



Flash Fiction Competition 2013

Image 2 adult entries

Title	Author	Page
The end of a wooing	Craig Anderson	3
THE PLAYING OF DURAN	D. Bruton	4
AMELIA'S SAVIOUR	Hazel Stevens	5
Drawing the line	Marka Rifat	6
'Golagros and Gawayne: A Scene from a Play.'	Craig Thomson	7-8
Damsel in Distress	Ruth Aylett	10-11
Summer evening	Nathalie Vanballenberghe	12-13
ERRANT	Greg Michaelson	14-15
The horse and her lady	Lieke Braadbaart	16
Of noble blood	Johannes Heinonen	17
<i>The Two Steeds</i>	Gary Alexander Stott	18-19
Knight in Distress	Iona Curtius	20
La Belle Dame sans Merci	Alison Lodge	21-22
Ban the Blessed	James G. Leonard	23-24
Percival	Lisa Kaiffer	25
The Beech Wood	Martin Cathcart Froden	26
Family Portrait	Evelyn McKay	27-28

The end of a wooing by Craig Anderson

I like to stand at this spot sometimes, by the window of the Great Tower, with its wonderful view over the town and the wood outside its walls, and the hills beyond, and remember that day long ago when you won my heart. You were so handsome, and I was young and full of dreams. You came down from your horse and laid your sword before me. Then you stood and took my hand. I gazed into your eyes, and melted at your gentle smile. It still makes me smile to think of it. And of course I laughed with the others at how ridiculous your brother looked when he had fallen from his horse and lay there with one foot still in the stirrup. He shouldn't have challenged you, of course, not when he was ill. Not that I knew he was ill. Nobody knew but you. And you did provoke him. And now I don't understand why I didn't wonder why you didn't go first to your brother, to see whether he was still alive. It wasn't supposed to be to the death. But, young fool that I was, I thought you were gallant.

Now I wonder why you wanted me. I used to laugh outwardly, but weep inside, when other women would joke about their husbands' demands. Other than our wedding night, you did your duty with me precisely five times, and each time you left me immediately afterwards. And yet I was beautiful then. I know I was, and you knew it too. You liked to show me off whenever you had to appear in public. I wore the finest clothes, and the most dazzling jewellery, and my hair was the most elaborately styled of all. But if I so much as touched your arm, you would grimace slightly and turn away. You preferred to spend time with those others. You were hunting, or you had important business to deal with. Did you think I didn't realise how it really was? If I close my eyes, I can still remember what it felt like to have my husband hold me in his arms, however few times it really happened. Is it so wrong for me to admit that sometimes I ached for you?

There was a time when I thought that beauty was the most important thing, but not any longer. I felt that I was the most beautiful of all the ladies of the court, and they felt it too. I looked down on them, even. I felt their envy, and somehow that lifted me even higher. I used to think that to be plain would be the worst thing in the world. Now I am old, and as I look in the mirror, I see a face as lined and hair as grey as any of the others'. Was it then all a lie?

THE PLAYING OF DURAN by D. Bruton

Men are such fools and easily played. I smile and am pretty and they fall fawning at my feet and want so much to please me that I can have them do anything. His name was Duran and he was a knight looking to make his name and his way in the world. He was pretty too, and tall and easy. He was presented to me one day and I could tell by the press of his fingers holding mine that he was eager. Just a smile and a soft word and he was quickly won.

Duran was as one in a fever after that. He was hot, and his thoughts were thick as treacle pulled from a spoon, and he did not know what he thought or said. I met with him in the breathless dark, when my husband slept, and I fed him honeyed words and kisses that were sweetened, and I wrapped my arms about him and cast a spell. I might have loved him if I had not another use to make of him.

I told him my husband beat me and made an ill sport of me. On my breasts and my back, where the bruises might not be so easily seen. I showed Duran the marks on me, marks I'd made myself to deceive him. And I cried pretend tears to seal the deal and so was he contracted to save me from the devil.

The challenge was delivered and my husband laughed. I feigned concern for his welfare and he bragged that no boy was a match for him and his axe. And, if truth be told, I feared what he said held substance. So, on the morning of the duel, I poured a sleeping draught into his mead. Not so much as might fell a horse, but enough that he might be slower and heavier in all his movements.

They met by the first and the smallest light, up in Briar's Wood. They met alone, except I was there, in the shadows. I made myself known to Duran, and I spoke secret sweet nothings to him and thus I raked his ardour into flame – for what cannot love accomplish when it burns so fiercely?

And they fought, the man and the boy. Sword against axe, the birdsong stilled by the clash of metal hitting metal and the thunder of horses' hooves and the laughter of a man playing with a boy and the cry of a boy who was driven to be more than a man on this day. And when the fatal blow fell and my husband was laid on the forest floor with all his life spilling from him, then a part of me rejoiced.

I took Duran to me and declared him my saviour and my love. And I said he must quickly from this place for what he had done and I kissed him and made much of him – and then was glad to be rid of him.

