists together and assigning duties and dates. Rani didn't want any surprises so Sara happily agreed. It was going to be fun.

The hen do was the first priority and the destination was agreed as Cornwall. A fabulous cottage was found for 12 and all deposits were collected and a chef arranged to cook a fabulous meal with all the tastings and trimmings. As it was going to be a very boozy weekend, they decided no one was going to drive so train seemed the best option. Dina, Sara's sister, suggested her boyfriend drive them all. Sara thought it was a joke suggestion. Apart from anything else she didn't know why Dina was interfering and her boyfriend was weird; 10 years older than Dina and why on earth would he want to take a gang of girls to a hen do. She didn't like him – he gave her the creeps. Rani didn't seem too bothered. Obviously, the costs would be hugely cheaper if this van idea was adopted. But the more Sara thought about it the more she shuddered. But everyone else weren't so bothered. The idea of saving three quarters of the cost of a train appealed. So, Sara sighed not much option to get shot of the perv. Thing was he wasn't even going to stay with them – she really couldn't work out why he would want to be there. Maybe overly possessive about Dina – making sure nothing untoward happened at the Do. As if it would...

The wedding dress got ordered and her dress was organised and even the wedding venue was booked. Everything was being ticked off the list so fast, she was amazed. In fact, the only thing left was her speech. Lots of ideas; options; poems; mottoes; quotes; advice flooded in but Sara was happy with her speech. It hit all the right notes and the jokes and memories were not so embarrassing.

"Hi Sara, just wanted to find out did you book that artist? The one you were going to ask to come and do drawings during the wedding?"

Sara sighed. She knew she had done it but just couldn't remember if she had had confirmation.

"I'm sure I have let me check. But I know he wanted a deposit."

"But we haven't paid any deposits?"

"I will ask again. And let you know how much we owe."

Sara felt a sudden panic. She really hoped she hadn't forgotten. A quick check and it was booked but he was waiting for a deposit.

Sara called Rani. Yep, artist was booked but would like £100 deposit. Rani suddenly jumped and said "Oh you know what Dina has suggested someone else. Do you mind asking her for the details?"

Sara felt a sudden state of annoyance. She was swimming against her own chaotic nature and all these changes were confusing. She began to question why Rani had asked her to be chief organiser. Surely, she should have asked Dina. Still, she didn't want to add more strain for her friend so she obliged. But this other artist was more caricature so she didn't think it worked but, in the end, he was cheaper so Rani chose him.

Sara did feel a bit irritated. She hit the radiator annoyed and her hand ached with the pain. Suddenly blood spurted out and she felt so much pain she wanted to scream. She ran towards the bathroom. Her hand throbbed as she poured cold water over her hand. But it was too much and she had to call a cab to go to A&E. The hospital was full up and every seat was occupied. It was a morbid place and the gloom was only interrupted by moaning and people complaining about the wait. Once her turn came the X-ray confirmed the worst. Her hand was broken.

Sara shared this bad news with Rani. 6 weeks in a cast and no writing, typing and then the worst came as expected. Dina's interference paid off and the reins of that wedding organising passed onto Dina. In some ways it was a relief and yes, the interference had been annoying. But it was good to be on the sidelines watching on rather than in the thick of it all. Still, she would do her best for her friend! There was no point in letting these things get in the way of a lifelong friendship.

THE GULL THAT FLEW INTO ROOM 90

Nadine Corscadden

90th Anniversary Competition First Prize

The wind was like a living thing, rattling the main doors of the ancient Grand Pomme d'Or Hotel and carrying in the scent of seaweed. Inside, the lobby glowed with muted gold light that reflected off the polished brass fittings. This place was not just a landmark but a refuge on the island especially against the Jersey winter. The storm outside was a reminder that the island, for all its charm, was also a fortress of stone and sea.

The concierge, Mr. Pritchard, straightened his jacket as the doors swung open. She had arrived; Lady Eleanor Ashcombe swept in with another gust of wind, leather case in her hand, hatbox under her arm, the lights of the taxi that brought her fading into the night. She paused at the reception desk. Her presence each January was a ritual, as immutable as the tides.

"My Room key, please, Pritchard," she said, her voice clipped, aristocratic, she needed no introduction.

