

Tales from the

U3A

POEMS & STORIES FROM
SUTTON COLDFIELD
WRITING GROUP
Volume 3





INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our third Sutton Coldfield U3A Writing Group anthology!

Everyone from the group, who submitted material, is represented here. Selection was necessary but an attempt to add some variety and the space we had available were the only selection criteria.

Sutton Coldfield U3A Writing Group is for all. It doesn't matter whether you are an experienced writer or have never written before, everyone is welcome. We all write at our own level in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. We work on a project basis some may be light hearted and, we hope, fun; some projects might be more challenging.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this anthology. Everyone can write and we hope that it might encourage you to put pen to paper in some way. In the future your life will seem exotic and alien. Write it down for your grandchildren and great grandchildren, and all of those that will follow you.

I would like to give thanks to the members of the Writing Group for their good humour and hard work. It is a pleasure to work with you. Especial thanks go to the production team of Susan Hundleby, Sue Lippitt, Trevor Smith and Gillian Wood who compiled this anthology.

Carole Millin
December 2015

THE BIG HOOT

(A soliloquy - with apologies to William Shakespeare)

To hoot or not to hoot that is the question.
Whether tis nobler to suffer these owls in Sutton town
To display such outrageous fortune, or
To place them in parts of Brum that are a sea of troubles.
Should we oppose them or welcome them.
To die - to sleep - to sleep perchance to dream,
Let these owls dream - and children too
Must dream. They made these owls and now
The whole of Sutton can show respect
To those who let their imagination run wild.
The pangs of creativity, the insolence in some
Of the owls' faces. The patient merit
Waiting for a winner. The dread of something
After September when owls will fly
And not one returns. We do not know
Where they will go and this thought
Makes cowards of us all. Such enterprise
To create the big Hoot and little hoot trail
all around Sutton Owlfield and beyond.
Soft you now you fair owls
For you will be remembered.

I BLAME CENTRAL HEATING

Every week we read another story of some disaffected teen holed up in their bedroom plotting mass shootings, terrorism, or at the very least inappropriate texting while their family is blissfully (or otherwise) unaware of their activity.

It never happened in my youth and I think I know why. Central Heating! Picture the family gathered round the fire. There was usually only one – in the living room – and homework, knitting, reading, radio listening, all took place as near to the heat source as was humanly possible. The bedroom was the equivalent of cold storage and, apart from a couple of months in high summer, not a place to linger. At bed time you left the fire at the last minute and, grabbing your hot water bottle (if you were lucky), cold footed it up the stairs, across the lino and into bed where you tucked the blankets into every gap and shivered your way to sleep. You might be lucky enough to have a brother or a sister to snuggle up to but that was the extent of your ‘central heating’.

Even had the cell-phone miraculously been invented, at that time your fingers would be far too cold to manipulate it and they remained below the covers till the dawn, or your mother woke you.

So the answer to all this malfeasance is plain. No billion pound anti-terrorism campaign is needed. Just a ban on central heating in bedrooms. Simple!

oooOooo

MEMORY

I remember the Coronation, possibly, or perhaps I just think I do. The footage of the beautiful young woman in the fairy tale carriage has been shown so many times that it is very familiar, but I don't think that familiarity dates from 1953.

I know, because I have been told, that I watched it on my aunt's TV. She lived a few houses away from us and owned one of the few TV's in our street. It was a substantial piece of furniture, made from highly polished wood and built to last, as everything was then. The screen was barely the size of an iPad. I do have a clear memory of this TV as it was on this that I sometimes watched Andy Pandy and Muffin the Mule.

How the extended family all managed to see the Coronation pictures I can't imagine. There would have been: Mum, Dad, two aunts, one uncle (the other uncle was a bad lot, often absent and rarely mentioned), plus four little girls – me and my cousins. I doubt we little ones sat through the whole broadcast, but I have no information about this.

We didn't actually have a party in our street. It was held in the playground of the local primary school, an imposing, three storey, Victorian building standing directly behind the row of terraced houses in which we all lived.

There were no adults at the party so I, a little tot, was entrusted to the care of my ten year old cousin. Such arrangements were not unusual and caused my mum little anxiety.

I have a clear memory of the school playground filled with long tables at which we ate our special tea. What this consisted of I couldn't say, but I imagine it featured sandwiches, jelly and ice-cream as this is what was always served at birthday parties throughout my childhood.

We were all given a commemorative mug and plate. Mine were in regular use for years and so haven't survived.

All the children in the neighbourhood wore fancy dress. I was Little Red Riding Hood. I know this because I have an old, grainy, black and white photo of a small girl wearing a cape and hood of indeterminate grey, which I'm led to believe was red, clutching a small, wicker basket.

I can remember flags and a stage at one end of the playground. All the children had to go up on the stage so that their costumes could be judged. I didn't win a prize. Somebody would have told me if I had.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DAFFODILS GONE?

(A parody)

They saunter slowly from the coach
And scatter o'er the vales and hills,
Like locusts on the land encroach,
And pick the bloody daffodils.
Gathering 'til the landscape's clean
'Til there is no yellow, only green.

CAR PARK RAGE

Emma Urquhart leaned through the window of her 4x4, pushed the button harder than necessary to receive a car parking ticket and drummed impatiently for it to appear. Grabbing the ticket, barely had the barrier risen than a blast of exhaust and squealing tyres added to the exhaust fumes and echoing sounds of the multi-storey car park.

As Winston Bekele drove carefully and leisurely into the car park, waited patiently for the barrier to rise, he listened appreciatively to Bob Marley at a volume most people would find deafening. Grateful for some time on his own, he had just collected his car from servicing. Turning off his iPod, he delighted in how gently and softly the engine of his 5 series BMW purred and how the scent of the freshly valeted leather upholstery restored that new car smell that he so enjoyed. No wonder his car was his pride and joy.

As he too drove up to the first floor he could hardly believe his luck as a car began to pull out of the first available and prime parking space. He waited whilst the car completed its manoeuvre and then began to ease into the space, keeping a careful watch on a pillar one side and a parked car on the other.

The crash that followed shook the whole car. The sounds of crumpling metal and shattering glass took over. The airbag inflated instantaneously and for what seemed like an age, he sat there trying to gather his thoughts. The impact had pushed him into the next car and he became aware of its alarm sounding loudly and echoing around the car park.

It was then that he noticed the 4x4 embedded into his front wing, bumper and bonnet. Emma Urquhart was already out her car and approaching him, menacingly.

Just as it seemed that the situation could get out of hand, they were interrupted. Someone had called the police.

The policeman stood directly in front of Winston Bekele and demanded, "Is this your car, sir? His tone aggressive and accusing. "Just give me moment, while I check this out."

Moving away out of earshot, there followed the muffled conversation of two-way radios.

Meanwhile Emma Urquhart looked around for support from the crowd that had gathered. Winston Bekele leaned disconsolately against his car with a look of resignation and expectation of how this was going to end.

"Everything appears to be in order, sir." The policeman could scarcely disguise the surprise in his voice.

"Madam, are you Mrs Emma Urquhart?"

"Yes, why?"

"According to the DVLA, you are the registered keeper of this vehicle but there is no MOT or insurance and it seems you only have a provisional licence. You are under arrest."

oooOooo

CAR PARK RAGE

(A Sonnet Trilogy – 1)

Classy, sassy lady in her four by four,
Statement making, status faking, make way,
It's shopping time for an hour at least, before
I pick up the kids, need a parking bay.
Working class ethnic, black shiny beamer,
Bob Marley wails, hoodie covers his face,
Loner, loser, long for good life dreamer,
Cruising the car park in search of a space.
Four by four and beamer crash to a halt,
Check the details, police formality,
Prejudice tells us who must be at fault,
Book the ethnic, restore normality,
With no insurance or MOT test,
Pretentious lady you're under arrest.

TO CATCH A THIEF

(A Sonnet Trilogy – 2)

Well-dressed city type in his work mode
bubble,
Laptop, brief case, mobile, talks to his phone
Unaware of any approaching trouble,
Lonely, twilight, urban street, going home.
Dishevelled dropout, living for the day,
Running to catch the man still unaware,
Gains on his quarry, no getting away,
Then he's on him, panic, fear in his stare,
Mugging, a beating, a drug fuelled attack,
No-one to hear him, witness, intervene,
Petrified and alone, no turning back,
Another statistic, the next crime scene,
'Hey brother, ain't this your luckiest day?'
Then hands him his wallet and walks away.

WITNESS

(A Sonnet Trilogy – 3)

On to the street they swarm, like ants from a nest,

In twos they go, their message to reveal,

Well-dressed, leaflet carrying, Bible to chest,

Slow walking pace drives their faith
sponsored zeal,

Trade salesmen and hawkers don't have their
skill,

Double glazing, fascias, electric, gas,

'No thanks', 'not today', can get rid at will

If the house looks empty they'll simply pass.

But missionaries want in-depth debate.

Pretend to be out? Dismiss politely?

Doorbell rings again, I've left it too late.

Bell rings again, I won't take this lightly,

Fling open the door, no longer a joke,

'Sir, look, upstairs, we think we can see
smoke!'

JEALOUSY

Standing on a low stool, Janey looked at the funny shape her nose had made after pressing it on the cold window pane. Then she breathed hard on the glass, making a lovely misty patch where she drew squiggly pictures. She wanted to play outside but Mummy had said, "NO!" No one was out. Wherever she looked, all she saw was snow. Even up over the hedges. She hadn't been out for days. She missed Daddy and wished he'd come back from his new job soon and that awful baby would go away. Janey had tried to stop it crying this morning by starting to put the pillow over its stupid face but Mummy had come in so she couldn't. She was sick of that awful baby with the screwed up face and smelly bottom. When she wasn't crying, she was stuck on Mummy's chest and was no good at all for playing with. Neither was Mummy any more. She'd been fun until this stupid baby had come; she'd even played with Janey when that baby had been in her tummy. Janey wished she'd go back there! Now Mummy was always tired or busy. She did read her a story sometimes but nursed that baby at the same time and Janey didn't have her to herself much anymore.

