

Limerick:

1st Bryn Seabourne
(No 2nd or 3rd)

Poem:

1st Oliver Barton
2nd Adele Cordner
3rd Oliver Barton

Story:

1st Bryn Seabourne
2nd Cath Barton
3rd Barry Chantler

Once a marathon runner called Gwenny
Down in London from Abergavenny
Asked the starter "What if
Like poor Paula Ratcliffe
Near Buck House I just must spend a penny?

Bryn Seabourne

Waiting

(a villanelle)

How can you pacify the questing beast,

How quell the spirit, satisfy the soul?

Waiting is the hors d'oeuvres of the feast.

When at length the daily turmoil's ceased,

When work and play have taken both their toll,

How can you pacify the questing beast?

We're waiting for a place to be released,
We wait for menu, napkin, wholemeal roll;
Waiting is the hors d'oeuvres of the feast.

What sometime seemed the most may be the least,
Empty plates come from the empty bowl;
How can you pacify the questing beast?

Can the span of man be e'er increased?
What can precede the final casserole?
Waiting is the hors d'oeuvres of the feast.

Search every dining place from west to east,
Inquire of sage and chef from pole to pole:
How can you pacify the questing beast?
Waiting is the hors d'oeuvres of the soul.

Oliver Barton

The Corn Field

The cold clay curls dropped from the plough like rippling Belgian chocolate covering a cake.
All day, the glinting green tractor traced the field, followed by flocks of feeding sea birds,

gorging on shocked worms with their cackling cries.

And so it went on, day after day, til the stubby battlefield transformed to a gently rolling sea,
gleaming and glistening in the short spring sun.

Then they returned, shooting a putrid mustard from a stained yellow spout,
leaving the landscape locked out as we drove quickly by.

But soon, all was smoothed and carefully raked, caressed into submission.
The soil lay calm, expectant, as the seeds were swiftly sown.

And as the dandelion clock lollipops stood long,
as the creamy cow parsley showed its first florets,
as the buttercups splatted oily citrus splodges on the freshly cut lawn,
as the fattened ewes lay prone, their heaving bellies writhing with new life,
just then, we saw the sharp shards of grassy shoots stand out from the spreading soil.

The countryside morphed from singing green to sultry cinnamon and suddenly they shot up,
peering at us over the hedge, marching rank and file,
so vast that we could dart amongst them, lost in awe of their enormity.

When the harvesters came, they fell faster than the leaves blowing from the trees,
and they left behind nothing but trailers topped with their sweet golden prize
and a gaping hole where once they stood so firm.

Adele Cordner (Daisy Scott)

A Clean Plate for Grandma

“Leave a clean plate for Grandma,”

Young Johnny is frequently told

When faced with grave doubts about spinach and sprouts

And gravy gone greasy and cold.

“If Grandma could only see this...”

Is said of the state of his room;
His post-earthquake style has taken a while,
And clearing it fills him with gloom.

It's Grandmama's birthday today;
They're off to a posh place to dine,
A place that is graced with impeccable taste
And you pay through the nose for the wine.

Johnny is walking on glass,
Frightened of what Gran might do.
You use the right knife if you value your life,
When Grandma's keen eye is on you!

Her steady gaze terrifies him
And Johnny feels like he has sinned -
When after a while, with a secret sly smile,
Grandmama loudly breaks wind.

Oliver Barton

1. It was all over at Philippi.

Brutus was dead. Prisoners were distributed, corpses collected and booty scavenged. War cries and trumpets had long been silenced, and there was no more clash of metal upon metal. Stricken horses whinnied helplessly. Desolate, camp followers and new-made widows wailed and lamented. The warm evening breezes bore flights of wheeling, prospecting vultures which the stench of death had drawn to a night's squabbling and a morning's gorging on the blood-rich killing ground. Most of the conquering legionaries had finished carousing, and lay all around in welcome, satisfied rest. Campfires, now largely deserted, dwindled to smoky wisps. Pickets on duty about the conquering generals' pavilion hummed tunes from home, exchanged bawdy lingua franca jokes and tried to follow the noisy celebrations within the silken walls.

Octavius raised his goblet. "To Victory, Revenge and Comradeship! Just the two of us, now!

"Yes, Lepidus won't be a problem." Antony beckoned for another drink.