"Of course, my lady," Pritchard replied, bowing slightly. He had learned long ago that pleasantries were wasted on her. Lady Eleanor only spoke when necessary and always stayed in Room Ninety.

Behind the desk, the housekeeper Alice watched fascinated as Pritchard handed over the key to this remarkable woman. She had heard the stories: the fortune, the artistic temperament, the beauty had led many to suggest she was perhaps even a princess. Others whispered of tragedy to help explain the solo visits over the years. However, all agreed that Lady Ashcombe carried her secrets like jewels, glittering and untouchable.

Room Ninety smelled of beeswax and sea air, its wallpaper a silvery grey, a colour she'd insisted on for her first visit along with the deep blue velvet drapes, pictures and mirrors that adorned the walls. The brass bedstead gleamed under the lamplight, polished by years of careful hands. Everything was as it should be. She surveyed the room slowly. Curtains drawn back just so, the balcony doors latched firmly against the wind, the writing desk cleared except for the blotter and fountain pen. She nodded once, satisfied.

Setting down her leather case on the ottoman, Lady Eleanor began the ceremony of unpacking. First came the sketchbook, its cover worn smooth by decades of touch. She placed it gently on the desk. Inside were pages filled with pencil drawings. Then she withdrew the silver-framed photograph, the man in the picture smiled faintly, his eyes mischievous, his hair dark and unruly—the same face that haunted the sketchbook.

Outside, the sea roared against the breakwater. Lady Eleanor turned to look out of the window, her silhouette framed against the glass and breathed a deep sigh. She loved coming back here.

Next morning, Alice balanced the tray carefully as she climbed the last flight of stairs. Mr. Pritchard had been stern before sending her up. “She’s particular,” he’d warned, “and sharp as a blade. Don’t linger.”

Alice knocked softly on the door to Room Ninety.

“Enter,” came the reply, clipped and cool.

Lady Eleanor sat in the armchair by the balcony doors, her silhouette sharp against the pale morning light.

Alice set the tray down, stealing a glance at the drawings that lay fanned out on the table. Faces, mostly. One face repeated again and again: the man in the photo. She felt a question rise, but swallowed it.

“Your tea, my lady,” Alice said softly.

Lady Eleanor turned her head slowly, eyes narrowing as if assessing a stranger. “You’re new!?”

“Yes, my lady, 3 months now, I’m Alice, the last housekeeper retired.”

A pause.

“Pritchard told me how you like things...” Alice waivered distracted by the pictures.

“Curiosity,” Eleanor said, leaning forward while covering the sketches with a blank sheet, her eyes steady but unfathomable, “needs to be tempered by intellect.”

Alice murmured an apology and backed toward the door, heart pounding as she closed it quietly behind her.

The storm still raged that afternoon. The hotel’s corridors were hushed, but in the lounge there was the pianist coaxing soft melodies from the grand piano. The pianist was almost as old as the building, his back slightly stooped, his fingers

moving with the grace of long habit. He remembered her, every winter, the same woman in the same chair, but they had never spoken. Not once in the ten or so years she had been coming here. Their silence was a ritual as old as her visits.

Eleanor sat in her usual chair by the bay windows. She gazed out at the rain-slicked promenade. The music seemed to hold her in place, tethering her to something distant and fragile.

Alice approached her with a small glass of sherry. Eleanor took it with a nod and returned to gazing out of the window. The pianist shifted into a lilting tune, and Eleanor's fingers moved unconsciously, tracing the rhythm on the armrest.

"So much is still the same," Eleanor murmured, almost to herself. "As it was then."

Alice frowned as she asked "Then?"

Eleanor's lips curved "When the island was under siege. When the Germans came." Her eyes drifted back to the window. "This place... it was ours."

Before Alice could respond, a gentleman walked in, hung up his dripping wet coat and took the chair opposite Lady Eleanor. He gave Alice a swift appraising look then said, "White wine, local, please...". He then turned to Lady Eleanor "It's good to see you..." He paused as he waited for Alice to step away then leaned in to whisper, "We have some progress to report about the ...the Gull...read it later". He took out a small envelope and passed it to Lady Eleanor.

The storm had broken in the night, leaving a strange calm behind. Outside, gulls wheeled and dipped over the bay, their cries sharp against the hush—a sudden chorus of life. Alice carried the tray up to Lady Eleanor's room. Yesterday's words still clung to her: "This place... it was ours."