She turned from the window to look at the baby, for once quietly asleep in its cot. It wore a bonnet even inside because Mummy said new babies needed to keep extra warm and everywhere was freezing. It had its stupid white bonnet on and was covered with white sheets and white blankets. Janey looked out through the window where more snowflakes were falling.....the stupid baby wouldn't show up in that snow she thought.

oooOooo

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN...?

It was during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Lots of people seem to have been very scared at this time. I didn't have time to be scared. I was knee deep in an experimental theatrical production called "The Maker and the Tool" which was due to tour the country – well, six towns anyway – under the auspices of 'Centre 42', the project conjured up by Arnold Wesker.

We were a band of amateurs but we were serious about the venture and strove to be professional in our work, if not in our wages. We therefore rehearsed in all available spare hours usually in unheated churches or school rooms. The joke going the rounds was that rehearsal was from 10am till unconscious, and it wasn't so far from the truth. "Bring everything you need" we were instructed – "Food, drink, cough sweets, tissues, blanket, ballet shoes, mittens, paperback." This last to be devoured covertly in an hiatus when we were supposed to be meditating on the work. Luckily, apart from a few sniffles, nobody went down with 'flu or the black-death, or even lost their voice as I remember, which was all to the good when singing part of Haydn's 'Creation'. A bit more of a stretch than the folk songs which were our usual fare. I was never a soprano but we had one or two good ones from a church choir.

The one time we were let out in daylight – blinking – was to join a demonstration about the Cuban problem. It must have been in the centre of the town but I don't remember the route. One thing that did impinge was that Edmund's flaming torch – oh yes, we had flaming torches, jazz musicians, the lot – managed to set fire to several

banners! Quickly extinguished with help from friendly onlookers.

Well we went back to our darkened hall. Dark because of the cine and slides incorporated into the production. The world crisis was averted, the performances went ahead and I bought myself a green jacket to take on holiday to Helsinki.

POEM MADE FROM A SHAKESPEARE SONNET

How would I say, mine eyes be blessed made
by looking on thee, in the living day.

As truth and beauty shall thrive together, so
are you in my thoughts forever.

But when I do count the clock that tells the
time,

I do feel that I may lose this fair child of mine.

Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell,

Thou art too dear for my possessing, farewell.

oooOooo

WHITE SOCKS

Sidney the fox
has incredible socks.
They arrived one night
fluorescent white.

On a train
in the rain,
Two pairs in a box
from a firm in,
Dunfermline,
He found on the web
of a spider called Ned.

With his new white socks
and his long loping gait.
To impress his new mate
Sidney jumped a house gate.

It was low,
not tall,
so,
he knew he'd not fall
or catch his socks,

that came in a box,
on a nail,
he might fail
to see.

Now Sidney is old,
his spring less bold.

He's tired
and retired
by the sea.

But his socks,
that came two pairs in a box,
on that train
in the rain,
glowing white
in the night.

He hangs on a tree.

For all to see
how cool, an urban fox can be.

oooOooo

So LUCKY

On the wireless they say we're lucky to live in Britain. That's what statistics show. Apparently though, the economy is dicey. Not half as dicey as mine I bet! Anyway, one good thing about it, I won't get obese; can't afford it. A tin of sardines lasts me a couple of days; three at a stretch. They're full of Omega 3 to keep healthy. Why do they give vitamins names that sound like spaceships? *(Sniffs)*.

My mind's active as well. I keep occupied watching all the goings-on in the street, so I'm not bored. I've got draped nets that go up in the middle; bit like an arch, so I can sit and watch from my chair. I call it my 'viewing platform'. That chap opposite, polishes his car morning, noon and night. It's like gold! I swear he'll rub it away if he's not careful. Got it last week; brand spanking new it is. Came cruising along the street in this long white thing with blacked out windows. Makes you wonder why they don't want people to see in. What are they up to? Just hope they can see out properly to drive. Well, what a commotion! His girlfriend came staggering out on the highest heels I've ever seen. She'll regret squashing her feet into those stilts before she's much older. *(Pauses)*. Got hardly any clothes on as usual. *(Sniffs again)*.

Well, there they were, stroking the bonnet, getting in and out of it, taking pictures of each other standing by it. Then they started it up and revved that engine so hard it blew all the crisp bags out of the gutter. I don't know how they do it. Neither of them work. They seem very popular though; people going in and out of the house all the time, even kids on their way home from school. They come out

with sappy grins on their faces, smoking and pushing plastic bags into their pockets. I can't make it out at all.

He did look up once and caught me watching him. Gave a sort of nod and waved at me but he didn't look that happy. He mouthed something at me but I'm no good at lip reading. I'm not sure he'd be a Good Samaritan if I needed help. Last winter when the snow was bad I could have died in here and no-one would have known or cared. They tell people to keep an eye on elderly neighbours when the cold weather comes. Huh; fat chance of that round here!

Still, I do alright. It's a job keeping warm when the prices keep rising. I make do with my old oil heater. Had it years. It's a Glen; that's the make. I pretend it's my gentleman friend. In the winter evenings I'll say, "Come on Glen let's have a cuddle" and I sit right next to it and press myself against it. Silly, but you do daft things when you live by yourself. At least no-one can hear me. They'd be carting me off to one of those funny farms!

Yes, I'm ok. Soldier on. Things could be a lot worse. We British have a good sense of humour. We need it!

oooOooo

TREES

TREES

Trees

Trees

Trees

Foliates, that catch the breeze,
Pollinate, to make you sneeze,
then lounge about the forest floor
to trip you with their roots -

And more -

If you should wander out of sight
on badger track, some moonless night
where charcoaled Smokey ghosts,
do wisp around the boundary posts
and whisper low of ancient lore
from forest's toad-stool leaf-mould floor.

Of woodsmen's blades in forest glades,
Amongst those sunlight dappled shades.
The pollarding, the coppicing
The rooting out of sapling.

But then -
a brighter ring,
the leafing of the buds in spring,
the choruses of boisterous flights
swishing through the forest heights.
Of creatures of the paw and wing
multiple legged, and some that sting,
some that slither, some that crawl
and those awakening from the fall
that yawn and scratch, and sneeze and bawl.

So next you mushroom with your trug,
Don't kick that trunk like some young thug,
be Royal, and give a tree a hug.

A hug.

A HUG.

oooOooo

AN EVENING ALONE

A November evening and I was alone in the house. My father was working in the control office at New Street station, my mother was at a Guides meeting and my two elder sisters were married. I had gone to Erdington library earlier and walking home had wondered whether the Beatles would be a success in America.

For some reason the Youth Club wasn't meeting that Friday so I had a choice between watching television and doing my homework. As usual the homework came in second. This is probably why I underachieved at school.

The choice was between BBC and ITV, both in monochrome. Colour television and other stations were still a few years in the future.

"Tonight" was on BBC. This was a news magazine programme which picked up minor human interest stories the main news bulletins ignored. The programme was coming to an end when Cliff Michelmore, the presenter, broke off his script to announce they were going over to the newsroom. Unusually for him he sounded confused. Perhaps he knew what had happened.

The newsreader was a young man, a recent addition to the newsroom. Unusually for the BBC in 1963 he was wearing a striped shirt. Without preamble he informed us that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas. There was no information about the President's condition.

A telephone on his desk rang. He picked it up and said "Yes" two or three times and replaced the receiver.

He faced the camera. Instinctively I knew what was coming. "I regret to inform you that President Kennedy is dead."

The picture quickly changed to the standard BBC between programmes - screen of a globe rotating against a dark background.

The newsreader returned, now wearing a black tie. He gave a few details and the globe returned.

My father telephoned from New Street. He had heard a rumour about the shooting but not that the President had died, I told him the sketchy details I had heard.

Later that evening the BBC showed the scheduled comedy *"Here's Harry"*. They were inundated with complaints.

The following morning I went to my Saturday job at Henry's Stores in Birmingham, Business was normal.

Life continued without John F Kennedy.

oooOooo

OWLS IN RESIDENCE

Have you seen the twitchers they are out in force?

A parliament of owls can be spotted, if you know the source.

This trail will take you from Sutton Owlfield all over the city.

Some of the owls are thought provoking others are pretty.

The Sutton seven have taken up residence

So that our summer will be enhanced.

They swooped into this Royal town in many guises

Each one giving us some great surprises.

But these owls are not just a flight of fancy, oh no

As when summer ends to new nests, they will go.

The Big Hoot will be over, but much will be gained

As many poorly children will be relieved of pain.

GREEN EYED MONSTER

Of all the ills afflicting humankind,
the green eyed monster must take pride of place.
Whether the lovers, programmed soon to find
the pain of doubt, deceit, the fall from grace,
or, dire too, the threatened alpha male,
declining years ahead, resents and fears
the young pretender, hears the glad “all hail” -
tumultuous welcome from his youthful peers.
One wanes, one waxes full, youth threatening age.
One slows, the other speeds, but bides his time.
One impotent with jealousy and rage,
plots with intensity the perfect crime.
The green-eyed monster smirks and slinks away,
doubtless to gloat, and plan his next foray.

AN ARTHURIAN CHRISTMAS TALE

Thank goodness that was over for another year – sherry and mince pies in the Senior Common Room. If only someone would tell the Registrar that decent sherry is available from Tesco at quite a reasonable price these days. Still, Deidre's mince pies made up for it. They'd probably be the culinary highlight of my Christmas.