AMELIA'S SAVIOUR by Hazel Stevens

Amelia walked through the forest rustling the fallen leaves. Deep in her thoughts, she barely noticed the footfall behind her. A branch snapping brought her out of her reverie. Nervously she glanced behind. Stopped abruptly, stared at the man, leading his horse, approaching her. Should she flee? Her mind said go. Her heart bade her stay, there was something forlorn about him. He halted twelve feet from her and raised his head. Amelia noticed his eyes, so dark they appeared black.

'Hello' Amelia said tentatively, coughing to clear her anxious throat. Was there something ominous about him, however she was curious.

'Hello' he said briefly, shuffling his feet through the crackling leaves.

Amelia smiled, 'I love to walk through and hear them crackle.' she said absent mindedly.

'Yes, me too' he replied kindly, smiling at her.

Amelia felt relieved, but suddenly shy and wary. She half wished she had kept on walking.

'I will leave you to your rustling' he laughed and strode past her, scattering golden leaves in his wake.

Amelia watched him go, she wished she could stop him, too late now, he disappeared down the slope into the glade and out of view. She didn't need the complications of another relationship. Not since... A lump came into her throat at her thoughts. It had been two months since Richard ran off with a milk maid leaving Amelia heart broken and angry.

Going down to the glade Amelia halted abruptly, devastated by the scene before her. The man stood, sword in hand, looking down at a body, he turned and looked at her, tears in his eyes. She moved forward and took his hand. Her eyes begged him to tell her what had occurred.

Gripping her hand tightly, the man hesitated, looking down he noticed her bare feet. He felt ashamed she should witness such atrocity, he looked over to the body, strewn across the path, foot still in the stirrup. Amelia followed his gaze, gasping as she recognised the dead man. She knew him to be a scoundrel. He was the man who haunted her dreams, followed her through the village. Whispered suggestive comments to her. She had cried her fears to Richard but he laughed them off, said she was imagining it. The comments would be a joke. He never took her fearfulness seriously. Now she felt a wash of relief seeing that man prone and lifeless.

"He found out I came here." She mumbled finding her voice. "He would have got me."

The young man nodded, "I had to save you. I saw him following you, heard his comments. He pursued my sister in the same way. When he found her on her own he raped and killed her. This was for my sister and for you." Tears streamed and Amelia pulled him close to her, breathing her gratitude as she did so. Here was a man of honour, a man she knew would protect her for the rest of her life.

Drawing the line by Marka Rifat

“I mean by a picture,” the artist had said, “a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in a light better than any light that ever shone – in a land no-one can define or remember, only desire – and the forms divinely beautiful.”

Edwige la Constante placed thin, cold, but comforting fingers on the slender wrist of Edmund, Knight of the Briar Wood.

“This is absolutely the limit. Rotten luck for poor Gizzy, but really, what can one expect?” she asked.

Gizzy, or Guismonde le Gallant, lay stiff on the ground. He would ride forth no more, on those ill-proportioned horses, through dense, monochrome woods and tiresomely thorny thickets.

They blamed Brummie Ned and mutiny grew in their small, intensely illustrated world. The only one who had spoken up for the pen-wielder, and called him, in gushing tones, “the Master” and “dear Mr Burne-Jones”, was the former Guismonde. And look how the Master repaid loyalty.

“Munds, how long do you think it will be before you end up like Gizzy? It’s so undignified. And fatal.” Edwige stamped her bare foot for emphasis and to get the blood circulating. Frankly, Ned’s notion of mediaeval clothing was all very well for summer, but this was an autumn tableau and no boots, sleeves, gloves or scarves, and a far from cosy dress made for a very bad temper.

Edmund gazed at her pinched face, the sunken eyes, wonky nose, gloomy mouth and long chin. The same face he saw when he looked in a moonlit pool, indeed when he looked at everyone here. Why did Ned never vary the phizog, this composite of his wife Georgie and his Greek object of mad desire, Maria Zambuco? Heavens, Ned saw people every day, all shapes and sizes, with really interesting faces, sensible necks and plenty of meat on their bones. Edmund despised his weedy frame and would have loved a dashing beard, like King Cophetua. He had also endured many a moan from Edwige about the curves Ned lavished on the Beggar Maid, and the bevy on “The Golden Stairs” and so many, many others. Enough moping and petulance.

“Dearest.” He gripped her willowy arm. “Gizzy was daydreaming, sat on his nag too long and lost all sensation in his limbs. Keeling over was inevitable.” She drooped and sighed.

He clasped her bony shoulders and said firmly: “ But there is hope.

“I was drawn a hero and I deserve better than this dismal rectangle!”

With that, he pulled her to the left edge of the illustration. “See that thin bit? Ned ran out of ink and forgot to fill it in – if you wield that axe and I use my sword ...”

In the airy studio of the esteemed Pre-Raphaelite artist, two tiny, pale figures, wrapped in mauve pen wipers, sat on a nib box, feasted on a crumb of yellow cheese and animatedly discussed their next and colourful adventure.

'Golagros and Gawayne: A Scene from a Play.' by Craig Thomson

Golagros and Gawayne:

A Scene from a Play

(Image ii.)

GWYNDOLIN O, brave schir Knyght! I hadst thoght myself loissit to that fey senyeour for certane.
My gretest thanks: your dedis, your dignite and your doughtynes shal be gaderit in
tail euerlesting!