She knocked.

"Enter," Eleanor said, her voice softer than before.

Lady Eleanor sat at the writing desk, her sketchbook open, a pencil poised between her fingers. On the page, the outline of a gull took shape—wings spread wide, riding an invisible current.

Alice set the tray down carefully. "Your tea, my lady."

Lady Eleanor's gaze flicked between the window and the sketchbook, her hand moving in slow, deliberate strokes. "They're beautiful," she murmured. "Free as the wind. Not bound by anything but their own interests." Her eyes followed the gulls outside, wheeling in the pale sky.

Alice hesitated, unsure if she should speak. Eleanor's pencil stilled. Her fingers hovered over the page, tracing the curve of a wing. "You've been wondering," she said abruptly. "About him."

Alice froze. "I—"

Lady Eleanor's eyes lifted, sharp but tired. "Everyone wonders. They whisper. They invent stories. None of them know...yet"

Alice swallowed. "Who was he?"

Eleanor closed the sketchbook gently. "James. A stubborn, beautiful hero." Her gaze drifted back to the window, where the gulls wheeled in the calm. "We worked here together. He... he...is like no-one else I've ever met."


Her voice faltered, then steadied. "He worked with the resistance. Smuggling messages, hiding supplies. Brave and cunning. I stayed here, in this room, and he would climb through the window. We all had codenames and 'Gull' suited him given his expertise with birds." Her hand trembled on the desk. "Then one night in January, someone betrayed him. He was taken to France. I never thought I would see him again."

Alice felt her throat tighten. "I'm so sorry."

Lady Eleanor's voice was quiet "All any of us can do is our best...and sometimes that means finding our own ways to make peace with what happens...it's why I come back here every January since his disappearance. To this room. To remember, to rally. And if I'm being completely honest to hope that he will find his way back to me."

Outside, the gulls cried again, almost like an echo to her words.

The week passed slowly but Lady Eleanor's taciturn habit meant that Alice was hesitant to ask her more about what troubled her as there was clearly something. Yet Lady Eleanor would take her daily walk, whatever the weather, before settling into her seat in the lounge where she would be joined by a mysterious gentleman and today no different. When Lady Eleanor entered the lounge, she was drenched, but there was a warmth to her face. The gentleman that sat with her that day was one Alice was sure she had seen before but would struggle to describe as he looked so average.



The next morning Pritchard waylaid Alice as she did her morning rounds and remarked “Lady Ashcombe stepped out early”.

Full of trepidation, Alice knocked on the door. The room was empty, well and truly empty, all of Lady Eleanor’s belongings had gone. Alice spotted a piece of paper on the desk. It was a just a few scribbled words, but the significance left Alice gasping with delight to read “The Gull flew back into Room Ninety”. When Alice passed Pritchard the note, he just smiled enigmatically.

For the rest of the day Alice tried various tactics to get Pritchard to explain. Eventually Pritchard gave her a quelling look and said, “Read the paper tomorrow.”

The next morning the front-page story had the title ‘A Golden Opportunity’, and a familiar sketch of gulls. Alice scanned the text until she found the phrase ‘Ornithologist named as Resistance Hero by War Office has returned to his family after successful prisoner exchange’.

Pritchard remarked quietly “I hope they return for the award ceremony”.

THE PALIMPSEST OF AERON VALE

David Tate

90th Anniversary Competition Second Prize

The first time I saw the boy with the glass harmonica, he was standing knee-deep in the river Aeron. Mist unfurled behind him like pale silk, and the dawn light made his instrument glint with a faint, spectral iridescence. Each time he drew his fingers along the rim of the harmonica, the air trembled, softly at first, then in concentric ripples that hummed against the ribs of the valley.

I did what any sensible man would do on his morning walk: pretended I hadn't seen the child conjure impossible music in a river older than memory. But curiosity is a persistent weed. By the time I reached the wooden footbridge, I was already turning back.

He wasn't there anymore.

That was in late October, ninety days after my brother Rhys died.

Rhys had been a folklorist, the kind who spent more time chasing a rumour through the Welsh hills than paying bills or returning text messages. Two days before his heart gave out, he'd left me a voicemail, his voice taut with excitement or was it fear; it was always hard to tell with him.