"Right. By the way, I thought you gave old Brutus a good send off. 'The noblest Roman of them all,' and all that. The hacks will love it. Like your 'Friends, Romans etc.' "

"Well, 'never speak ill of the - famous - dead', they say. But, to tell you the truth, I never really liked him.

"Really?"

"Well, think about it," continued Antony, getting into his stride, and responding to young Caesar's flattery. "It was no use him trying to hide behind the skirts of malcontents like Cassius and Casca. It was a straightforward Right Wing coup they'd plotted. Classic pre-emptive strike. Yes, your Julius **did** play his cards close to his chest. Who wouldn't, the way things have been for decades? And paid for it in the end. Reactionaries! We're not a bunch of peasant farmers any more. They had no proof, remember - It was me made him the offer he could refuse - at the time - that could justify treason, treachery and betrayal. Just class prejudice, jealousy and vanity. The world was changing, and educated, reasonable, honourable Brutus, if anyone, would have known that. But then, self-righteous prig, he reckoned he was Rome's last guardian and conscience. After the murder the die was cast. There was going to be no future for the likes of you and me, and, well, deep down he knew it."

"Yes, it was that final stab in the back - or somewhere - that broke uncle's reckless heart, they say," interrupted Octavius, encouragingly.

"How could Brutus live with that? And all that patriotic guff about Rome's debt to some mythical Brutus who was cruel enough, incidentally, to slaughter his own son. Those days are over.

And that frosty wife of his! I was never on her a guest list. Blue blood and blue stocking. I imagine I was always that bit too racy for the Quirinal crowd.

So, yes, I gave the hacks some good copy, but it was what I'd said in the Capitol that I really meant. The bit at the end I mean. The bit that turned them on - and turned them off. Not bad for a rake like me, eh, Portia?

2. It was all over at Actium.

In his irresistible rise, Octavius Caesar had hunted Antony to a dissolute, final resting place in perfumed Alexandria. It was all haste now to return to base in Rome and do what Julius had not been given time to dare attempt. Before sweeping down to the port, illuminated even at that late hour by the beacons on The Pharos in the bay, he had paid brisk and stiff respects to the dead lovers, promising royal send-offs. In the now Imperial Barge, Octavius was escorted across the Inland Sea by a squadron of war galleys. He was not going to be caught napping by pirates, like his adopted father. It didn't matter that Julius had had the bloody-minded resourcefulness to turn the tables on his captors. Octavius was made of much more cautious stuff.

On board, the war council laid plans to tighten the chief's grip on Rome the minute the convoy docked at Ostia. The banks of oars dipped slower and relaxed as the vessel entered Tiber's tidal waters. They responded to the slowing tempo of the relentless drumming.

"Well. That's that, Gentlemen. You all know what I expect of you. Until we meet tomorrow to settle the business of the Senate, then."

There was a harder tone and more confidence in Octavius' voice. 'As to an imperial manner born' the Mantuan poet might later have put it.

"That all went pretty smoothly, General, said rich adviser Maecenas. And the Senators will be reassured by the correct and courteous words you had for Antony, in Alexandria.

"No point in rubbing their noses in it. You know as well as anyone that the truth is I never really liked the man. Think about it. All that time loafing about in the fleshpots of Egypt, with that Greek tart. Even Uncle Julius had his turn with her. Gone native, if you ask me. And the way he deserted my sister. Never forgive him for that.

But those things are personal and not important. Mustn't mix sentiment with policy. That really was Antony's downfall. You could see that when he got all emotional after the Ides of March bloodbath, that did for Uncle Julius. And of course his infatuation with this Oriental sorceress speaks volumes for his judgement. Erratic. Unpredictable. No good to me. Spies told me that she urged him to set up independently. Cut off Rome's grain supplies and the luxuries for the rich, and support the pirates, she would say, and you'll soon bring that boy to his knees.' Well he'd gone flabby. I had to get the first blow in, hadn't I? And it all collapsed in on them like a rotten water melon. It was all there in his playboy days, wasn't it?"

"Absolutely, Lord Augustus, absolutely!"

"Now about uncle's brat Caesarion....."

996 words.

