

Welcome to the final SCRIVENS for 2021

Due to a technical problem this issue has been slightly delayed. However, it names the WOTY winners and also the overall Writer of the Year 2021. So step forward Margaret Evans and take a bow.

The first prose winner was Margaret Evans, the second Yvonne Dalziel and Graham Leake was third. In poetry Jock Stein was first and Mike Davenport second. Third was disqualified as it had also appeared in another publication.

So let's get on and read the entries from around the Tyne and Esk family of writers who have made submissions for this issue of SCRIVENS.

Ophelia Dreaming

Lorna Dixon

I hope Mr Millais paints me as beautifully as he has painted the trees and flowers. The roses and violets and the delicate willow tree look so real. I can't wait to see how he fits me into the charming background. I wish I could paint in such detail, but then I don't have the time to sit for months on a river bank. Perhaps if they continue to use me as a model one of the Brotherhood might give me some lessons. I'm sure I could learn to paint like them . . . Oh well, I can dream, can't I? . . . I do wish Mr Rossetti would visit soon – I think he quite liked me and I most certainly like him. Perhaps he would be willing to teach me? That time he came to see Mr Deverell painting me as Viola in Twelfth Night – I couldn't hear everything they were saying – but I'm sure they were talking about my hair and how difficult it was to find the exact pigments to make up the colour. Funny isn't it? I always thought I was unlucky to have red hair but if Mr Deverell hadn't seen me working in the hat shop I might not be here now and never met the others in the group – especially you know who!

It's not too uncomfortable lying in the water but this old dress is very prickly – all the heavy silver embroidery would soon get tarnished if I didn't dry it properly and polish it after each modelling session. Mr Millais said he found it in an old clothes shop. Well, it should be clean enough by now, the number of washings it has had! It is very heavy too, and feels as though it wants to drag me down further into the water. Still I am quite safe as long as Mr Millais doesn't get too absorbed in his painting and forgets to watch out for me falling asleep!

Dante Gabriel Rossetti – what a lovely name

for a lovely man. Surely it's time for him to come and see how the painting is coming along... They really are a brotherhood. They support and suggest things to each other . . . Here I am, dreaming again. Not really surprising when I am lying for hours on my back staring at the ceiling. Perhaps I am falling in love with an artist? He's a poet too – I have read some of his verses . . .

I really sympathise with poor Ophelia. I can imagine how she would feel if she was rejected by the man who had been wooing her. She was in love with him and he led her to believe he loved her too. She didn't commit suicide though. She went mad and fell into the stream when the willow branch broke. I can see why an artist would want to paint her surrounded by the wild flowers and garlands that she sang about in the play.

I am beginning to get cold now. The candles usually keep the water warm enough for me to relax and keep really still. How strange – I'm starting to shiver. It's like when you are really enjoying bathing in the sea – you don't really notice how cold you are until you get out . . . Now I am shaking violently making ripples in the water! You'd think he'd notice! Perhaps he's not looking at me at all. Perhaps he's just working hard on the detail of the dress. If I don't move soon I'll sink into a frozen slumber like a fairy tale princess in a tower.

There's somebody hammering on the studio door . . . Come on, Millais, can't you hear? Perhaps it's him, my Dante. Perhaps he is secretly in love with me like the man in that Italian poem. He's come to warm me with his radiant smile. At last, the door is being opened . . . That's him! It's my knight in shining armour charging into the studio to rescue me!

"Heaven's above John. Look at the poor girl! She's turned blue! All the candles have gone out. She'll catch her death!"

Strong arms are lifting me. I stand up in the bath tub, dripping all over him. He is holding me, warming my poor shaking body, heedless of the water saturating his velvet coat. I sneeze violently and am aware of both artists shouting for the housekeeper to bring towels and dry clothes. She takes me behind the screen, strips me and rubs my body until I howl with pain.

Now I am wrapped like an Egyptian Mummy and sitting beside a blazing fire in the morning room. If I am ill because of this my father will be furious and fuss like an old hen. He may even try to forbid me to model again. But he will not stop me from modelling for Rossetti if he asks me. I hope he will. My body may be chilled to the bone, I may even have caught pneumonia, but, as the deep brown eyes of my painter-poet gaze anxiously into mine, my heart is pounding, glowing with heat and life.

A Big Tall Duck

Sheila Thacker

“Whatever is that?”