Tradition. Well, I had a few Christmas traditions of my own and one always began today. On the last day of the Autumn Term I started the annual re-read of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and eked it out to last right through the family celebrations.

“This kyng lay at Camylot upon Krystmasse.”

As my eyes travelled along the lines of words, I heard the music of a language spoken long ago. I let the pictures form in my head of lords and ladies with their fine clothes glittering in the smoky hall. How different from the Christmas which lay ahead of me.

When they had had their fill of the feast, Arthur's knights escaped to the jousting, to action, danger and animal power. Well I would escape from the desperate family festive fun, by journeying to Camelot and reading of their adventures. Of course, I wouldn't be the only one retreating to a fantasy land. The children too would be lost in their own electronic worlds. I had to smile at the thought of the children. They were so scornful of an aunt who knew little about the latest trends and fashions, but when it came to bedtime I was the one with the best stories to tell.

Of course I had all the best stories. They were taken from the hordes of books which filled my tiny office to overflowing. No, I didn't regret devoting my life to studying these wonderful old tales which had never been bettered, only re-told and adapted through the ages.

I relished the descriptions of the Christmas feast at Camelot and yet even these sumptuous celebrations didn't satisfy Arthur's knights. They wanted something different, something more... Yes, I could relate to that. Who couldn't? The feeling that life might not be entirely complete, that there might be something else...

Their wish was answered by a strange and alarming guest, who led Gawain to a life-changing adventure. I wondered whether anything would ever arrive to disrupt my well-ordered life.

The floor boards creaked. People had left, machines were switched off and the old building was settling back into the past, reconnecting with memories from centuries ago. As the lights went out around me I stared out into the damp gloom of the falling midwinter night. This was the time when I loved the old building best of all, the time when I had it all to myself.

Then I heard the footsteps, purposeful, climbing the stairs, coming along the corridor.

The knock on my door. My heart was racing. "Come in...."

"I'm sorry, Miss, but you're the last one here and I need to lock up."

oooOooo

GORSE FARM

Autism, lifelong condition, no cure
Not understood by others, unaware
Why they can't communicate and unsure
Of rules we live by, seeming not to care
Dismissed as strange and frequently
friendless
Families helpless, unable to cope
Half a million with problems endless
Many need full time support to give hope
For a much richer life free of despair
But at Marston Green, Gorse Farm this
provides
Where fourteen can live in permanent care
Autism West Midlands helps them make
strides
Through staff professional, dedicated
The sufferers' lifestyle elevated.

BIRD ON THE COURSE

Cheeky Charlie went on an adventure around
Brum

But his flight was not a scheduled one.

This chatty cockatiel was a treasured pet

But 12 miles in total he did get.

A cockatiel's habitat is not on the fair way

So an eagle eyed golfer had a shock that day.

Even an albatross and condor are part of a
golfer's chatter

But on the green is not the place to hear a
cockatiel's natter.

His owner was in a flap and feeling very under
par

So when his birdie was spotted, the golfer
became a star.

After a week on the wing, Charlie is safely
home

Hopefully never more to roam.

oooOooo

THE MISSING PIPE

One of the greatest pleasures of Sidney's life was smoking his pipe. He loved nothing better than to take the orange lid off a two ounce tin of Godfrey Phillips Grand Cut and take out two flakes of tobacco before rolling them in his hands. He then carefully filled the briar bowl of his short stemmed pipe with the strands of moist tobacco.

Finally he struck a Swan Vestas match (never England's Glory and certainly not with a lighter) and sucking gently lit the tobacco. He prided himself on lighting the pipe. He boasted (not entirely truthfully) that he could always light it with a single match even when a gale was blowing.

For the next half hour Sidney relaxed, puffing contentedly at his pipe oblivious that not everybody shared his pleasure. At the pub they moaned about him smoking old socks and at home his wife pointedly opened a window as soon as he was filling his pipe. She called it his dummy.

The only problem Sidney has was that he sometimes forgot where he had left his pipe. He never said so but suspected his wife would move it from where he put it down. One summer day after a long search he found it in the kitchen, strengthening his suspicions that his wife had hidden it.

He filled the pipe but before he could light it the phone rang. Somebody trying to sell double glazing. Sidney interrupted him mid-sentence by slamming the phone down.

He took the matches out of his pocket but couldn't find his pipe. He knew it was in the living room but he couldn't find it. His growing desperation wasn't helped by the fact

that his wife obviously found it funny. He glanced in the mirror hanging on the wall and saw his pipe. In his mouth!

THE PRICE OF BREAD

(World War One: Nov 1917)

She sailed uneasy 'neath a starless sky,
As she approached the rugged Irish coast,
Her lights extinguished and the rocks nearby
Her outline shrouded like a furtive ghost,
Holds filled with grain to make the daily bread
For hungry thousands whom they must not fail,
'Zig-zag two points each way', the captain said,
'And throw the skulking U-Boats off the trail!'
The young man took a bearing on the Light,
When suddenly all hell let loose abaft,
The Carlo broke in two and sank from sight,
And left the young man clinging to a raft,
Another vessel failed to reach its port,
Men's lives the price at which our food is bought.

The young man was the author's father.

CORONATION DAY: 1953

We did Her Majesty proud today. It was a close shave though. Thank goodness the train arrived on time and the flag was on board. I wouldn't have missed the District Head's toothless smile, for all the world, when I unfurled that Union Jack. I think he was as proud as me, taking the Boys Brigade salute together!

My hasty message must have got through. If not, the DH hid his surprise well. He was enveloped in an enormous Riga and the two ends of his pure white turban popped out at the top like two rabbit's ears to show he is the son of an Emir. He must have expected Hodgson in full regalia: white uniform, pit helmet and ceremonial sword. I hope he wasn't too disappointed to get me instead. I put on my best suit. I wonder where Amadhu found the polish for my shoes. Thank goodness I'm not allowed to wear uniform yet. The humidity this morning was worse than ever and the first of the rains came down in torrents this afternoon.

I wonder what's happening in Zaria, for Hodgson to be recalled at such short notice.

The children's sports were a great success. Ha! Ha! That sack race....what chaos! They haven't seen anything like it before in Zonkwa. Hee! Hee! The girls and boys took their three legged tumbles in great spirits. I thought we were going to run out of cloth strips: the children were swarming out of nowhere. It was a very ambitious programme with hindsight.

The prize giving went down well.....I'm glad I spotted those pads of paper and pencils in the office...I must remember to order some more.

My speech seemed to be well received. Well, everybody clapped loudly anyway....it certainly tested the limits of my Hausa. I wonder what those desk-tied chaps in Zaria would have thought.

What a relief the football field was finished in time. I've never worked so hard. It wasn't as smooth as it might have been, but at least a few people knew the rules. Those new goal posts looked very fine indeed. I thought it was going to be a complete shambles, but actually the match went rather well. My refereeing skills weren't put to the test too much. It was certainly one of the best games, from a keenness point of view, that I have ever seen. The score of 1-1 was very satisfactory. There was a huge crowd, three deep at least around the field, and then all those others on the railway embankment: nearly 2000 people in all, I think. The cheers were deafening. Perhaps I can persuade the town to start a proper football team now.

I enjoyed myself immensely. Those two Roman Catholic Fathers did a grand job wiring up all the fireworks and keeping them dry through that rain storm. It was lucky the Rest House roof was completed yesterday, otherwise we wouldn't have had any show at all. That last half hour setting up the rockets was quite frantic. Thank goodness my car battery lasted long enough for us see what we were doing. I can't believe how dark it is out here in the bush. That display really stole the show. I don't think more than about twenty people have seen fireworks before. The fuses were so wet I never thought we were going to get them lit. That first aerial shell was brilliant, and then when Frank got the strip of 10 rockets lit I really thought we'd cracked it. I must remember not to mount rockets so close

together next time. What an explosion! Those next 100 rockets must have gone up in about 30 seconds flat. I hope Bob's trousers are all right. I couldn't believe it when I saw the rockets explode off in all directions right across the countryside.

Still, no damage done.....I hope. I wonder if the goal posts survived. I'll take a look in the morning.

AND THOSE WILL SMELL

Spring,
A pleasant thing,
Where church bells ring
and birds on the wing,
sing.

while all around
the sodden ground
are whispered rumours,
of bulbs and tubers,
poised to bloom, in showers,
with flowers.

A sigh of Crocii
A hill of Daffodil,
A Bluebell dell.
And those so tuned
To be perfumed,
Will smell.

I'VE GOT TO WRITE A POEM

I have a magic box that's full of words.
Words that are witty, wise and whimsical,
Cheerful words like glee and spree,
Gloomy words like loom and doom.
My words are like seeds blown away in the wind.
My words are footsteps dancing to a beat.

I've got to write a poem.
I've got to make it scan.
I've got to put in assonance
And consonance, if I can.
I suppose that I could write about
Mother Nature's wondrous creatures,
If only I could fit it in
To iambic pentameters.
With all those words, it can't be hard to write a verse or
two.
Try as I might, it won't go right. I don't know what to do.

I'll make a patchwork with my words.
I'll spin and knit and sew.
Vermillion, azure, emerald
Are the colours which will make it glow.
Crispy, crumbly, crackly, crunchy,
Shiny and smooth and sleek,
My words will weave textured tapestries
If I give them space to speak.

oooOooo

MOON POOL

Have you noticed

how mothers invent stories - a bit of harmless psychological manipulation - to discourage their off-spring from doing something that has a danger - is harmful - or just not well mannered?

My mother would say, “don’t put your head under the water tap to drink - use a drinking glass.”

The scam goes like this:

tap water comes in from underground water pipes.

Earth worms live underground.

Therefore tap water can carry earth worms.