Bryn Seabourne (Voltaire)

The careless arsonist by Cath Barton

DC Cadwalader slammed down her notebook in disgust. The jottings had spun round and round in her head for hours and still they made no sense. Things were getting worse - there had been eight burglaries and eight arson attacks in the past eight

days. What connected them was baffling the team. This was the evening of day nine but so far all the screens were blank. The town was quiet. She flicked off the screen switches and shoved the paperwork into a drawer. Let what was going to happen, happen. There was nothing more she could do about it tonight. In just half an hour she could be at home, large G&T in hand, bathwater running and...

As she pondered what she might be able to drag out of the freezer for dinner there was a sharp rap on her office door. She swung her chair round to face it.

"Yes?" she shouted, annoyance audible in her voice.

The door opened slowly.

"What kind of time do you call this ...?" The words died on Jill Cadwalader's lips as smoke curled under the door and an acrid smell leaked into the room with the visitor. Her brain shuffled the pieces into place with an almost-audible clunk, as she realised that the one man she'd trusted on her team, trusted implicitly, knew exactly what had been going on, because he'd masterminded it. And now he'd brought his evil fascination right into her office.

For months fires had been breaking out in offices round town. Always in the evening. And always soon after a robbery. The CID had been following up all the known burglars in town but hadn't been able to nail it on any of them. Now Jill realised that what the team had singularly failed to do was to think about what happened each time between robbery and arson. No-one had thought to question the person who was in there collecting information about what had been stolen: DC Jim "Sandy" Slattery, Mr Charming of the Llandeilo CID.

Jill was a quick thinker. It was not for nothing that she'd been the first woman ever to be taken on by the CID in this town. Clearly she'd made a mistake in backing Sandy Slattery, but he was not going to win. She walked over to the door and shut it firmly, showing no outward sign of the panic bubbling in her stomach and threatening to rise up. She returned to her chair, wound one elegant leg around the other and raised a quizzical eyebrow at Sandy, smiling with her mouth.

"So?" she enquired, eyes hard. "What exactly is going on here, DC Slattery?"

Sandy gave a yelping falsetto laugh as he pulled a bottle of whisky from his pocket, slamming his lanky frame into the easy chair alongside his boss's desk as he did so. She could see that he was very far from sober and that fortunately for her, this would slow his reactions considerably.

"I know you're a smart cookie, my dear Jill. You can see that it's only a matter of time till the balloon, as it were, goes up. But we have time for one last drink together," he said, "I think you deserve one. You've worked so hard, behind me every step of the way. No-one could have done more."

Outraged at his patronising tone, Jill hit out at his prominent jaw. Her aim was good and Sandy tumbled to the floor as whisky gugged out of his bottle and trickled towards the door, yellow as the urine in the police station cells on the floor below them.

Crossing her office in three quick steps, Jill opened the window wide with a flick of her wrist, kicking off her shoes as she did so, and jumped into the darkness. The building's emergency lights came on immediately, lighting her way to safety. The explosion came more quickly than Sandy had bargained for, thanks to his fuelling the flames with the whisky. Out on the road Jill fell to the ground, covering her head with her hands. Then she felt a coat dropped over her shoulders.

Firm hands helped her to her feet as the station sparked and blazed behind the trees.

"Sandy's in there," she gasped.

"He got what he deserved," said the man supporting her, who she now realised was her own boss. "To tell you the truth, I never really trusted him."

"I wish you'd told me that before, Chief," Jill said, as they sat together later waiting for their food to arrive in the late-night greasy spoon café. "You were always so keen for Sandy to take on more and responsibility. I thought he was your blue-eyed boy!"

"And I thought it was you who wanted to push him forward, my dear," he replied with a sly smile.

"Well, we were both wrong, weren't we? Backing a bent copper. At least that case is cleared up now. Just a mountain of paperwork to process!" Jill laughed, but the laugh died on her face as the café door opened and DC Slattery walked in. She looked from Slattery to her Chief and back again. This was, she immediately knew, the ultimate test.

"Okay Chief, here's our man," she said, standing to confront her colleague.

"Sit down Jill, and you too Slattery. Let's just have a little calm chat. We're all professionals here."

Yes, professional crooks in the case of you two, thought Jill.

"Sure, Chief," said DC Cadwalader. "My conscience is clear." And with that she gave a right hook to one and then the other, and walked out of the café. *Time for a new career,* she thought. *One far away from Llandeilo.*

Cath Barton

The Death of a Comedian

'Well, that's it then, he's gone,' Jed said as he came up to the line and took his place with the other four standing in front of the coffin. The coffin was a gaudy reconstruction of Tutankhamen's own; complete with face mask and cheap gold paint.