Asked eight-year-old Elliot.

We all looked round. My face lit up in recognition. Before I could say anything Elliot informed us: “It’s a big tall duck.”

We laughed, it was indeed a big tall duck. It was amongst other possessions in a large box labelled: ‘Random things we want to keep but don’t know why.’

We spent August in Dublin with our son Alistair and our grandson Elliot.

We came to help with childcare during the summer holidays yet got involved with decorating, gardening, clearing out cupboards and many other jobs we have been putting off at home saying we would do it after the pandemic. In short procrastination.

Alistair had cleared out his bedroom in preparation to decorate. A lot of things were stored temporarily in the loft and inevitably other boxes were spied and brought down for inspection.

Amongst the random things was *the* big tall duck. Elliot instantly fell in love with him and is now part of his gang along with Munk, Darcy, Brown Bear and all his other cuddly toys.

However, the big tall duck is not a toy; it is a walking stick with a brass duck head handle.

It was a Christmas present from my sister to my father in the late sixties. Being an MS sufferer he used a stick to help him walk. The brass head was ornate and the stick was beautifully tapered well varnished wood, with a rubber feral on the end to stop the wood from fraying and giving a firmer grip on the ground. However, being top heavy, it was impractical for daily use. It sat in pride of place in my parents’ hall stand for years. Their grandchildren admired it and played with it yet it never seemed particularly significant.

Years later 1993 to be precise; In a hotel room near the nursing home where my parents ended their days, I was sitting on the floor with my children, nephew and nieces going through a box of my late fathers remaining belongings. My brother and I had previously cleared his room of personal effects, distributed them as he wished and attended to the legal paraphernalia. Now it was just mementos for the kids.

Everyone had a story about the ornament, photo, picture or trinket they wanted. My enduring memory is of “Oh! I remember this . . . and so forth. It was a long nostalgic, emotional afternoon.

Alistair, quietly asked me “Mum, can I have this?” holding up the walking stick with the ducks head.

“Yes of course,” was the obvious reply, yet I was baffled as to why.

“Just want it, I like it” was the 15-year-old’s shrugged reply.

Twenty eight years later I was both moved and delighted to see it. It has been with him from house to house, albeit among random things.

Now it sits proudly with a new rubber feral, in Elliot’s bedroom. Part of their family.

Part of us all, it was lovely reminiscing about my father with my son and his son.

Alistair kept it, as it was the first thing he saw when visiting his grandparents.

Explaining family history to an eight-year-old is difficult. Elliot tells us that:

‘The big tall duck, got lost and was looking for his family and now he has found us we love him so he is family.’

That explanation is fine, I imagine my father chuckling and smiling his approval of the tall story, *the* big tall duck!

Comparing and Contrasting

Michael Davenport

Is it some primal curse, all this
comparing and contrasting?
In High School you had to read
the question carefully, note that
it was either Hamlet with Horatio
or Macbeth with Macduff.
Disobey these rules and you were stuffed.

Just before he got the boot
from his employment in a chemist's shop,
his trousers, badly stained with acid,
were compared and contrasted
with those of a superior apprentice.

At his wedding in the registrar's,
his mother, doleful and distracted,
compared and contrasted funerals
with nuptials, declared the former
much less serious, one's troubles over then.

His wife became obsessed with guru Ted.
Friend Archie said, "Be positive,
draw up a table, compare and contrast
Ted's qualities with yours".
The first entry set the tone:
Ted was a pioneer of cyberspace,
he was good at skimming stones.

As a teacher he could not resist
contagion, caught himself composing
the following examination question:
"Compare and contrast reproduction
in the human and the geranium."

Recognition

Mike Davenport

Night-time and muted lights.
A nurse checks, changes drips, slides out;
then it's just us and beeps from monitors.
I'm trapped inside my skin with pain and doubt,
an emptiness behind my weak-voiced wit.
Frank smiles, asks me how I'm getting on.
We are close already with adjacent beds,
struggles with catheters and cancer.
He is so pale and much more stoical than me.
Over one day and night we share
some details of our lives.

Later, a dream: a lonely hill-road;
in the whole world only me and a figure
staggering, his laboured breathing, near,
nearer. An alcoholic derelict, perhaps.
I almost turn away, then shout in joy,
'It's Frank, it's my mate Frank!!' I sense
he is close to the end, thin and drained,
yet he has struggled here to ask me
how I am, inquire about my pain.