When you’re young you feel the logic doesn’t quite fit - however, the possibility of a mouth full of wriggling earth worms, makes putting your head under the water tap so uncomfortable mentally, that a glass of water, checked for worms, is far more acceptable.

A similar bit of manipulation involved a Spinney to the rear of our house. The Spinney, an unkempt sprouting of woodland, sits on the peak of a tall hill known locally as Barrow Crop. At the centre of the Spinney, which incidentally is quite dense and overgrown - is a pool, completely circular, about eight feet in diameter, and bordered with an ancient stone perimeter.

It could have been a well at some time, or a spring - it had that blackness and stillness characteristic of deep water.

We kids called it the MOON POOL, probably because of its shape and its reflective quality - not that any of us were brave enough to venture into the Spinney at night to see the moon's reflection.

In those days 'the pool' had no protective railings or 'DANGER THREAT OF DEATH' warning boards hammered into the ground.

So mother, being protective, forbade us to play anywhere near the pool. It was, she said 'bottomless' and if we fell in we would sink down and down, and down, never to be seen again.

Well bottomless?

Every hole, every dark place, every pool has to stop somewhere – doesn't it?

You see the logic doesn't quite fit - like the worms in the water pipes.

But the thought plays on your mind, frightens you to keep away.

One warm Sunday evening in my late teens, I was at a loose end and just strolling over Barrow Crop hill kicking loose stones, when out of the blue the MOON POOL crossed my mind. Well I had nothing better to do, so I thought,

"I'll just check it out - just to see if it is still there."

It's been a while since we played around there as kids, but eventually I found a paw padded animal track that led under the wire and into the gloom of the Spinney.

Mother's mind worm began to waken as with some awkward foot-work, a few snapped branches, and several disturbed, and hopefully small, rodents rustling off into the leaves - there it was - just as I remembered, completely circular and black as glossy treacle.

A final push through an undergrowth of prickly Briar and Brambles and I was there, at the pool edge.

Illogically, and naggingly mindful of bottomless water holes, I knelt down cautiously on the ancient moss covered stonework bordering the pool -

I peered into the water.

My reflection peered back.

Not a bad looking guy I thought, tipping my head this way and that, admiring the view, and absently reaching a hand down to touch the water, my reflected hand reaching up.

Momentarily our fingers touched - my reflection and I - and my reflection wobbled as circles of ripples spread across the water.

It's a simple trick really,
like finger marking the hall mirror, mother would warn,
"touch fingers and change places."

Well of course I tried it - and nothing happened - I polished my finger marks off the mirror with a coat sleeve.

But the MOON POOL is different - very different. Mother thought I had become left handed out of some odd teenage affectation to spite the grown-ups.

And sometimes she would be looking at me as if she knew something was not quite as it should be - but the logic wouldn't fit. Maybe she just had the wrong dimension,

saying the pool was bottomless. Anyway I like it here in the bosom of the family - I like the sensations - I like the warmth of the sun - and the sounds, and the smells, and the taste of things.

And of course I always heed mother's warning to stay away from Barrow Crop Spinney and the MOON POOL.

And all those LEFT HANDED people - makes you think, doesn't it!

EPISODE

Illusions in melody,
Echoes of Vivaldi.
Choristers and orchestra
merge in harmony.
The tempo is set, for
piano and violin.
The flow is varied, first
steady, then swift - apace.
The warm rhythm flows
over me.
I relax into a deep sleep,
and dream of cool water
flowing, down-stream,
very deep and
very cold.

oooOooo

SNOW WHITE

(A play for the grandchildren)

Act 1

Prologue

Queen: Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who is the loveliest of all?
WHAT! Snow White my wretched step child,
I'll send her out into the wild.

Scene 1

Huntsman: The Queen ordered me to kill you dear,
But I don't want to have no fear.
So run away into the wood,
I think you'll meet Red Riding Hood.

Red R.H: Snow White you're fair as fair can be,
Can we be friends just you and me?

Snow W: Course we can but let's go from here
In case your wolf is still quite near.

Red R.H: Look there's a house, let's peep inside,
Chairs and tables is what she spied.

Snow W: How cute these seven cups and dishes,
Let's clean the place and make some wishes.

(Song of dwarves returning off stage)

Doc: Wow our home looks fantastic man;
These two have made it spick and span.

Grumpy: We didn't ask them to, so what,
What do you want you horrible lot?

Happy: Grumpy, how could you be so rude?
Let's offer our guests rest and food.

Snow W: Well thank you sir that is so kind,
We'll accept if you all don't mind.

Bashful: We'd really love to have you stay.

Sleepy: And cook and clean for us you may.

(All laugh)

Scene 2

Queen: Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is the loveliest of all?
So he tricked me, Snow White's not dead,
I'll have to see to it instead.
This poisoned apple looks so red,
She'll eat it all and then be dead. *(Cackles)*

Snow W: You poor old woman come and rest,
Yes, the red apple looks the best.

Queen: Ha, ha, she doesn't know that she
Will soon be dead and then we'll see
Who is the loveliest of all.
It'll be me the mirror will call.

Red R.H: Let's chop that apple up with mine
To make a pie that's oh so fine.

Dopey: That pie smells good, I wish I could
Eat it all, but no, share we should.

Sleepy: I feel so sleepy but what's new.

Sneezy: We all feel sleepy, a-a-choo!

(All fall asleep)

Act 2

Candlestick: Oh Beast now come and see this girl,
She'll set your thoughts into a whirl.

Beast: A beauty this girl is indeed,
Could she love me, that's what I need?

Teapot: Oh let her sip some of my tea
Its magic potion you will see.

Beast: Come my beauty and drink this tea,
Please let its magic work for me.

Snow W: My lips feel moist, what do I see,
A beast so ugly, oh dear me.

Beast: She wakes, my darling look at me.
I'm not what I appear to be.

Teapot: You tasted tea from my own pot,
Now would you like some more or not?

Candlestick: The tea is fine and so are you,
Look at the Beast despite the view.

Doc: Wake up fellas look who is here,
The gentle beast who knows no fear.

Bashful: A spell on him the witch did put,
That changed his head, his hand and foot.

Sneezy: Oh I remember that I do.
Do you, Happy? A-choo, a-choo.

Happy: Indeed I do, what a mishap.
To fall upon a lovely chap.

Snow W: Give me some tea then kiss me do.
I will marry you and I'll be true.

Doc: The prince has changed from beast to man.
For love can change us all, it can!

Red R.H: Oh what a happy end this is.
Snow White will live in perfect bliss.

THE END

SWANK ON A 'RUSTY' NAIL....

Marjorie Weston was a lady of a certain age and told people she was from a middle class, well to do family. Father was 'high up' in politics she often told complete strangers if they were listening. Recently widowed but already looking for another husband with a 'bob or two', Marjorie claimed that her deceased husband was 'mean' with his money and kept her on a tight leash for years. It was time she treated herself and had booked a few days away with her best friend, Hetty, in a hotel in Blackpool which was on the sea front and she was planning to see the illuminations and go on a 'spending spree'. Hetty thought this was typical of Marjorie who always thought she was better than anyone else but despite Marjorie's conversation and boasts about a 'spending spree' the truth was very different. Far from being able to spend her generous Widow's pension left to her by her deceased husband, she faced the future in grim financial circumstances and her misplaced 'snobbery' would require her to be more humble in the future.....

Hetty Granger was Marjorie Weston's best friend (Hetty muttered that she was Marjorie's ONLY friend!) and had purchased a bright yellow coat, a new hat, matching shoes and handbag from the Provident for the trip and a new nightie for her stay in their digs. Marjorie scolded Hetty for calling their accommodation digs and barked it is a Guest House. 'Bloody lardy dah' thought Hetty. Marjorie sensing Hetty was a bit put out by her comments said how pretty Hetty looked in her new clothes (but under her breath Marjorie said she looked like a Canary in a bird cage) - best friends indeed....

In 1960 going to Blackpool from Birmingham to see the lights would be an all day journey (no motorway then) and you certainly couldn't afford to stay overnight let alone for two nights. In those days coaches would be called 'Charabancs' and a far cry from the air-conditioned, on-board toilets and state of the art facilities you get nowadays (mini televisions are now mounted on each passenger seat and Wi-Fi is installed for those who wanted to use their mobiles/laptops) with a dedicated Hostess serving hot drinks, alcohol and snacks on tap throughout the entire journey. I doubt that the charabanc Marjorie and Hetty were travelling on had any such facilities and the driver told them prior to setting off that he would have to stop at various places along the way if any passenger needed to 'spend a penny' as Marjorie put it. Hetty called it 'stopping for a tinkle' much to Marjorie's disgust.

At 6am Marjorie caught the number 914 bus to get to Digbeth Coach Station where she was meeting her friend, Hetty. The bus journey proved to be a traumatic affair for Marjorie. The people that got on looked very suspicious (Marjorie was suspicious of anyone without her so called 'posh' status) and she told everyone that would listen that her Chauffeur, Alfred had been taken ill that morning, she couldn't drive so her husband's Daimler was sitting in the garage hence why she needed to travel by bus. One seedy looking character with a large tattoo on his neck asked Marjorie why she hadn't booked a taxi given her obvious wealth.

Marjorie lied and said she couldn't book a taxi as her home telephone was disconnected. She was relocating to a larger house now that her husband had passed away and left her comfortably well off. With that she got a book out

of her bag and started to read. No-one noticed that it was a council house rent book.