Gerald rubbed at his eyes with a bright yellow hankie, smudging the greasepaint around his eyebrows 'I can't believe he's gone,' he said. 'It was all so sudden.'

'And so unexpected,' Arthur piped up from the end of the line.

'It was a great send off,' Jed continued, 'befitting for the best comedian in Wales.'

'Aye, the best of us all,' Gerald said.

Frank cleared his throat 'I didn't care for carrying that coffin all the way down the promenade though. And why did he make us wear these silly costumes?'

They all looked at each other. Each of them, the pallbearers, were bedecked in clown costumes complete with spinning bow-ties, face paint, red noses, polka dot flares and flat shoes.

'It was too bloody far,' Gerald complained holding up a size 20 shoe. 'My feet are bloody killing me.' His hand went to a flower pad on his shoulder 'And my shoulders bloody killing me as well. I for one thought it was ridiculous.'

'And that Dixieland jazz band that followed us all the way,' Arthur added. 'What was that all about?'

'It was his final instructions,' Jed replied, 'and it was our job to see it done.'

He looked round. They'd placed the coffin stood upright in the middle of the reception room of the town hall. A usually solemn place that was now bedecked with brightly coloured balloons and bunting. A few other guests mulled around a buffet table (with nothing but cupcakes) and a drinks area (with nothing but pink lemonade).

'Doesn't seem many here,' he said. 'Where's his family?'

'I think they've got their own private reception later,' Gerald said.

The four returned to staring back at the coffin. They stared in silence, each deep in their own thoughts regarding the friend they'd just lost.

Presently, Frank cleared his throat 'It's a sad loss to the world of comedy.' He looked over at Arthur. 'This must be hardest on you, Arthur. You were his closest friend.'

Next to him Gerald wiped more greasepaint from around his eyes.

'To tell you the truth I never really liked him,' Arthur said.

The other three turned towards him.

'You what?' Gerald said.

'I never liked him,' Arthur repeated. 'I thought he was a pompous buffoon.'

'Now you mention it,' Gerald said putting away the hankie, 'the guy was nothing more than a talentless prick. He just got lucky, that's all.'

'It was more than just luck,' Jed said. 'The man was a born plagiarist. He stole all my best lines. It got to the point where I was scared to tell him *any* of my jokes 'cause I knew he'd be writing them down later.'

'Now now,' Frank said 'He wasn't that bad. At least two of his jokes must have been his own.'

The rest laughed at that.

'Let's face it,' Frank continued, 'we're nothing but sycophants, here dressed up in these ridiculous costumes. Truth is none of us liked him, the arrogant git.'

At that moment Reggie, the comedian's stage manager, barrelled into the room and walked up to them, his face red, his eyes streaming with tears.

But it wasn't from grief.

It was laughter.

'Oh!' Reggie gasped holding his sides. 'Oh, I just had to stay out the way.' He gulped for air and pointed to them 'You should see yourselves, what a bunch of clowns!' He doubled over in pain from laughing so much. 'Oh,' he gestured at them, 'I couldn't hang round, I'd have given the game away.'

'What game,' Arthur said. 'What the bloody hell are you running on about?'

Reggie forced himself upright and wiped his eyes with a sleeve. 'He's not dead.'

'You what,' Jack said.

'The best gag ever,' Reggie continued. 'He wanted to pull the greatest prank on you fellows, his best mates, so he faked it all.'

Reggie fell about laughing again 'You should have seen yourselves, walking down the promenade with that band,' he paused for breath, 'in those costumes. Oh, he really got you guys.'

The rest ignored him and turned back to the coffin.

'Not dead?' Arthur said.

'Alive and in that coffin?' Gerald said.

'Hearing everything?' Frank said.

'That's right, guys,' Reggie answered. He walked up to the coffin and pressed a button on one side. With a loud click that echoed through the room, the coffin lid swung slowly open to reveal a man dressed in a mummy costume with a whited face. On his chest was a banner with SUCKERS emblazoned on it.

Above the banner the greatest comedian in Wales wasn't smiling. In fact, he wasn't smiling at all.

Barry Chantler