GAWAYNE: Ah, my gude Lady, bot all is evin that is od. Treuly tis destanyt that ane so febill o' fay
-

'No, no, no! *DES-tanyt*, not *de-STANYT*! It's supposed to *flow*, Alex. Where's the flow in STANYT?
Bloody hell.'

'*Des-tynt* - *des-tynt*, of course. Very sorry Mr. MacInlay, I know this one -'

'AAAAOOGHHHHH'

'Cut it, Donald. Three weeks, Alex, and this is what you give me? Is this what they're paying to see at
the festival theater; is it?'

'*Des-tynt*, *des-tynt*. I'm sorry; just slip of the tongue, you know -'

*GWYNDOLIN gently pats GAWAYNE on the shoulder. She shoots a barely disguised scowl at THE
DIRECTOR. GOLAGROS rolls on the floor by his wooden steed, moaning horribly.*

'Don't worry about it, Alex, we're all tired.'

'OOOOUNHHHHGHHH'

'For gawd's sake; cut, Donald! Right, everybody, back to the top.'

'UUUGGHNG. I think I've really broken it this time.'

*Enter AILEEN from stage right, looking v. concerned. Begins to disentangle GOLAGROS from his
stirrup. A piercing scream.*

'O, gawd, watch what you're doing, woman!'

*GWYNDOLIN and GAWAYNE leave to stage left, heading toward the coffee machine. GWYNDOLIN
discretely pulls a handful of change from under her robe, her other arm is still round GAWAYNE's*

shoulder.

'But is not my *fault*, you know. I don't even speak English properly until last year. *Des-tynty, des-tynty...*'

'Ach, forget it. Dave's a bloody tyrant. Cappucino yeah?'

AILEEN gently rolls up the ankle of GOLAGROS' knitted chainmail stocking.

'I think it might be broken.'

'I *know* it's bloody broken, Aileen, it's *my ankle*. AAAAAAGH'

AILEEN looks away; begins to cry quietly. THE DIRECTOR paces in the stands, kneading his face with the heels of his hands.

'Will somebody please call an ambulance for Donald?'

'Have you got change for a two pound coin? I remember when this thing used to cost 30p.'

'Oh sure, sure. *Des-tynty, Des-tynty*. You know, sometimes I think I should have stayed in Ukraine. I had good job there, at motor garage. My mother she always calls me; 'O, Alexi' she say - '

'Three bloody weeks and this is what you give me. How the hell am I supposed to take *this* on stage, never mind the tour...?'

'OOOOOOUUH, gawd!'

AILEEN runs off to stage left, past GAWAYNE and GWYNDOLIN, v. tearful.

'Three weeks... Will somebody *please* call an ambulance for Donald. And call the understudy for Golagros.'

Damsel in Distress

I watch the sun's rays at the dawn of the day
Turn my garden the colour of blood.
Night's visions of war and of battles afar
Fill my heart with anger and dread.

Invaders with axes collecting their taxes
By force from our towns and our farms,
Their foes bearing swords, our old over-lords
Reasserting their 'rights' with their arms.

Then, there by my gate - I feel suddenly faint -
Stands a knight with an axe in his fist,
His horse next to him. His dark eyes are grim,
'You're coming with me. Don't resist.'

In my shift as I stand, with a rope round each hand,
Taken shoeless, with no drink or food,
I beg and implore, but my cries are ignored
As I'm dragged by his horse through the wood.

The sun rises high, my mouth is so dry,
I'm exhausted, tormented by thirst.
We arrive in a glade and there in the shade
Stands another knight, friend of the first.

"A woman? Come on - this is no time for fun!"
"She belongs to their Council, she's key."
"Then watch out for the bitch, she might be a witch"
"She's not cast any spells over me."

Onwards we go with two of them now
Then my eyes catch a glint just ahead
We suddenly stop, then break into a trot
I run as I'm pulled by the lead.

Axe raised, the front knight charges full belt
At a horseman whose sword glitters bright.
His horse swerves aside, the axe strikes well wide
The sword hits the knight in the throat.

And now the knight's horse, weighed down by a corpse,
Panics and bolts through the trees.
The horseman advances: what are his chances,
And what's the best outcome for me?

Now my captor attacks, swinging his axe,
As the horseman comes on with his sword.
I jerk hard at the rope, the knight misses his stroke,
And the sword cuts him down to the bone.

Looking proud, not contrite as I was with the knights,
Seems the way to maintain my disguise.
I take a deep breath: with roped hands outstretched,
Walk forward and meet this man's eyes.

"Sir, as you see, I need my hands freed";
The edge of his blade cuts the knot.
His hand's now in mine: I can capture his mind
He'll do what I say and forget.

He stands in a trance as I take a small flask
That hangs from my neck on a chain
Its contents a plague that will kill in three days
Which he'll spread to the rest of his men.

Now I'll find more axe men and be captured again;
The liquid's to sweeten their food.
I see the sun's rays at the end of the day
Turn the forest the colour of blood.