When Marjorie reached Digbeth Coach Station the sight of the charabanc was a complete shock. In the brochure it described the coach to be 'state of the art' transport that would provide a thrilling experience for the discerning traveller. 'My backside' Marjorie muttered to herself. How can ripped seats, dirty ashtrays and grimy windows be described as a thrilling experience and with that she fainted. The driver who had a 'fag' hanging from his mouth and his clothes smelt of fish told Marjorie to 'put her head between her legs' if she felt 'queer' which sent Marjorie into another fainting fit. Thankfully when Hetty arrived she pushed Marjorie up the steps of the charabanc and insisted that they sit behind the driver so that they could get off first if she felt faint or when they stopped on the way for the obligatory 'tinkle' as Hetty called it. Marjorie ignored Hetty.

As soon as they were settled in their chosen seats Hetty prodded Marjorie and said in a loud voice "Marge are you ok?" "For goodness sake stop calling me Marge it sounds so very working class, my father would turn in his grave if he heard you." "Sorry MARGE (Hetty emphasised the words to irritate Marjorie) it's just that my new shoes are killing me and I can't think straight, have you got the hip flask I could 'murder' a drink."

The journey started after the driver called Sid, who was holding a clipboard, shouted out passenger's names and when you acknowledged that was your name ticked you off his list. At the same time he 'talked' the passengers through the T's & C's as he called it. Basically this was providing a free 'chilled' drink and a packet of Smith's

crisps included in the fare. Judging by the absence of a chill cabinet the 'chilled' element was a plastic box filled with water and ice cubes. Quite how the driver kept the drinks chilled with this method with no air con amused Hetty but it infuriated Marjorie.

"Marjorie you need to learn to chill." (Hetty's tongue in cheek comment was completely lost on Marjorie.)

Marjorie asked the driver in a high pitched voice "in the brochure it stated this was supposed to be a 'state of the art' experience for the discerning traveller and it included in the price of the trip a dedicated Hostess who would serve free drinks and snacks on tap." The driver said in a tone that offended Marjorie but amused Hetty (it transpires that Hetty was chatted up by the driver when Marjorie was napping and given free drinks and cigarettes) "Hey Lady you are beginning to get on my nerves with your moaning. The so-called hostess is me so you are stuck with it. Lie back and enjoy the ride."

Under his breath the driver cursed Marjorie and thought she was going to be trouble. So to pacify her he offered her another free drink to compensate which prompted moans from other passengers. Anything to keep the 'old bag' happy he muttered. Hetty thought Marjorie was being unreasonable as usual and said so under her breath but unfortunately Marjorie overheard her and went into a sulk. For some reason Marjorie wanted to keep Hetty sweet so pretended to nap.

Hetty muttered "This journey is going to be a nightmare judging by Marjorie's long face" but she decided to ignore her and settled down to read her book. They had been on the charabanc by now for a couple of hours when the engine started to make a terrible grinding noise and there

was a smell of burning starting to permeate the front of the vehicle.

Hetty could see the dashboard and noticed that a warning sign was flashing red and shook Marjorie who was open-mouthed and snoring like a hog. (Hetty thought it was very unladylike and unattractive.) “Marjorie you need to rouse yourself my dear we seem to have an engine malfunction and there is a strong smell of burning.” Marjorie woke with a start with her arms flapping knocking Hetty's yellow hat flying. The driver had stopped the charabanc and opened the sliding doors to let the smoke out. Marjorie reminded the driver that opening doors and windows when there is a fire is dangerous. The driver was arguing with Marjorie just as Hetty's hat flew out onto the road and everyone watched a car drive over it. (Marjorie sniggered at this point and muttered it was a silly hat anyway.) Hetty burst into tears and told Marjorie in no certain terms that she was no real friend and if she was - she would offer to buy her a new one especially as she was always bragging about being well off.

Things were getting ugly when the driver shouted “everyone get off the coach quick I can see flames coming from the engine”

DEATH COMES TO TUDOR COURT

She's gone, our 98 year old Queen Bee

- due to be 99 October next.

Her life's ambition, score her century -
wherever she is now, she must be vexed.

"Sharp as a needle" everybody said.

Nothing and no-one here she did not know.

Immaculate, the smartly coiffured head,
blue shadowed eyelids, matching nails, just so.

Although healthwise she gently slid downhill,
determination stifled all complaint

She led the social scene, and would do still
did not the body fail, the spirit faint.

We saw her on her way to her repose.

Each wore as token one silk purple rose.

THE SECOND ONE

Can this be love that worries me this rainy, Midland
afternoon?

Just out of vision, out of reach, like a half-remembered
tune?

A month now since I sobbed my fill and tossed in sleepless,
barren bed.

Too soon to smile, and hope, and gaze upon this brown-
haired man instead.

I cannot fall in love right now, my heart still aches, the
tears still fall,

I do not want these small blue flowers, they do not speak
of love at all;

For love is wine on Balkan bills and opera and midnight
trains,

It is not mud and warm tea shops and spattered sleet on
window panes.

I couldn't see why it should end, we were so wild, so right,
so free,

On pine clad slopes where sun mocked time – September
through to January;

I wore red silk it was enough, his arm was all the warmth I
sought

As by the edges of the sand, foot by sun-tanned foot, we
walked.

Can this be love? The wind whipped hair, my cold hand
held, a quick grey glance?

It seems too cruel of love to press on me so soon a second
chance;

I long for sun, the scent of thyme, the wailing of a clarinet,
I am not ready for the change, I am not over this man yet.

He dropped gold ear-rings on my bed – a note – a ticket
for the train.

A break so sudden I ceased to feel; a long blank journey in
the rain.

I see his form in every crowd, that walk, those shoulders,
that black hair,

I cannot rid him from my mind, I seem to see him
everywhere.

This can't be love, all broken clouds and potted plants on
window sills,

And puddles in the market square and cold green sheaths
of daffodils;

The concert hall is warm and full, the orchestra begins to
tune,

I touch my ear-rings, sense his glance, he asks me 'Is it still
too soon?'

oooOooo

THE INFORMANT

I hated Joe when he was drinking, which was most days and nights nowadays. As the only one around, I was automatically the target of his anger and tried to stay as far from him as possible since my leg had been broken from a recent assault.

A knock at the door! Perhaps I would be rescued at last?

“Good evening, I’m trying to contact Jack Sharples. Have you seen him recently?”

This was a well-dressed gentleman who might be able to help me. I tried to cry out but my vocal chords must have been more damaged than I thought.

Almost appearing normal, Joe replied, “Sorry I can’t help you.” The lying hound, he knew exactly where Jack could be found.

I knew I had to try and get to the man at the door. This might be my last chance of getting help. So, ignoring the pain, I summoned all my remaining energy and limped as fast as I could towards the door, ducking past Joe, until I was outside.

Moving beyond the man at the door, I could see that there were three men in uniform hidden around the corner of the building. So I continued away from the house and persuaded them to follow me down to the bottom of the garden where Joe had been digging a couple of days ago. I don’t know if he knew that I’d seen him bury the sack late at night.

Of course, they weren’t stupid and soon found what I knew they’d find. They were generous with their praise for my efforts and soon made sure I was wrapped up

warmly in a blanket before arranging for medical attention.

Detective James Caldwell was just finishing off his report:

After Jack Sharples was reported missing, I despatched officers to check with his friends and all his associates.

His boss at work confirmed that all attempts to contact him for the last three days had drawn a blank. He was especially worried as Jack's last task, before he disappeared, had been to pick up the cash payroll from the bank.

I personally visited his registered address, taking three uniformed officers with me in case of trouble. We knew that Jack lived with his brother Joe and although Jack did not have a police record, his brother had a temper and a record of physical violence especially after drinking episodes.

The standard semi-detached house on Oak Tree Drive looked well-kept and similar to all the other properties in the street.

As I walked up the path to the front door, I signalled for my colleagues to remain out of sight, but within earshot in case of trouble. I hoped to find the missing man and recover the payroll.

A man answered the door. He didn't match a recent employment picture of Jack so I

concluded it must be his brother, Joe.

When asked if he had seen Jack Sharples recently, the man said he couldn't help. I was just about to show him my search warrant and call my colleagues when a poor limping creature shot past me and approached my men. Incapable of speech, he indicated that the men should follow him into the back garden. First, I called one officer to restrain Joe who was cursing and trying to leave the house, then I followed the others to find a newly dug section of flower bed.

Within thirty minutes a CSI squad arrived and found the body of Jack Sharples in a shallow grave. A subsequent search of the house found the missing payroll thrown into the back of a wardrobe.

As we took Joe Sharples into custody at the station, we passed the reception area where our informant was wrapped in a blanket awaiting transport for medical treatment.

Joe threw him a vicious glare and said, "You stupid three-legged mutt, I should have killed you at the same time!"

oooOooo

TOGETHERNESS

Despite it being a night with three full moons, the dim light just accentuated the dark shadows surrounding the valleys and mountains which could be seen from the observatory on Herat. The choking atmosphere and rough terrain outside threw a menacing cloak of danger around the large city of residents who lived within the life-saving bubbles of strong polymer.

Moonlight should be so romantic. Jack turned away from the window. Yes, he had made up his mind - he would put the question.

Did Jill know how he felt and would she agree?

He found Jill in the Library and persuaded her to join him in the hydroponic gardens, one of the outermost research laboratories of the colony.

As they walked there, hand in hand, he outlined his proposal and found surprisingly that she had been thinking along the same lines. They had only met a few months ago and he knew that neither of their families would be happy with their decision.

They entered the airlock. Removing their special outer garments and miniature breathing aids, it took only a minute for pressures to equalise and then they could walk free onto the planet's surface.

Unfettered by Earth technology and climate control suits, Jack and Jill ran towards the welcoming hills. Under the brilliant orange and red sky of suns-rise they would fulfil their destiny as true settlers, biologically engineered over three generations to populate this new world.

oooOooo

A POTENTIAL PERFECT DAY

As a sunny summer's day dawns fair,
Groom stylish from shoes to hair
Before family and friends with pride,
Weds his beloved, bonnie bride.

