I don’t like judging short story competitions. Maybe I should have thought of that before agreeing to judge this one – or before the previous one I judged…. It’s not the reading short stories part – that’s very enjoyable. It’s the judging, deciding, excluding… It’s not just because I’m an indecisive person, or, then again, is it? When you’ve planted a row of carrots, there’s that moment, a few weeks in, when you’re supposed to thin most of them out to leave space between the fortunate, selected ones. I always replant in a separate row all the ones I’ve pulled up, leaving no room to grow anything else – but carrots, like short stories, are an unequivocally good thing and hey, you can never have too many carrots.

Judging is frustrating also because, unlike creative writing teaching, you can’t influence the stories themselves – can’t tell anyone that their story was completely compelling except for the last paragraph, or that momentary confusion they created for the reader in the second sentence. You just have to say yes, no, yes maybe, yes, no – and end up with a short-list as long as a long-list ought to be and a long-list that’s… most of the stories in the pile.

Anyway, I don’t want to be making this about me, and I don’t expect anyone to pity my plight. Clearly, it’s much more pleasant judging than being judged - in fact it’s a privilege to be in that position – so I should stop moaning. The experience has actually provided something of a revelation: flash fiction is amazing. There is so much a writer can do, and there are so many different things a writer can do in 500 words. Having the four images as starting points only seems to have enhanced the variety in the works they’ve inspired.

All of which, again, makes the judging, the drawing of distinctions, the paring down a delicate matter. You are not comparing like with like. It’s great when one story leaps out, or stays with you long after reading it, or moves you while reading it so that you have to pause, startles you with a frisson of complete surprise: well, I wasn’t expecting that. The trouble is that this happens in one way or another with many of the stories. So I suppose all the things that judges always say about the standards being really high and how hard it was to pick, and that another person on another day etc. etc. aren’t just to make the entrants feel better but are, well, simply true.

Some of the pieces made me think about the image, see it afresh, some of them made me think of nothing but the story, but in all of them I was looking for language that was engaging, for a kind of confidence that would take me along. Ultimately, a story has to be an act of persuasion – as they knew in the good old pre-romantic days when fictional narrative was a branch of rhetoric and folk weren’t so hung up on self-expression and originality. A writer needs to persuade the reader to be there for the time of reading and sometimes afterwards.

I chose ‘Red Eye Reduction’ to be the overall winner because the story managed to combine so many elements with apparently so little effort. Structuring the narrative around the entirely visualisable but oddly abstract activity which is computer picture editing, the writer was able to handle characterisation while pulling in the other thematic strands with humour and panache.

As with the other stories I chose, the decisive factors were prose that was linguistically alive: words or phrases or rhythms that resonated, situations, people, voices that were engaging, a vibrancy in the sense of place or set of circumstances, a thought, a way of seeing that was arresting.

The specially commended stories for each image are:
I’d also like to create an *ad hoc* ‘honourable mention’ category. In alphabetical order: ‘Into the Blackness’, ‘Let her Sail’, ‘Look at the Fool’, ‘On the Cards’, ‘Seeing Red’, ‘The Painting’, ‘Unravelled’. There were numerous others besides these which had admirable features to recommend them, but even I recognise that to mention everyone creates a different kind of problem.

So if your story is not on this list, please bear this in mind, and thank you to all of you for the chance to read these stories and to the Special Collections Centre and their pictures for instigating them. You may notice that these notes come in at well over 500 words, so I’ll stop now. If your entry is listed, I hope any pleasure is not diminished by the fact that I compared your carefully crafted works to carrots, given that carrots are an unequivocally good thing, and you can never have too many of them.