Summer evening by Nathalie Vanballenberghe

She was lying down in the freshly-cut grass, absorbing the last sun rays of the day. Veronica had been working hard all day and she decided to enjoy her free evening in the garden. Suddenly, a strange noise drew her attention. Toc-toc... Toc-toc, there it was again. She opened her eyes and stared straight into the muzzle of a white stallion. Startled, she stumbled backwards only to be stopped by the hands of a handsome knight.

“Pardon me if we frightened you,” the knight said, “but we seem to be lost. Can you help us?”

Speechless, Veronica stared at the knight. He was wearing some medieval attire and carried a long sword. Party? Self-defense course? Where was he going? And with a horse?! This was a garden in the middle of the city. How did they get in? The questions reeled through her mind.

“Where are my manners? I should have introduced us. I am Giles de Vachequiry and this is my noble companion Eandis. Enchanté.” Both the knight and horse bowed their heads in respect of the lady.

“Veronica Mehor”, she uttered. “Hmm... how did you get here? In my garden?”

“Well...” the stallion said, “We were traveling through this dense forest, when suddenly we were attacked by a thug from St-Brie. With one sweep of his sword, Giles here succeeded in killing his opponent. When we returned to inspect the fallen robber, this amazingly beautiful creature appeared out of nowhere. She was tall and skinny, and seemed to be floating just inches from the ground.

‘Congratulations, Monsieur de Vachequiry. You have succeeded in killing one of our long-standing enemies. As a reward, we will send you on holiday to an exotic country, where you will enjoy wealth, prosperity and beautiful women.’ The creature waved her hands and we found ourselves transported to this garden!”

“So here we are.” Giles said. “You seem to be shocked to see us. Is this not a regular holiday spot for hard-working knights?”

Veronica was troubled. Talking horse? Floating creatures? Was there some magic mushroom accidentally mixed in her soup at lunch?

“Euh... There might have been a mistake,” Veronica said. “Your fairy may have transported you to the wrong place. I normally only receive birds, cats and the occasional badger. Horses and knights, I can’t cater for that!”

The odd pair looked rather disappointed.

Eandis asked, “Can you recommend us another spot then?”

“Well, yes...”, but Veronica could not finish her sentence. She was suddenly distracted by this buzz near her left ear.

“Not another visitor?!” she thought.

The buzzing became louder and louder, now also accompanied by an itch. Awch... a sting. Veronica slapped her ear, and opened her eyes. What happened? Where was the knight? And the horse? She looked around her garden, but it was empty. Only a few blackbirds were serenading the evening glow. Did she doze off? She noticed strange marks in the grass to her left. Not a dream after all?

ERRANT by Greg Michaelson

"Help!" shouted the young woman, as the dark knight rode into the glade.

"Help!" she shouted again, as the dark knight spurred his horse towards her, drew his broad axe and swung it over his head.

"Help!" shouted the dark knight, as his horse came to a sudden halt at the foot of a tree.

Left foot stirrup stuck, the dark knight tumbled out of the saddle. The young woman snatched up the fallen axe and smashed it down on the back of his head.

As she wiped the bloody blade on the dewy sward, the young champion charged into the clearing and leapt off his horse.

"Have no fear!" called the young champion, sweeping round in a wide arc, his burnished blade held horizontal. "Help is at hand!"

"Oh," said the young champion, spotting the felled dark knight. He lowered his sword and turned to the young woman.

"Am I too late?" said the young champion. "What happened?"

"What do you think happened?" said the young woman, tossing the axe down beside the body. "You were late. So I had to deal with him myself."

"Couldn't you have waited?" said the young champion.

"No," said the young woman. "I couldn't. What kept you?"

"I was praying for honour," said the young champion. "At the holy shrine in the ruined chapel. I told you."

"You said you wouldn't be long," said the young woman.

"But I've not been long!" said the young champion.

"You bloody fool!" said the young woman. "It was early morning when we first met. What time do you think it is now?"

The young champion stared at the ground.

"The shadows are short," he said finally. "I suppose it must be noon."

"Exactly!" said the young woman. "I told you you'd lose track of time in the chapel. Everyone does."

"Everyone?" said the young champion. "Have there been others?"

"You really are a fool," said the young woman. "Anyway, that's it. You better go and find another quest."

"Not another one!" said the young knight. "Can't I have a fresh go at this one? Please?"

The young woman said nothing, and looked pointedly at the corpse.

"I suppose not," said the young champion. "Aye well."

"These things happen," said the young woman, gently taking his hand. "Away you go."

The young champion sheathed his sword, mounted his horse and rode off into the trees.

The young woman bent across the dark knight and made a three finger pass over his brow.

"Awaken," she said.

"Thank goodness!" said the dark knight, hauling himself up and dusting himself down.

Then he reached into his cloak and drew out a slate.

"What do you think?" he said. "We really can't pass him."

"No," said the young woman. "A 'D'? It's a shame. He was rather sweet."

"A bit dim though," said the dark knight, taking notes with a stub of chalk. "All right. 'D+' then. Come on. We'd better feed the horse."

The horse and her lady by Lieke Braadbaart

"How could you do that?" Lilia shouted, pointing at the dead man as she walked up to her supposed saviour.