Reception guests take motorway drive
Quickly, safely to arrive.
Ancient castle decked out so smartly
Awaiting the bridal party.

In colourful carriage, joyful pair
Start for castle's festive fare.
Small lanes they selected happily;
But potholes spell calamity.

Horses stumble, wheels shatter and break.
Bride, groom suffer shake and ache.
Willing hero, off the beaten track
Picks them up, transports them back.

Friends fretfully wait and little knew.
Cheers sound. Rumbling into view,
Covered in hay, the couple emerge.
Crowds fall quiet, then forward surge.

Quickly people part, the pair pass through.
The smell of dung so strong - phew!
Special clothing for this special day.
Dusty, dirty all from hay!

The gawping guests gasp, some even pray
“Dispel distress, far away.”
New party clothes and urgent showers,
Perfume, sweet smelling flowers.

Cheerful celebrations can progress,
Food and music scatter stress.
Be prepared for best made plans to fail
Is the moral of this tale.

oooOooo

THE TALES OF A 'SO-CALLED' ACTRESS

Now my hobby is people. I collect people so when I sat next to this very interesting-looking man on the train dressed in a bright yellow, I mean canary yellow suit with matching hat I found myself striking up a conversation with him.

"You look an interesting person." I said.

"Hello" he said turning to face me.

"Hello" I said, "what do you do?"

He said, "I am in films."

I said, "Are you working on a film now?"

"As matter of fact, yes I am" and started telling me about this project that he is involved in making videos for the overseas market, mainly targeting Holland and Germany.

I said "Are you the Producer?" He said "no but I am on the production side, my name is Henry.

"That's a nice name, mine's Marbella." (It's Mary really but it sounded more glamorous.)

He said "Are you an actress?"

I said, "As a matter of fact I am."

Henry got up to go "I need to make a phone call but don't move I will be back."

In the meantime I sat twiddling my thumbs for what seemed a long time. My background was in catering not films and I was going to have to come up with a plausible story to convince Henry I was an actress? I was just about to go when he returned. His face was bright red and he

had a broad grin on his face. "Fancy a drink" he said. "What's your tippie?"

I asked for a Martini with ice and a cocktail cherry. (I normally drink Gin and Bitter Lemon but I thought a Martini gave me an air of sophistication.)

When Henry returned with our drinks, he said that it transpires the Producer, Tony, is seeing replacement actresses for the video the very next day at an address in West London. "I am based in Ealing where's your stomping ground?"

I said, "Bromley for my sins."

He said "That's far away. Why not bed down at my place?"

I said, "Thank you kind sir but I didn't arrive on a banana boat yesterday."

Henry said with an indignant look on his face "Excuse me I have a son studying hotel management and a daughter with one kidney. Besides, I've got my sister-in-law staying with me. She's come up for the Ideal Home Exhibition." When we got back to his flat there was no sign of his sister-in-law. She was probably still traipsing round Olympia.

I felt nervous and suddenly the penny began to drop when I saw his tattoo. My experience of tattoos is that they are generally confined to the lower echelons of society and when I saw some of the photographs with women wearing next to nothing lying on the grubby floor - my mind was made up...I will go back to catering!

oooOooo

ARE YOU AN ACTRESS?

Are you an actress – Henry asked me?
Now my hobby is people – especially men.
Henry was very different to other men
He wore a big medallion and a gold diamond ring
That dangled like onions on a piece of string
His hairy chest sprouting dark hairs like coiled springs.
Now Tony was in films and video making in Germany
His looks were undeniable but his morals, an uncertainty
Are you by chance an actress?
Now there's a coincidence it seemed
I am on familiar ground it does seem to mean....

OWL

A noble bird this feathered fowl,
the scourge of many a rodent's prowl,
its lightening dive few can survive,
but one of those to stay alive
did call upon a boxing hare
to punch the owl's all seeing stare.
But hare as mad as tales foretell
fell for the owl's bewitching spell.
Now the owl, and the pussy cat's strange affair,
has nothing on that, with the mad march hare.

THE SPECIAL STAR

My first walk on Mars, an air of mystique
Spacesuit on, airlock, excitement and fear.
An alien landscape, waterless, bleak
Desolate, rust red, horizon unclear.
The small sun was pale in the dark blue sky
In its weak light the stars shone clear and
bold.
Steady, unblinking and sharp to the eye
Familiar constellations of old.
But my gaze was drawn to the brightest star
Vivid blue in the cloudless Martian skies.
It was our home, the Earth seen from afar
Where humanity lives, loves, hates and dies.
A shining star, as few have seen the Earth
That special star, the planet of my birth.

oooOooo

A CAUTIONARY CHRISTMAS STORY

Oh gather round ye good folk all
And hear the tale of what did befall
Some sorry, sad Christmas time in days of yore
That hurtled some, and left in sorrow more.
There dwelt in those days, another time long gone,
A widowed lady who by her by his sword
Her husband did acquire great tracts of land
And o'er each appoint one young squire.
And so from her strong stone hall
She summoned her squires and all,
From the utmost reaches of her land,
And others close at hand,
To celebrate sweet Christmas in custom grand.
By God's truth you would not believe the Christmas fare
provided,
And none derided by those decided
To make their presence there.
Meats of goose and beef, venison and swine,
With drink of ale, mead and wine.
With such smells from gargantuan portion,
Our dear squires were not constrained by caution,
But grabbed and stuffed themselves in unseemly haste,
So not to miss the taste of every morsel.
The drinks they quaffed in gulps immense
And made no pretence of calm restraint,
Until with bellies well, full rounded,
Mother Nature them all confounded,
By sending them to rest in sleep,
And in slumber keep their greed confined.

Though sleep came as a friend,
There was no end of unseemly sound
That rebounded strong farts, belches, belly rumbles for
hours long,
So did each express the sour stench of excess.
Then, when all in deep unsweet repose
Came from the fire an ember glowing,
Which emblazed the rush-mat, no one knowing,
Until too late the very hall became with fire fierce
And all with burns and smoke consumed.
So fire unbridled and uncouth
Extinguished the vestiges of comely youth;
Save for the one who lived to tell this tragic gory Christmas
story.
So one and all take the moral of this tale to heart.
Shun excess and greed and tender to the need,
This Christmas holy of the poor and humble lowly.

oooOooo

THE ARRIVAL

The baby was lying serenely, in an enormous carry-cot, watched over by her two year old sister. Their mother, tired and harassed after a long journey, was negotiating her way, anxiously, through a sea of customs officers, all eagerly searching the contents of the suitcases. In the distance, a man waiting expectantly in the arrivals lounge peered through the glass trying to catch a first glimpse of his young family.

At last, the customs officers waived the lady on her way.

A porter appeared from nowhere and gathered up their cases. The mother bent down and grasped the carry-cot in one hand and her elder daughter's hand in the other: together they walked through into the arrivals hall.

People were milling around, some arriving at the check-in desks and shouting across to each other, others calling for taxis to take them home. The floor was completely covered with huge bundles of all shapes and sizes: belongings were wrapped in large brightly coloured squares of cloth with all four corners gathered together into a tight knot on top.

Suddenly, the young girl saw her father standing at the end of the barricade and ran full pelt into his arms. Her mother followed more sedately, embraced her husband, and then proudly held out the carry-cot.

He peered inside and his face expressed sheer joy and tenderness as he looked down on his younger daughter for the very first time. Lifting her out of the carry-cot, his smile broadened as he saw what lay beneath the blankets.

THE LOST PHRASE

Seated one day at my lap-top, I was weary
and ill at ease,
And my fingers were hovering idly over the
silent keys.

I knew not what I was writing, or what I was
dreaming then,
But I wrote a phrase so lyrical it could have
been Shakespeare's pen.

It lit up the screen of my lap-top, like an
inspired flashing of light,
It woke up my stultified person with tremors
of great delight,
It linked all the words I had chosen and
moulded to one perfect piece,
Then flickered away into darkness, as if it
were loath to cease;

I have sought but I seek it vainly, for as I
greatly had feared,
I stupidly hit the wrong button and the whole
bloody lot disappeared.
It may be that Dell will disgorge it, or the
passage of time ease my pain,
Or it may be that in Sage's pages, I will find
my lost phrase once again.

oooOooo

SMILING THROUGH

Knowing that smiling is good for lowering blood pressure and minimising wrinkles (although that's a bit late for me) the resolution THIS year was to SMILE; whatever happened. So, that's how New Year's Day began: full of smiling optimism.

Anticipating a happy day, I leaped out of bed giving myself a broad grin in the mirror. The absurdity of this made me trip light-heartedly down the stairs.....literally.....because I fell over my sleeping cat. Nursing injured limbs, I forced a smile. "A test", I thought, "rehearsing for future mishaps". Just as well I did. Incidents which followed would challenge the Cheshire Cat.

The phone rang; a neighbour, fond of using me as a sounding board, had a tale of woe. "You sound cheerful!" she said accusingly as I reassured her. "Oh, it's my year for smiling!" I replied, feeling foolish. I couldn't decide if the silence the other end was disbelief or disapproval. I cut the call short. I practised smiling all day as I burned the toast, smashed a cup, laddered my tights, saw the gale had demolished fencing and failed to contact family by phone. I was a positive smiling saint.

Stuck in traffic jams while driving to see a friend, I smiled patiently and benignly at drivers similarly jammed in the opposite direction. I was rewarded with frozen stares. Clearly, people hadn't heard about smiling. Undaunted, I grinned on.

When it came to leave my friend (who, incidentally, had regarded my smiling with a mixture of pity and puzzlement) it had grown dark. Misjudging the exit, I

walked cheerfully into a low brick wall, hurtled over and landed flat on my face.