"It's happening again, Dai," he whispered. "The cycles are real. The Aeron remembers everything, and I think I've finally..."

Static drowned out the rest.

One week after the apparition on the river, I found a parcel at my doorstep wrapped in waxed paper and bound with coarse twine. No return address. Inside: Rhys's leather-bound field journal, the cover scored by rain, mud, and a series of tiny burn-marks that formed an irregular spiral.

The journal should have felt like a consolation. Instead, it felt like the first move in a game I didn't know I was playing.

Most entries were typical Rhys, collected myths, odd sightings, interviews with the local farmers who still swore that the Aeron had moods and memories. But three

entries, dated decades apart, were written in different inks, different handwritings, yet told versions of the same story: a boy who played a glass harmonica in the river; a river that sang back; a pattern of events repeating every ninety years.

The final entry, dated three weeks before Rhys's death, was different. His handwriting jittered off the lines.

Saw him again. The boy. But he didn't see me, just looked through me like I was a shadow, or he was. The harmonica isn't an instrument. It's a key. And the river... the river is a lock.

I tried to dismiss the idea as grief, mine, his, our whole family's collective history of romanticizing the strange.

Two nights later, the river sang.

I don't mean wind through reeds or owls calling across the valley. I mean music: clear as crystal, threaded through the air like a silver filament. I followed the sound barefoot across the damp grass and found myself at the same bend in the river where I'd seen the boy.

He stood waist-deep in water. The fog curled at his shoulders.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He turned. His eyes were very old. "The river calls you," he said simply.

"No," I said, because that was too much. "No, it didn't."

"You're Rhys's brother," he continued. "He calls you too."

"I don't know what that means," I said. "I barely know what I'm doing here."

The boy nodded. "You came to hear the memory."

"What memory?"

"All of them."

Then he raised his hands and played.

Images rose from the surface of the river, blurred at first, then crisp: an ancient woman dropping a locket into the river; a shepherd, of old, carving runes into a smooth stone; a neolithic child laughing at her own reflection.

The river was showing me memories.

“Stop,” I shouted.

The boy didn’t stop.

The visions accelerated, centuries flickering like pages in a book. Lovers carving initials in oak trees, battles fought on the banks, couples hugging with delight.

And then, a flash of something else: Rhys standing by me, clutching his notebook, eyes wide with awe and terror.

“Enough!” I shouted.

The boy lowered his hands.

The world settled. The river dimmed.

I stood trembling.

“What is happening?” I whispered.

“The Aeron remembers,” the boy said. “And every cycle, it chooses someone to hold the memory with it.”

“No. Not me.”

“Rhys tried,” the boy replied. “But he wasn’t chosen.”

“That’s why he died?” I demanded.

“You don’t force this. You accept it.”

“I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Almost no one does.”

“Who are you?”

“Aeron,” he said.

“The river?”

He smiled.

I kept returning.

He showed me things that left me hollow.

One evening, as frost began to creep along the banks, he said, "It's nearly time."

"For what?"

"For you to choose."

I felt a coil of dread tighten behind my ribs. "Choose what?"

"To remember or to forget."

I opened my mouth to protest but the river stirred. Mist rose in coiling tendrils.

"Come closer," Aeron said.

Against all sense, I obeyed.

He reached out a hand. It was small, cold, and impossibly light. "You carry your brother's grief like a stone," he murmured. "But the river can take it."

"And then what?" I whispered.

"Then you belong to the cycle."

I don't remember falling into the river. I remember only the sensation of being pulled, not downward, but through something. Through layers of time. Through memories that were or weren't mine.

I saw myself as a child, trailing behind Rhys on muddy paths while he recited ghost stories. I saw myself as a teenager, brushing off his theories as harmless eccentricities. I saw myself standing in the hospital morgue, touching his cold forehead and whispering an apology I should have made long before he died.

Then the river peeled away my memories as though they were thin sheets of wet paper. Beneath them, I glimpsed older lives, none of which I recognized but all of which felt faintly familiar. A shepherd carving wood. A woman dropping a locket. A child skipping stones.

A cycle.

An inheritance.

A burden.

A gift.

When I finally surfaced, gasping, the boy was gone.

The river lay silent.

I stumbled home soaked and shivering, Rhys's journal still safe in my jacket pocket, though I had no memory of putting it there.

Over the next days, the valley felt... wrong. Or perhaps I did.