"Whatever do you mean, fair lady? The scoundrel was about to attack you. I apologise for getting blood on your fair dress, but it was a necessity.." The errant knight replied, perplexed.

Lilia's face grew red as her horse laughed in the background.

She replied, "I don't care about the dress, you oaf.. You killed an innocent man!"

"But my lady, he had an axe.."

"So? You have a sword. Are you a threat?"

"No, of course not, I am a knight." The knight puffed up his chest, trying to make himself look as tall as possible.

"Well, how do you know he wasn't a knight too?" Lilia asked, trying not to laugh at the knight's preposterous stance.

"Clearly the man was a barbarian, just look at his shabby clothes." The knight pointed a dismissive finger at the man he had just murdered.

"That doesn't automatically mean he was a bad man, I mean, just look at your clothes.."

"What's wrong with my armour? I clean it every day!" the knight's voice involuntarily rose an octave. The horse sniggered. The knight scowled.

Lilia hesitated for a second before replying, "Well it shows, and not in a good way. You care too much about appearances, lad. The guy here was harmless, anyone could have seen that. Whatever happened to knights being smart..?"

Lilia took a step backwards towards her horse, just in case.

"But.. You were in distress.. He took your arm, I saw it! You can't say you were happily chatting to the guy? You needed help!" The knight took a step forward, pleading.

"Sure, he was a bit of an ass, but I had it handled. You think I would go around riding in the wilderness without being able to protect myself? Boy, you are stupid.."

"But you don't have a weapon!" the knight protested.

Lilia sighed, "Give me your hand." She ordered.

The knight did so without hesitation. Lilia grabbed his arm, and twisted. Next thing he knew, the knight found himself crumpled on the ground, screaming in agony.

"See? I am my own weapon." Ignoring her horse's eye rolling, Lilia climbed back in the saddle.

"What?.. How?" was all the knight could say, sprawled on the ground.

Lilia looked down at the man, shaking her head slowly, then rode off without another word, leaving the knight lying next to his victim.

"Well I for one thought that bum deserved what he got, groping you like that." The horse commented as they rode through the trees. "And that knight was kinda cute!"

"Oh shush, you.." Lilia replied. "I was making a point. Don't ruin it."

"Yeah, yeah, with you there's always a point to make. When will it end?" the horse complained.

"When there are no more points, of course.."

And so they rode on.

Of noble blood by Johannes Heinonen

“Stay, my love, what shall we now?”

“We must away from here with haste. Behold, here lies valiant Arthur where they struck him down; his armour has yielded, his axe fallen. They spared him not; they would not spare us neither.”

“Whither shall we flee?”

“To the west; ‘tis but the last haven of our noble house. Here, I must lift his body on the horse – there – now may the noble beast carry him where it will. See how it goes from the smote of this cold hand of mine.”

“Make haste, my love – they shall soon be upon us.”

“Yea, take my hand, my dear, and I shall lift you up. Now I follow. ‘Ere we reach the lands of our fathers, we must to the castle. Now is the time of the enemy upon us; the flood is coming; they are at our heels like a pack of wolves. The storm of war thunders in the sky. They have taken all from the far sea to the eastern forest where we now fly, and none had power to hold them. What shall remain, ‘ere these dark clouds have poured out their load and, bereft of their power, disperse, we cannot say. But now is the time of our testing; now shall the gold be refined. It doth appear to mine untested soul that ‘tis better to forfeit this mortal abode and to suffer the sight of the defilement of one’s banners and ancestral lands, if standing nobly against such tide of destruction and with one’s full strength, with committed heart, battling against it, than to save one’s health and treasures and, surrendered to fear, flee from where the heart knows it belongs.”

“Thy noble heart doth beat with valour, and mine shall beat in same; beside thee shall my place be ‘till the end. Where thou dost fall, so shall I also, and my prayer be that they shall lay this lifeless form to rest beside thine. Yet our souls shall no sword sever, nor any arrow separate. Beyond the realms of the clockwork of the heavens, there shall we never part. In life and death, we are together.”

“Above all thy beauties thy faith dost shine the brightest. Hark! I hear the sound of hooves upon the soil. Run, Nightwind, ever faster! Shall we reach the border before they are upon us?”

“I see them among the trees; their swords do glisten in the fading light, and their steeds are black. They shall not be far behind us.”

“Take this sword, and here I draw mine. If they draw alongside, smite thee them on the right and I shall do so on the left.”

“I see them, not four score feet behind us.”

“Lose not thy courage! Here is the end of the wood – I think I do spy my father’s archers at the wall! Now let them cast themselves against my father’s ranks if they will – they shall be dashed to pieces!”

The Two Steeds by Gary Alexander Stott

Deep in the cold and grey vapour of the outer Scottish hills, they rode.

"Everything all right back there, dear?" asked Julian, noticing his wife had been silent for some time.

"Oh, yes. Sorry." she replied. "I was just thinking back on our wedding day."

"Oh?"

"Aye. It was a happy day." Julian thought on that for a moment.