Not even I could smile at the resulting sight of blood, and blackened brows.....I've resolved not to make any resolutions next year.

ASTRONAUTS

A party of astronauts went to the Moon.

A party of astronauts from the Earth's womb.

Their mission, called Apollo.

With insight, a vision of tomorrow.

They left planet Earth.

The place of their birth.

Mission control, the only voice.

Step on the Moon, the only choice.

Such adventure for mankind.

For new worlds they would find.

To outer planets, another day.

A dangerous journey, some would say.

oooOooo

I AM NOTHING

I was introduced to you when you started school. You hardly took any notice of me until you had progressed through to middle school and onward to higher education.

After that first introduction I never left your side. As you stepped onto the higher rungs of your schooling ladder the significance of my presence dawned on you. It was agony when you could not demystify me; it was ecstasy when you really saw me as I was. You were excited when you understood my strength.

I have innumerable friends and I am very seldom without their company. Thanks to you, you bring us together. My friends like their own company but when you put me and my friends together, I like it. My friends are important in their own right but when you place me with them our collective value gets enhanced, although sometimes my close proximity can reduce the value too. When you place me with my friends I can move and shift my position; my friends and I often interchange our positions – there is an element of sacrifice in our juxtaposition. On my own I am nothing.

With your help my countless friends and I, whenever the need arises, can replicate ourselves however many times necessary and continue to exist together. We get on fine. However at times you will need to place me with my friends and replicates with a link between us to see our true value. I need this point, this link to give credence to our existence as desired by you. This link, a mere dot amongst my friends and me lends vital significance for you and our existence. I am nothing without them.

As you move forward in life, I am sure you have learnt to appreciate me, my importance, and my strength. And yet I am nothing on my own.

Oh I see you are delightfully dabbling with your laptop or is it your iPad or could it be your smart cellular phone?

Whatever it is, you would be amazed to know that I and my best friend one and only one, by cohabitating singly and as replicates made us a very powerful fundamental entity without which the technically advanced world you know today would have taken a very, very long time to be created.

I wonder if you know that I was born in India.

You know my value now. I am important and yet I am nothing on my own.

I am Zero.

oooOooo

THE OFFICE

With walls stout, windows high,
The only view the changing sky,
Strong wooden door,
Linoleum covered floor,
Trod and trod through the years,
By many a score set,
On work clerical, methodical,
High desks with stools provided,
Frequently cursed and chided, with loathing
For splinter damage to
Personal clothing.
Ledgers entered a pall
Of woodbine smoke
The occasional chuckle
At a silly joke.
On cold, dog, dark, winter days
The cast iron stove with
Cheery warmth ablaze
While light from gas lamps
Illuminates softly the old
Office room - banishing the
Dreary grey of pervading gloom.

4.30pm, work not so consuming

Now as

The last hour wends its

Way to mark the end of the day.

Balance sheets cast, dockets spiked,

Ledgers closed; put away.

From desk remnants of a lunch time break

Wrapping paper, orange peel, unfinished cake,

Dumped in the office bin

Lights turned off - save one

Door shut - all gone.

oooOooo

MORNING MARKET

For parts of our year we base ourselves in Brittany, inland in rural France.

Of late our habit on Thursday mornings in summer is to visit a town about twenty clicks south east of us. Our turnabout through the lanes of its weekly market brings gentle pleasures. These have amplified as familiarity with the vendors has grown. In any category of trade there is strong competition. Our shopping principle is simple. If we enjoy what we buy first time then we stick with the stall. Not that we are big spenders, mainly in the market for whatever fruit is in season, for fresh goat's cheese, and for olives and tapenades. We miss our favourites when they have not turned out. Not just those that we buy from, regularly or occasionally, but all whose commerce animates our Thursday morning.

Not that we are early birds.

Sometime in the hour before noon we'll roll into the market, emerging off the end of the route taken from wherever we've managed to park up. After about an hour, as the market is beginning to wind up, we've generally made our purchases and turn to thinking about lunch. There's a bakery a little distance away from one end of the market. An established favourite, it's been our last call, so that we get the freshest bread to go with the rest of our picnic. There's often a queue.

On the second or maybe third Thursday back in July, as my place shuffles me in from the street, I am casually casting an eye over the wall litter when I notice details of various sandwich deals. I emerge with a pair of nicely filled baguettes, two new brand non-alcoholic beers with an

extra refreshing citron twist, and a couple of light sugared pastries for dessert.

“Okay!” she says, smiling. “Good idea. Where shall we eat?”

I’ve come back across the street, to join her at the bench she is sat alongside, in the shade under the trees by the memorial to the fallen. We push back more easily across the thinning market place, and turn right into the head of the main street along which the market extends as far as the ancient church. On the left just beyond the town hall there is a small cobbled square, set back from the street, bounded by raised flower beds. It sports two opposing benches. Both are free at the moment we pull up. We choose the one fixed between two of those broad leaf trees that repel flying nasties of all descriptions. It also offers a good view of the street and its old timber and stone buildings. Fine houses back in their heyday, character shops and assorted hostelrys now. I sit mid bench, set lunch out to my right and within her easy reach.

We munch and crunch. Slake our thirst. Watch the market rewind, packing back into the traders’ transports.

The rhythm of closure fascinates. There is nothing random about the sequences in which each and every item of stock is picked off the stall to be disappeared into its appointed place in the dealer’s van. Next it’s the folding tables turn to be taken in. Then the dropped parasols are dismantled. Finally the heavy weather counter weights get wedged in their spaces, low to the floor inside the sliding side door. Final check that nothing is forgotten, farewells called out to those still tidying away, ignition keys turn and with a bumping down of tyres from curbs they’re off.

Ten minutes to one o'clock there is a market. Ten minutes after the hour it is gone.

As the market has gone so the flow of pedestrians has fallen steadily away. Of the many fewer people in the street most are taking drinks and maybe food, seated at outside tables that have reclaimed the morning's market spaces. Quiet is also blooming into the afternoon, where the loud of the morning's trading has been. As we come to the end of our picnic the municipal cleaning crew sweep through. In their wake a long wheelbase courier glides to a stop outside the closed florists, behind the bench across from us. A consignment of neatly boxed flowers is lifted from the back of the van by the uniformed driver, and stacked on the pavement. A shop door opens and the delivery is taken in and signed for. Less than five minutes before it couldn't have happened. The blue battered van that just went out past us was parked baulk to the courier's access.

The detritus of our lunch posted into the adjacent street bin, we opt to cross the street for coffee.

The café is no longer busy, and we have our pick of al fresco tables. It is not uninteresting to take a view from the other side of the street, continuing to chat and people watch. Towards two o'clock the street begins to come a little more alive in readiness for the afternoon's business. We think we recognise the man who walks towards us and into the café. After ten minutes, at five minutes to two, he steps back out and crosses the street readying to open up. He runs the shop that sells all manner of requisites for hunting, fishing and shooting. We had recognised him, from when I had once been looking for a folding picnic knife.

It happened that we went to the market on the two Thursdays following, across the end of July and into August.

We chose variations on the same lunch theme, trying differently filled baguettes and dessert pastries from the bakery. We stuck with the same canned drinks. They were good. Luck had it that our bench under the broad leaf trees, which we think they must pollard every autumn, was available to us each time. Twice more we sat, enjoyed our picnic refreshments, and observed a precision performance. Nothing to do with any choreographer, the market magically vanishing before our eyes was a choreographic treat, on a par of a kind with watching Swan Lake at the Bolshoi. Everything and everyone moved to the same rhythm, in the same sequences, to the same effect. Vendors brought their stalls down, pedestrians dwindled, market vans departed, cleaners brushed by, the flower courier delivered, we moved across the street to take coffee, and the field sports shop opened as the town hall clock marked two.

For part of next summer we expect to be based in Brittany again, exploring out fresh ways to expend our time there. We'll look forward to the Thursday morning market, to taking a leisurely lunch as it winds down, and perhaps to accompanying our watching by listening with earphones to the rhythm of the repeating themes of Ravel's Bolero. Maybe we'll even experiment with closing our eyes on the market scene a little before one and opening them, to the anticipated sight of no market, as Bolero climbs to its closing climax a few minutes past the hour.

oooOooo

INCLINED TO FAIL

“Do not worry,” said father. “This car will have no trouble climbing Porlock.” We both sat still but looked at each other with doubts expressed in our faces. Gradually the car moved to the bottom of the hill and began the steep curving ascent. Was it our imagination, my younger sister and I, or was the car beginning to move more slowly? Evidently we were right for just after a few more yards the car stopped. Father applied the brake and placed the vehicle in first gear.

“I believe we can still reach the top” said father, “but we must remove the luggage from the rack to make the car lighter. After all, both cases together weigh almost ten stone. So, my plan is to remove the luggage, leave it at the side of the road, take you three up to where the hill levels out, and leave you there for a few minutes while I drive down for the cases. Once we're on a flat surface we will have no further trouble on our journey. Simple!”

On saying this he quickly left his seat and began unstrapping the luggage from the rack at the rear. Unfortunately gravity, which had been a real assistance when he was loading the suitcases onto a level horizontal surface, was not so obliging when father undid the restraining straps, for no sooner had he done so when the cases slid off onto the road. One, the more robust, remained firmly closed when it hit the road, but the other immediately sprang open and disgorged its contents.

Straightway father began picking up all the items as quickly as he possibly could but he was hampered by a strong, stiff breeze which suddenly sprang up and began blowing handkerchiefs, shirts, knickers, socks and

underpants in all directions. Father really tried but soon realised his task was hopeless, which did nothing for his temper. So instead of trying to pick up the items he vented his ire by running around kicking any garment he could reach in any direction.