I would be washing dishes and suddenly feel the echo of cold steel, my hands remembering a sword, though my life had never touched one. I would walk past the oak near the footbridge and feel a sting of heartbreak over initials carved there centuries ago. I would dream of faces I'd never before seen but could name.

The river had not taken my grief. It had braided it with something vast.

I tried to pretend life could continue unchanged. But each day the past seeped through the seams of the present, and each night the river murmured faintly, as if calling me back.

On the seventh night, I returned.

Aeron waited, sitting cross-legged on the damp bank, humming softly to himself.

"You've started remembering," he said without looking up.

"Yes," I said. "And I don't know if it's destroying me or remaking me."

"It's usually both."

I sat beside him. "What happens now?"

"You choose," he said again. "Most people choose forgetting. It's simpler. You wake tomorrow with only a dream of all this, and the river sleeps until the next cycle."

"And if I choose remembering?"

Aeron looked at me with those ancient eyes. "Then you carry the memory. And when the next cycle begins, you become the harmonica player."

I blinked. "The harmonica player?"

"The one who calls the river awake," he said. "The one who plays and opens the lock. The one I was, before you came."

I stared at him. "You were chosen?"

"No," he said. "I was born in a cycle where no one chose. Someone had to hold the memory, so the river made me."

“And if I choose?”

He exhaled, a breath that seemed to release centuries. “Then I can rest.”

A long silence unfurled between us, filled only by the soft rush of water and the distant hoot of an owl.

I thought of Rhys, his obsessions, his loneliness, his hunger to understand something he felt but could never grasp. I thought of his final message. It’s happening again. The cycles are real.

He hadn’t been afraid. He’d been vindicated.

“Aeron,” I said.

“Yes?”

“If I choose remembering, will I see him? Rhys, even once?”

The boy smiled. “Memory is not a boundary.”

I nodded.

Then I placed my hand in his.

The river surged.

Tomorrow, at dawn, I will stand knee-deep in the river with the glass harmonica. Someone will hear me, someone who thinks they are just taking a morning walk, and the cycle will begin again.

Aeron sleeps now, finally free.

I am the memory.

And I, the river, remembers everything.

CRIME CORNER

Geoff Parkes

To run in tandem with my other article in this issue, The Fortunate Isles, I am devoting the whole of Crime Corner this time to crime in the Canary Islands in general and Tenerife in particular. I should start by saying that the overall crime rate in the Canaries is low – much lower, for example, than in Madrid, Barcelona, or Valencia. At the same time, crime in the tourist hotspots is on the increase, and I offer the true stories below in the hope that they can forewarn anyone planning a holiday in these lovely islands.

Let's start with the types of crime of which I have personal experience: I have been targeted three times.

1. Pickpocketing

Two years ago, after leaving my hotel in Los Cristianos, Tenerife, I was walking to the taxi rank to book a journey to the airport. I was wheeling hand luggage with one hand and carrying a plastic bag in the other. All of a sudden, I felt someone fiddling in my back trouser pocket. Whirling round, I saw a guy of about 20 scamper off, cross the road, and continue distributing advertising leaflets on cars. He glanced back at me once, grinning.

2. Opportunistic stealing

About five years ago, I went for a swim late one afternoon on Los Cristianos Harbour beach. Back at my sunbed, I noticed a man standing about 15 yards from me, staring out to sea. I stayed there relaxing for several minutes, and he didn't move. He was a bit too close for comfort. To be honest, I thought he might be gay, hoping for an encounter. It crossed my mind to stand up and go and tell him he was wasting his time as I'm heterosexual, but I didn't.

The time came for me to slip out of my trunks and get dried and changed. We are all familiar with the ridiculous contortions one has to go through under a towel to preserve one's modesty on a non-naturist beach. I went through the motions, then reached for my underpants and trousers under the sunbed – and they were gone. I thought I was going mad. A couple of minutes later, a Norwegian came up to me to say he had witnessed someone stealing my things. The whole theft can't have taken more than 30 or 40 seconds when I wasn't looking. The Norwegian pointed back towards the shore.

I saw the thief striding along the promenade, my trousers dangling from his hand.