And sometimes it is thus:
out of the world's randomness
a companion that you've never met
speeds towards you in an ambulance
then is wheeled along a corridor, as you,
alone and scared, enter a surgery ward
clutching your carefully-packed bag.

The Monument

Diana Stevens

He
stands
erect
prominent
towering over
the city enriched by thousands
of slaves, shipped to toil, suffer and die in plantations.
The profit he made, he spent well -
at least so he thinks
and those who
subscribed
did
too

The
bird
alights
on his head
talons gripping well
surveys distant humanity
scurrying about their lives, flaps wings, squawks loudly,
excretes a long stream of guano
This man is nothing
but a perch
for him
to
rest

Rosslyn Yew

Hannah Faويلةán

A seed six hundred years ago,
symbol of resurrection,
investment in wood:
bows to keep their soldiers fighting.

I grew and spread my arms;
they cut me, made their bows.
But what arrow can stop a maid or a candle
to find a dog?

Flames licked, sliced fabric, walls, wood,
towers tumbled over hiding women,
and a brave chaplain tolled a high bell.

I grew and spread my arms;
They cut me, made their bows.
But what arrow can pierce King Henry's fire?
Blackened walls fell under crumbling ceilings,
and this time a family fled.

They returned, rebuilt, expanded
to stories under stories down the cliff
and a door into a courtyard where I watched
cooks to kitchens, maids to parlours, children
to orchard, prisoners to cells.

But what arrow can stop a canon from
Monk's battery?

Balls tore my branches,
bore holes in stones, a castle cascading,
family fleeing

until all that remained was treasure,
a black knight, a white lady
and a folly for an artist's eye.

I grow and spread my arms;
crows fly through gridded, glassless windows;
pigeons share their fern-frilled city;
people come and stare and walk away;
some bide in rooms restored then leave.

But the birds stay, the ferns stay,
the ghosts stay, and I stay.

I am resurrection.

I grow and spread my arms.

Hard Rock – Hard Bargain

Martin White

'No way am I doing this. The last time you
didn't even pay.'

'It didn't turn out the way it should have. I
didn't expect it to get banned.'

'That's your problem.'

'100 days of Sodom should have been a great
success.'

'I spent 20 days carving it, and no one even
read it.'

'This time it's totally different.'

'How's that?'

'It came to me in a vision.'

'Oh my God. A vision.'

'Yes, God came to me and told me I had to
take the tablets.'

'Yes, he may well have had a point there. So
what do they have to say?'

'Well, they are commandments.'

'Oh my God, not another set of
commandments.'

'These are different.'

'That's what they all say.'

'There are ten in total.'

'How am I going to have time to carve 10
commandments?'

'They're short. For example number 8 is
"Thou shalt not steal".'

'Well it will cost you.'

'How much?'

'Three camels and a yak.'

'Where the hell am I going to find a yak, for
goodness sake.'

'That's your problem.'

'You drive a hard bargain.'

'Listen Moses, just you make sure you come
up with the yak.'

Encircled

Jock Stein

No news, no kind of mail, no signal
where the stream leaves Loch Coruisk
and gently greets the bay of the sea,
as it did for a thousand years before
the ocean got its name.

A wagtail flies from stone to stone
as quick in air as seals in water,
here a safe hermetic bubble
where they launch their pups, without
a thought of predators.

The boatman tells us population
figures, as he looks at Canna,
Eigg, and Muck and Rum. How many
sail, today, within full sight
of where they went to school?

The A B C of Storms

Jock Stein

*'A monumental failure of planning' – a critic
on the Government's response to storm Arwen*

Name your adversary, know their character,
such elemental steps in climate warfare
by the Met, acknowledging the Twitter
votes, the alphabetic sequence, taking care
to warn the public, use a chosen name.

Shame your adversary, blow his character
to smithereens, point out the difference
between a Welsh Saint Arwen, and the knave
who pranced about the land with such great violence
that homes were stripped of heat for days on end.

Blame your adversary, throw her character
upon the Government,
whom all should love and trust
to save them from the storms of life,
do more than give
the nod to friendly names so well discussed
like Barra, Corrie, Dudley due to follow.