"I suppose it was, m'dear! I suppose it was." Their wedding *had* been a very happy day, for both of them. The marriage of an Englishman to a Scot had been met with protest from the smaller minds of Catelyn's family, but the majority had accepted it without qualm. For Julian, it made their marriage all the more exceptional. It symbolized not only a union of two people, but two nations. He liked to think of that as progress, one step closer to a world in which all nations were united by nothing more than their own humanity. National identity was simply a road to conflict. When he looked at Catelyn, he didn't see a Scot; he saw the one he loved. Which reminded him of a certain inconvenience...

"I've been meaning to bring something up, by the way."

"Oh?"

"It's about Robert." Catelyn grew anxious.

"What about him?" she asked. Julian thought how best to phrase the issue, and decided to just come straight out with it.

"I think he wants you." Catelyn paused. She didn't know what to say.

"That's preposterous! He's worked for us years now! He wouldn't try to come between us."

"No, that's true. He wouldn't. But it doesn't change the fact that he'd *like* to. I mean, who even knows? He's the spirit of independence. I know it's risky for us, but we're going to have to consider letting him go, dear."

"Oh?" said Robert, who had been following closely behind on a horse of his own for several minutes.

The two steeds came to a halt, and the men dismounted.

"Listen, Robert. It's not ideal for anybody. You've helped us greatly. We wouldn't have survived this long without you. But it's really not right to go on given the circumstances. It's true, isn't it?"

"Aye, it's true. I love Catelyn." As his suspicions were confirmed, Julian felt utter pain tear through his heart. All of a sudden he felt furious, and moreover, weak as he faced down the much younger man.

"But she doesn't love you!" retorted Julian.

“Ah. That's where you're wrong.” said Robert. At this, Julian felt a second surge of pain as Catelyn removed the dagger from his chest. He watched as his wife embraced the young man, a single tear in her eye.

“Sorry, Jule. Robert and I are better together anyway. It's time us Scots had a union of our own.”

Julian dropped to his knees, and died as the two rode off together into an uncertain future.

Knight in Distress by Iona Curtius

Trees streaked past in a blur of green. I bent lower over Verona's neck. She was a good horse, but Sir Kerry's stallion was just as fast and he knew these woods better than I did.

It was getting darker. If I did not catch up with him soon he would slip through my fingers again. I could not let that happen! I urged Verona onwards. I was gaining on him. He was slowing down! He came to a halt in a small clearing and turned his horse. Kerry looked around and cursed loudly. "Cowards!" he spat. His camp was deserted. His men fled when they heard their master was running for his life. "You can't expect your men to be nobler than their master. They have learnt only cowardice from you!" I called over to him. His face darkened and his eyes narrowed to angry slits. "How dare you insult me this way, you filth?" he growled. I had been called worse things before, but this was the man who had killed my father and robbed me of my inheritance. "Face me and fight me then. Prove me wrong!" I challenged him. I might have been making a very grave mistake. I did not know how he fought, but there was no other way. I had no men to take him prisoner. If I wanted my inheritance back, I had to fight him. All I could hope for was that the long years of stolen comfort in my father's castle had made him lazy and fat and that he had been running from me because he feared he would lose in single combat. "Let's put an end to this then. You asked for it." he barked and made to swing himself out of the saddle, axe in hand. I drew my sword and readied myself. We never fought. Kerry's eyes suddenly widened in shock and he let out a yelp of surprise. An arrow had hit him in the chest, penetrating his chainmail. He fell, his foot still caught in the stirrup. I stood there shaking, unable to take in what had just happened. Then the thoughts came crashing in on me. Who was the archer? Why had they shot Kerry? Was I next? I looked around, searching. Something moving in the undergrowth caught my eye. I turned. A girl stepped out from among the trees, lowering her bow. She was beautiful. She had an air of grace and elegance about her even though she was barefoot and simply dressed. I wanted to ask her who she was, why she had shot him but the words stuck in my throat as her piercing blue gaze met mine. I froze, paralysed. She smiled. "I could see that you are too noble to do it. Even if you'd managed to beat him you wouldn't have killed him." Her voice was beautiful, smooth... I shook my head and tried to concentrate. "He killed my father!" "And still you couldn't have done it."

La Belle Dame sans Merci by Alison Lodge

Aurelia stared blankly into the shop window with a slight sense of shock. It couldn't be could it? You would think she would remember a gift her husband had given her for their Paper wedding anniversary. A slightly strange subject to be romantic to be sure, but she had loved it on sight when she had first seen it all those years ago. He had gone back to the shop in London to buy it for her as a surprise and she had been thrilled.

The weak autumn sun filtered through the antique shop window causing the delicately gilded frame to wink briefly, as if mocking her thoughts. Although she had never known the title or artist she had always referred to her as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. The Beautiful Lady without Mercy she thought. How lovely and yet deadly she was, not at all like her. Cuddly was the latest description her husband had saddled her with. Well, after three children who could blame her for some extra curves?

Her own copy was in storage back at the cottage they had moved to once the last of the children had flown the nest. The only problem with downsizing was that most of her belongings were still languishing in the small garage at the bottom of the straggly patch of grass currently masquerading as a garden.

Squinting a little harder at the picture and deciding that it must be simply a coincidence she turned to go.

"Are you coming in?"