Pensioner I may be, but I can still run, and I was moving faster than he was. I was also shouting. I pointed and yelled that the guy was a thief, and I screamed it in English, Spanish, and German. There must have been 200 – 300 people sitting in the area, slurping ice-creams, scoffing fish, or gazing at their mobile phones. Nobody did a thing. Sat there gawping. Didn't want to get involved.

The thief could see that the tall foreigner in Y-fronts (no boxers, please!) was gaining on him. He dropped the trousers on the promenade and took a side street inland. I got as far as my trousers, stared after him, and decided it would be ridiculous to try to continue the chase.

Back at the sunbed, I was soon approached by another Scandinavian, this time a Finn. He returned to me the only thing of value which I had had in the trousers, and which had fallen onto the promenade: a very expensive pen.

* * *

An old friend of mine who now spends eight months a year in Tenerife has had his passport and all credit cards stolen – twice! The first time was when he stopped his car for two minutes to admire a view with some visitors – just enough time for the thieves to nick everything from the car. The second time he is still not sure exactly when the theft took place, but it was somewhere between the airport and his flat in Costa Adeje. It was probably when he put his wallet down for a moment in a café.

There are numerous reports of handbags, mobile phones, and wallets being swiped from table tops, or under tables, when their owners are momentarily distracted. Don't let go of anything!

* * *

On the day of departure from my hotel in Santa Cruz, La Palma, I left a few things on my bed to go out and buy a bottle of water for the bus journey south. I was gone ten minutes. When I came back, I discovered my Spanish-English pocket dictionary had been stolen, presumably by room service.

3. Gangs

This was the scariest episode. It was a beautiful Sunday morning in Costa Adeje, Tenerife, and I decided to leave the coast for a change and head for the hills. Once you walk inland, you're quickly away from the crowds, and the road I was climbing was bordered by bungalows, with no shops or hotels. There was nobody around. Without warning, a car came from behind at speed, mounted the pavement, and stopped two yards in front of me, blocking my way. Instinctively, I shouted, "What the hell...?"

A young blonde woman was suddenly at my side, leaning into me. "Oh, I don't know what that is," she said.



Something told me to turn around. A swarthy man in his twenties had undone the straps of my rucksack and was fishing inside. I glared down at him. He thrust his hands into the air, with that desperate *nothing-to-do-to-with-me*, guv gesture adopted by the patently guilty.

I walked twenty yards back down the hill, laid my rucksack on the pavement, and checked inside. I had just caught him in time. My £700 camera was still there. I did the rucksack up again.

The swarthy man and the blonde walked down the hill to rejoin me.

“Is that island La Palma?” asked the blonde, pointing.

I said, “*Yo no sé. Tengo que irme ahora. Voy a cruzar la calle.*”

Judging by their accents, I knew they wouldn’t understand Spanish. I crossed the road and continued walking briskly up the hill. I didn’t look back.

* * *

As I speak Spanish, I have been fortunate enough to glean a lot more about crime on the islands than the average tourist would. For a start, the police are not interested if you have lost less than 300 euros. Thefts are too common for them to record such a trivial amount.

Second, gangs travel to Tenerife for the peak holiday season, when pickings are at their richest. This means November to March.

* * *

It’s not too difficult to act in such a way that your chances of being targeted are vanishingly small. I’m unlucky in that I’m particularly tall, obviously foreign, wear a striking hat, and am often alone: a great target.

Avoid the area called Las Verónicas in Playa de las Américas, especially at night.

After my experiences, I always leave passport and credit cards in the hotel in a case with a combination lock. I take no more cash than I’ll need, and I always keep it in the lower front pocket of cargo trousers. I put my mobile phone in the other side of the cargo trousers, in front of me.

Where do I feel safest? Without a doubt in Arrecife, Lanzarote. It’s the only place where I can leave my stuff on the beach, go for a 500-yard walk, and return with confidence that my things will still be there. I’m sure this is true of the quieter resorts in all the other islands, too, but I’d never do such a thing in any of the big resorts.

I do hope these tales haven’t put you off visiting! We should keep things in perspective. Nearly all the crime is petty and non-violent. You’re more likely to be mugged in Brighton than in Los Cristianos.

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Our quarterly magazine, *The SCPSW Author* welcomes contributions from members. Short stories, articles, reviews, poetry, illustrations, letters to the editor, and photographs may be included. Please email contributions to the editor. If you don't use emails, you could send a typed entry by post.

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