Judging a prose competition of this nature, one is obviously looking for good themes and good language. But what about narrative? On the first run through I resorted to the schoolmasterly expediency of ticking good bits, regardless of why they were good - and I counted the density of ticks per thousand words. A rough guide only, but enough to convince me that in fact narrative and did have to play a role. Thank heavens, many entries containing interesting language in abundance.

So, I’ll give a brief report of the six shortlisted entries in alphabetical order, and then I’ll announce the winners. First of all

**Peter Clarke** - **Unexpected Consequence of a Lunar Eclipse** an artist has left behind bewilderingly convincing pictures of the surface of the moon. But these have moved beyond the scientific into a realm of the fantastic, including vegetation and shells, and a strange piece called ‘Court of the Crescent Queen’, hauntingly and beautifully convincing. The narrator describes meetings with this artist, his increasingly peculiar behaviour, and the artist’s eventual disappearance, during the course of a full lunar eclipse. The story is interesting, and some descriptions excellent, it is a fascinating read!

**Ellen Evers. The Moonstone (3?)** is about the intervention of paganism (in the form of a moonstone bestowing special powers) into nineteenth century rural life. The possession of the stone imperils its owner, a girl, but she is able to use it to grant the wish of a baby to the lady of the manor. A neat story, and there are some poetic descriptions. great fun to read. Splendid imagination and spirit of place. Ellen cannot be with us tonight, so here is a paragraph to give you a flavour.

**Andrea James: First Man on the Moon (29).** Now this by contrast is a shocking horror fantasy centring on a seduction (during which a child is conceived), on the very night of the moon-landings, and this is collided with 1960s hippy optimism regarding communal living, drug-taking, and then alas - insanity, paranoia and appalling consequences when the child is born. Not always an easy read, but gripping and it certainly resonates in the mind. It has lots to say about about the dark side of human nature, negating the superficial optimism of science, and it does so in a memorable manner.

**Hetty’s Moon by Anthony Levings (31)** starts with what seems like Sci-fi cliché dialogue, but there is clearly more going on – involving two Hetties, Little Hetty, the narrator’s brain tumour and his flower-power wife, Big Hetty, from whom a terrible secret has to be hidden, this being that the moon landing footage as we know it is fake. The narrator is a film-maker who was involved in making the Shoeburyness footage – this was not the usual conspiracy however - the problem was that the quality of the shots coming back from the moon weren’t good enough to be convincing. So, these real ones were eventually destroyed by Nixon. By the end, the two Hetties seem to have become scrambled, and we are not sure which of them is set to die, nor indeed the veracity of anything – but there is a sense of the triumph of a feminine principle, and of truth. This is all great, rather dark fun, and it messes with one’s head for a long while after reading it.

**Tina Morley’s They’re Coming (6) is a lovely**, uplifting sci-fi fantasy about aliens coming to visit the earth, the story told from the point of view of a family. The children of the family are surprisingly indifferent to the landings, though the alien inspection of the human race as caused the rich, privileged and corrupt powers that be to sort out just about all the world’s social problems. Yes, you’ve guessed it, the children, computer hacking geniuses, have set the whole thing up. But the world is still a better place. The writing is clear, simple and to the point. And uplifting. Tina cannot be with us. Here is part of her email to Luigi message, before re a reading from Trevor Breedon.

**In Sarah Stretton’s The Old Moon** subtle poetic language used unobtrusively, subjugated to the narrative structure, which is so tight that the fairy-tale elements seem realistic, in the manner of magic realism. There is a simple but immensely effective narrative structure – simply counting down days. There are surprises on every page, as the mayor (traditionally a masculine figure but here her femininity is movingly crucial) confronts a massive supernatural wolf who has lost her cub and whose presence and whose howling endangers the survival of her community. In fact the mayor finds a solution to the problem of the wolf-mother’s conflict with the moon. Why this twist works it hard to say, and that is the story’s great strength. The happy ending is heartening, strange and haunting. The writing is clear, evocative, and poetic - nothing facile about it. This deserves to be a modern fairy-tale classic.

**Gary Studley’s Son** (37) A father addresses his son, who has failed as a hunter. The father sets out his own disappointment and the son’s weakness an in a resolute, resonant manner, confronting possible excuses one after the other. The language is highly poetic, but this suits that atavistic nature of his pronouncements. Resonances reach down all the way from Caan and Abel to modern-day veganism, though there is nothing preachy about the piece. On the contrary, the monologue structure is well-balanced as as said, highly poetic. The piece is moving too – we can easily identify with the pain of the son’s failure.

So, all the shortlisted pieces were excellent, and distinguishing between them was very difficult. However...

3) Andrea James for First Man on the Moon

2) Anthony Levings for Hetty’s Moon

1) Sarah Stretton for the Old Moon