The petite blonde gestured at the open door behind her.

"Only I'm about to close for lunch."

Attempting to rectify the slight look of goldfish about her she was sure she must have, Aurelia tried to marshal her thoughts into a rational conversation. Something she was a little rusty at these days.

"I was just looking at the picture; you know the one with the lady and the knights."

With a faint tinkle of the bell, the shop door closed and the woman ventured closer, a cloud of perfume following in her wake.

"Oh yes, that one. Not one of my favourites, but I was sure one of my customers would like it. It was a gift from my partner actually. All I did was put on an antique frame."

"A gift? I couldn't have sold it if it were mine. In fact I was just thinking that I must get my copy out of storage. Even though I moved house eighteen months ago I'm still trying to find things. My husband Michael despairs!"

Aurelia gave the picture a final glance, unable to resist its pull. Even with her back turned to the window it was as if it was burning her through the glass, the other woman a minor interruption.

"Now that is strange – two coincidences between us in one day – Michael is my partner's name."

All at once her focus changed.

“Really? Perhaps I might come in after all.”

Ban the Blessed by James G. Leonard

“Get back!” she shouted, stumbling away from her black-garbed assailant. He relentlessly followed and brought his wicked axe downwards only for sword steel to sing out and knock his blade away.

“Stay thy hand villain!” commanded the new figure; a knight clothed in light.

The man spurred his mount and threw his axe against the knight’s sword arm which hardily took the blow and delivered a vicious riposte that pierced his opponent through and spilled him from his saddle. With his remaining strength he crawled towards the lady, axe in hand. The knight leapt from his saddle and kicked the axe away.

“Be----“ his death rattle.

The lady ran to her saviour and asked joyously “Your name and nature Sir Knight?”

“No nature but only the name of Ban good Lady.” He flourished his words with a courtly bow to which she clapped her hands in delight.

“Fair in name, face and nature. Three times Blessed and so you become “Ban the Blessed”

“Blessed indeed now that I am in your company fair Lady.

“And will you keep me safe Sir Knight?”

“Aye Lady, until you have no more need.”

Ban opened his eyes, moved, felt his body ache and slumped back against a rock. He looked at his hands; sickly yellow paper thin skin and felt despair. In the years that he had been with her his body had aged greatly and now, sword long broken, he had trouble lifting his axe. She came into view and for a minute his body and heart were free of worry.

“You have looked after me well these years Ban.”

“And how much better you have fared Lady; your hair still jet, your face unlined; a saint to this corpse.” He gestured at his worn out shell.

“Do you regret staying?” she enquired.

“Nay though I feel tired as of late.”

She had her hand on his knee and was looking up into his eyes. She moved her head closer and murmured.

“Sleep then my Ban. Sleep.”

He wrapped his arms around her and started to drift away only to be awoken as he felt a sharp pain in his neck. Her teeth were in his neck drawing his life force. He threw her away and looked in horror at her now cat-like eyes. She licked her lips and smiled “So lively Ban”. In response he drew

his axe. Her ears twitched and she fell screaming "Get back!" He raised his blade and brought it down in a murderous arc only to have it blocked by a knight in white.

"Knave!" he roared throwing himself at Ban who feebly parried, making a desperate attempt to disarm the youth only to grunt as a sword ripped through him. The youth pulled the blade out sharply and Ban fell to the ground with a moan.

"B---" he moaned reaching out his hand.

The knight lifted his sword...

Ban tried again "B---"

...And pierced him.

Ban's last broken thought "*Beware*"

Percival by Lisa Kaiffer

Percival looked down at his former rider.

This hadn't exactly gone as expected.

He glanced over at Clarina. She snorted when she noticed, but was there a sparkle of curiosity as well?

He nudged his human with a hoof, then bent down to blow air into his ear. That normally did the trick. No this time.

Percival began to grow nervous. He turned his ears towards the Clarina's humans.

They sounded angry. They were waving their appendages about inefficiently. The shiny one kept pointing a long thing at him. He had seen those things before – fire and blood usually went with them. He shuddered as the remembered smells coursed through him, his instincts urging him to run. He poked his human again. They needed to leave. There was no reaction.

'What is wrong with you?'

Kelda tried staring him down. He didn't seem impressed. She crossed her arms and turned away.

'Be reasonable. He cannot be allowed to tell anyone about us, and his stupid horse has given us the perfect opportunity. He might already be dead.'

'Yes. Or he might not be. Do you know how long it took me to sanctify this place? Do you want to ruin me? Do you seriously think that you will get your stuff from someone else? After this?'

He shifted his weight noisily. She knew the knight's weak spot. He sheathed his sword and lifted his hands.

'Okay. I will take him back with me. Say he had an accident. Make sure he knows he'll have another if he talks. Happy?'

She smiled.

'Better.'

Kieran turned around and went to pick up what he hoped was a corpse. He heard Kelda get onto her horse. He smiled, then wiped his features blank as he turned.

'Meet up here tomorrow?', he said, glancing over to the horse dancing nervously away from him.

Without waiting for an answer, he started walking towards the village.