Frame your adversary, so its character
is clear, not storm or climate change, but human
greed, and powers beyond a government.
The Met lacks muscle, cannot raise the millibar
alone. It takes another alphabet.

Christmas Cheer

Billy Graham

I was awakened Christmas morning
by a sparrow's cheerful trill,
it stood chirping merrily
on my open window sill,
I opened an eye and heaved a sigh,
and tiptoed from my bed,
and with my shoe in my hand
I bashed it on the head.

Downstairs the room was empty,
no Christmas tree, no lights,
only a stump stood in a pail,
leaning weakly to the right.
This year there were no presents
piled neatly in a stack,
the only decoration
a letter from Farepak.

My son hunched in a corner,
his eyes on me were fixed:
'No Santa this year for you,' I said,
and him on twenty six.

Then I saw his eyes gleam,
as if lightened from a load
the change as sudden as the football
teams at Gorgie Road.

He said I still have last year's presents,
I'm sure they're some quite new:
Ferrari, lap top, mobile phone
to mention just a few.

A lump came to my throat
as I staggered back to bed,
the sparrow chirping merrily,
a bandage round its head
And as I lay there sobbing,
my life I vowed to change,
the droppings hit me in the eye,
my sparrow had revenge.

*PS No bird was injured during the writing of this
poem, though maybe the poet should be.*

The Tale of the Wee Blue Sweetie

Moira Galbraith

It was a beautiful day in summer there was not a cloud in the bright blue sky. I had just been a walk with my five year old twin girls, making the most of this delightful day.

On our return I gave the girls' a drink and some sweets, then made myself a cup of tea and sat at the kitchen table. As I looked out of the window I noticed the grass in the back garden was in need of a cut. Thinking I would probably have time if I hurried to cut it before starting to prepare the evening meal. I set to my task.

The twins were sitting watching television as I passed through the sitting room, I noticed one of them sitting forward to give our pet border collie a sweetie. Lady could not have liked it though, as seconds later, as I glanced round, I saw her cough it up onto the sitting room floor. I was in such a hurry to get the grass cut that I didn't even pause to pick it up.

I soon had the lawnmower out and was mowing away to my hearts content, singing a song to myself as I went. Then I paused to give the mower a rest for a minute and thought, this was very thirsty work for such a hot day, but I would be glad to get it done.

A few moments later one of the girls came out and gave me a sweetie. It was so nice of her I thought, as I restarted the lawnmower. She is such a sunny natured child and would share almost anything. Once again, engrossed, I was making real progress until a thought struck me. I paused. I switched the lawnmower off. I had just eaten a wee blue sweetie . . . 'Don't tell me . . .' I thought as I rushed indoors.

'Thank God!' I said as I saw there on the sitting room floor . . . a wee blue sweetie!

The Beach

Diana Stevens

I am the same but never the same. My sand swirls, shuffles – moved by wind and waves. The sea is never the same. Occasionally mirror flat and indigo blue but often stormy North Sea blue. Near the strand edge sand is muddy brown, firm. Serrated wrack clumps around rock pools. Beyond, where dunes form on the raised beach, sand is fine, silver, warm to the touch.

When formed I was small, with gravel sand. Surge and pitch of waves ground down rocks. Deep in earth's crust, grinding tectonic plates caused land to uplift or sea to retreat. Once a tsunami thundered in. Ice blanketed land, melted, the sea rose. Warmer now, marram and lyme grass sprouted on dunes. Trees flourished – pine, birch, sycamore. I expanded as the sea ground rocks into sand.

Years later I was part of a harbour. Fishing boats sailed in when the tide was high or beat upriver with oars. Herring gulls and gannets competed fiercely for fish heads or guts as they circled overhead. People searched for periwinkles, dog whelks or collected lug worms as bait.

My harbour has gone. Now I am a ribbon of silver sand stretching round the bay. Dunes and pine woods are still here where roe deer and rabbits slip between shadows. A salt-marsh gives shelter to lapwings, sand-martins and skylarks. I am waiting for people to return. Waiting for children to dig for worms and crabs, to search rock pools for starfish and sea anemones or spot a seal, sleekit among the waves. Waiting for dog walkers and surfers to return, children with kites, buckets and spades. Waiting for bird-watchers, botanists searching for puff balls or fly agaric – for wild thyme or birdsfoot trefoil or the scarce spotted orchid. I will be here.