Percival followed the shiny one, almost despite himself. He didn't notice Clarina leaving. He couldn't tell where they were going. It was quiet as they left the forest and headed for the end of his world.

There was salt in the air.

Percival usually liked this place. The strong winds reminded him of when he was younger, faster.

Besides, coming here usually involved carrots. He watched the shiny one step up to the edge of the cliffs, and put his friend down, wedging his foot underneath.

Percival wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he didn't like it. He nudged the shiny one off of his friend and went back to blowing air into his face, ignoring the crunching noise the armour when it reached the stony ground at the bottom. He stayed nearby for the rest of the day, then finally returned home to the warmth, alone.

The Beech Wood by Martin Cathcart Froden

On Maundy Thursday Peter Fane swam out of Earl Robert Carlisle's castle, Matilda's kiss burning on his cheek. He was the last person to exit the castle out of free will. Propelled by fear, wet and shivering, carrying a message in the early morning light, he made good progress through the dense beech forest. Until he was captured.

On Good Friday Simon de Foix crossed the moat. The Frenchman sent a burning raft loaded with coal, sulphur and sheep fat across the filthy waters. The raft set the bridge on fire, and in the cover of smoke his forces crossed, stamping out the fire. Fleur de lis standards held high, screeching in that guttural language of theirs, morning stars slicing the air, the battering ram beating a deathly rhythm. Nothing but primordial fear kept the iron clad gates closed. The machicolations were useless as Earl Carlisle's people had nothing to pour. No oil, no water, hardly any faeces.

No fighting was to take place on Easter Sunday, out of respect for religion, but on the Monday, Simon renewed his attacks. There was little Robert could do, apart from trying to disguise Matilda. He decided on hiding her in the throng of starving townsfolk, emaciated from the month-long siege, fed on a diet of cat meat and rain.

In the crowd Matilda shone like a lily on a pond and the first time Simon saw her his pulse stopped. Earl's daughter or not. He asked her to come and sit next to him. Politely enough for someone who knew his quarry had no choice.

The terms of surrender involved sending Peter and Robert to their deaths in France, after hefty ransoms had been extracted, but not before the Earl gave away his daughter's hand. This while Peter had to watch.

Their second Easter began well. Simon was just back from Palestine where he had become a rich man, Praise be to God. Matilda spoke to him, in her faltering, charming French, taught to her by a governess from Avignon. She had missed him, she wanted to see him, just him.

The third fork in the road led into the beech forest, and she took him there, eyes glittering. Seven gulps of sweet wine, eight steps, then her poison stopped his pulse. She knew her Father was dead. The message smuggled in to her had told her so. In the storm that wrecked the prisoner's ship in the Calais harbour only an exceptional swimmer would have had a chance. It had taken him a year to the day to get back, but now Peter stepped out of the shadows and this Maundy Thursday Matilda's kisses burned once more.

Family Portrait by Evelyn McKay

'I can wait for you no longer: you have arrived.' This he replied in anguish, as she stood before him, the sun behind her setting her hair alight and illuming her skin to the palest white. She was fully his.

Kinsas had been a widower for sixteen years. The villagers of Illion, talking amongst themselves, had often wondered at this man's strange, beautiful wife, who had come from a distant land and had never spoken a single word. Three moons after her death, a childhood friend of Kinsas, had proposed that they journey together to find new wives, as was the tradition with the widowers of Illion. But, as his friend later relayed to the other villagers, Kinsas had only said, 'My hands shall remain empty until they regain that which they have held.' His wife had died giving life to their only son, Odin, who never learned to speak; even his infant cries, they said, were barely audible. When Kinsas, rightly concerned, consulted the wise woman of Illion, she only told him: 'A rose sprung from a rock must not be allowed to grow.' But Kinsas loved Odin, for although he looked nothing like his mother outwardly, his heart was hers in miniature, and Kinsas soon forgot the wise woman's words and Odin the Silent became a good man and was much loved by the people of Illion. But Kinsas forbade the villagers to speak of his son's mother, and Odin grew up without knowledge of her.

There he lay, the man who had kept in his heart the image of his lost beloved wife, the silver-skinned angel with the fiery hair. In battle, the fiercest for centuries, he had been struck. Even to this day, it is said, the scorched field where his blood flowed from his pierced chest can be seen; touch it and your fingers will burn. He spoke, his last words grasping at his killer's mind, as the horror revealed itself: 'Tighter now are the broken chains that bind us.' Reeling with terror, as the familiar voice reverberated within his head, Odin sank down to his father's body as the last breath rattled from it. In the midst of the clangings and screamings of the battle raging around them, here was silence; here was stillness. 'Father,' Odin said for the first time, 'Father.'

When Oella saw Odin's sword strike his father's heart, she ran out from where the women were huddled together, watching over their men. The night before the battle, he had married her in secret, knowing that this may be their only night together, despite Odin having been forbidden by his father to marry a foreign woman. As Odin raised himself with his dripping sword, Oella fell upon Kinsas, tears streaming as she sang in a foreign tongue a song almost without sound into his ear.

Then the song ceased, and a smile lay on Kinsas' dead lips, and Oella stood to face her husband, taking his hands in his.

'Odin. My son.'