Mother was silent with rage and disgust. We could hardly contain our laughter. Eventually father regained his composure, stacked the full and empty cases at the side of the road, took his place in the car and thankfully, drove to the summit of Porlock Hill where on a convenient lay-by he was able to leave the three of us while he returned for the suitcases. On his return we took our places in the car, whereupon mother looked at father and said "Satisfied?" which managed to convey all her pent up anger, scorn and contempt. Father looked fixedly at the road ahead and drove.

For several summers afterwards we spent our holidays in Norfolk.

oooOooo

GRANSHA

Do you find that the older you get, the past becomes more vivid? Must be over sixty years since I last saw him, yet, I see him clearly....my grandfather, Gransha....retired from the mine (not that he worked underground mind; he was a check-weigher, a superior job - he worked 'on top' see).

Where was I? Oh yes! Here's Gransha, unshaven, tap-tapping down the garden path in his metal toe-capped boots, his gardening gear baggy trousers, battered hat and bedraggled old jacket; here is an intelligent man, mostly self-educated, politically perceptive, who enjoys music and solving maths problems (for FUN!) looking more like a vagrant.

After retiring, the garden was his passion: neat rows of vegetables, a greenhouse and chickens replaced the trucks of shining coals of his old life.

"Come on!" he'd say to me as a child. "Got to get some tomatoes for Gran." (Never mind that he'd given Gran an abundance yesterday.) He wanted to show them off to me.

"Smell those!" he'd say, opening the greenhouse door. The dry, warm air rushed to meet us with that pervading, pungent smell of ready-ripe tomatoes.

Then – "Come on!" he'd repeat, "we must feed the hens." With tomatoes, a bucket of water and another for food, we staggered to where his feathered friends lived in an open-plan home, roaming free behind wire-mesh. Hens, hens, hens everywhere. Into a hen-house; "see if there's any eggs" he'd say, egging me on to put my hand in an empty nest. Seeing small eyes glistening in the blackness

nearby my trembling hand expected some unseen monster to grab it, but no....warm brown eggs usually (always BROWN).

Gardening, a meal over, meant relaxing with his pipe, involving constant striking of matches and sucking of pipe-stem until a delicious aroma filled the kitchen. Wet days, perhaps a tune on his fiddle and a jig in his tap-tap boots on the stone floor watched by his dog, Caruso, a replica of His Master's Voice and named after the famous tenor. Why? When the colliery hooter went, Caruso made high pitched howls; Gransha thought he had a fine tenor voice too. But he teased Caruso mercilessly; Caruso hated wasps, Gransha would make slow buzzing soundszzzzzzzz, driving the poor dog demented as he pursued the unseen insect. How he made us laugh!

Do you know? I didn't realise until now how much I loved him.

RAISED BED

Solent sound,
Water lapping,
The ship is raised from
seabed silt.
For almost 500 years she lay there,
after sinking on only
her second naval engagement.
Henry VIII's famous flagship -
'Mary Rose'.

oooOooo

REGENERATION

Plant me in the cool earth,
the brown earth, teeming with
unseen life. There I shall sleep,
happy at last to be nursed by Nature,
cradled in the sweet, sweet smell of the soil.

Stone shall not cover me or
weigh on my heart. But a
tree will grow;
stretching high to heaven above its branches of breaking
buds in Spring;
a haven for birds.

Their quavers shall my music be
to which I'll listen; hungry for the
sounds I love.

There too will the wind weave through
willowy limbs,
the silence broken by native sounds.

Summer's blue skies will chink through laced-leaves
while the Sun's kiss warms my bed.

In the fall of the year, rainbow leaves
will screen my sanctuary

and, at its end, fingers of filigree,
virgin-white, shall shroud my site.

So, embraced by its roots, my body
gives back the life it has had.
It shall join in the unending cycle,
the song of the earth, its miraculous mystery,

and I shall be part of that unseen world,
cradled in the sweet, sweet smell of the soil.

SIX BALDING EX-BATTERY CHICKENS

“Chickens?” Thrusting her head back in shock, Grace’s chin retracted into her plump, white neck.

“Yes! Six balding ex-battery chickens!”

“Never!” Ironically at that very moment she actually resembled a rather overfed, overweight chicken herself, causing Flora to snort hysterically between her tears. Grace, puzzled by this confusing behaviour, cocked her head on one side, appearing even more gallinaceous.

Flora, regaining some composure, blew her nose and flumped down on the kitchen chair.

“Sorry, but, I’m absolutely furious with Will. We had a real bust-up over this and then he buggered off to his fancy woman at the pub and never came home.”

Then, pulling on her paint-spattered wellies, Flora led Grace through the nettle and dandelion infested garden. Skirting the sodden sheets that had hung there for the past two days she navigated the way through mountains of Will’s “might come in useful” rubbish. He’d certainly put

some work into constructing the enclosure and coup and, it had to be said, made use of a little of this substantial pile of proposed recycling. When he'd asked her what she would like for her fiftieth birthday hadn't she suggested a garden make-over and, maybe, a bit of company occasionally? The first suggestion, she knew, was a no hoper as she'd been unsuccessfully dropping out hints for the past two years. As for the second suggestion - well, it was obvious he would just treat it as a sarcastic remark.

Flora had spent the previous day visiting her mother, returning late to a cold, empty house. No birthday meal, no present or card on the table, and no Will. That was, until he'd burst in from the garden, all mud and sawdust.

"Have you forgotten something?" she'd sulked. "Where's my present then?"

"Follow me." He'd led the way outside. And then it had all kicked off.

As a result Flora had spent the night of her fiftieth birthday alone in the cold, dark, room, curled up on the sofa still wearing her coat, and downing Chardonnay straight from the bottle.

"You and Will can enjoy this with your meal tonight, love," her mother had said as she'd waved her daughter off.

After the row Will had taken himself to the Cock Inn - and never came back home.

"Ungrateful cow!" he'd spluttered into his beer.

"I don't like chickens" Mel had told him, as she rested her ample bosom on the bar, whilst mopping up the beer spills. "I'm allergic to feathers anyway."

At the bottom of the dark, damp garden six, scrawny, sad-eyed chickens huddled together in the corner of their new home. Grace shook her head. "Just look at the poor things!"

Flora, pale-faced and red-eyed, hair bedraggled and wet from the rain, clutched the top of the wire fencing with thin, boney fingers, then slowly opened the bag of special chicken feed that she'd discovered that morning on the bedside table next to the unslept-in bed. "Hope you like your pressie. Something to keep you company!" Will had scrawled across the envelope of the accompanying card.

Grace shook her head again. "They just need some love."

Tossing a fistful of the contents towards her miserable-looking dependants, Flora exhaled one long, exasperated sigh. "Tell me about it."

oooOooo

ENCLOSURE

The smooth grey pebble was still warm from the heat of the day's sun. As warm as a newly found gull's egg. Al opened his fist and let it drop into the incoming tide. There was rain in the air.

When he reached the cottage, Mollie was hurriedly unpegging the washing from the line.

"You've been a long time."

He shrugged. "I know."

She glanced towards her husband as she folded the sheets. "Let's get inside. Shut the door, will you. The rain's coming in."

Tomorrow they'd be heading across the border on their way home again, tanned and relaxed from their holiday in the sun and salt air. It was just as it always had been. Mollie engrossed in her books or working in the garden, leaving Al to his fishing and explorations around his old childhood home.

Life had changed so much since Angus's sudden death, just before his ninth birthday. Unlike Mollie, Al had found it hard to grieve. He was a strong, no-nonsense man, an ex-paratrooper, who'd seen and done things that had hardened his outlook on life, turning him distrustful and cynical.

After the accident Mollie had watched him clam up completely. He'd lost his fire, his enthusiasm. His broad shoulders hunched. Almost overnight the coarse sandy hair had turned white and his face become etched with contour lines. He'd never said much about his military

days. He never talked at all about this far more harrowing experience.

Al closed the door against the incoming storm. "They'll be turning up in a few days' time. Look what I've started."

Mollie passed him a mug of tea. "It's so exciting. You must be delighted."

"Well, I am," he replied "but I still think I'm about to lose something. Something a little bit secret, from my childhood."

At the beginning of the week Al had gone to the bay to root about in the remains of the old village again. Nothing ever changed much. Just the brambles growing more thickly than ever. Past the roofless schoolhouse an overgrown path took him to a small rise where the enclosure was now completely engulfed in bracken. It had been almost free of vegetation all those years ago. Leaning against the huge stone blocks he'd closed his eyes for a while.

Because he was only six, Jimmy Murdo had always been left behind to get the driftwood fire going, leaving his older brother Donald and Al to climb the cliffs, looking for gulls' eggs. They'd cook them in a tin, kept stored in a gap in the wall. The Murdos always brought home-made bread or biscuits and Al supplied the lemonade and sometimes raspberries or apples from the garden.

Recalling the fishy taste of the eggs and the smell of the smoky fire, there was a deep emptiness in his heart, both for the loss of his childhood but more for that of his child. "I wish you were here with me Angus!" he had cried into the wind. "I could tell about my adventures when I was your age. I could show you so much."

“It’s got me wondering, Mollie” Al announced during their meal that same evening. “What exactly was it? I never gave it a thought when I was a kid?”

“Probably a sheep pen.”

“No. It’s too well constructed.”

A few days earlier they’d driven to the nearest library looking for books on the early history of the local coastline. The assistant had suggested the usual titles, those they’d already read, and most of which they’d stored on the overcrowded shelves back at the cottage. The assistant looked across at a woman, busy working at a desk under the window. “Hang on! I’ll ask Jen. She’s an archaeologist, doing some research here on the area.”

When Al had described the structure to the young woman, she’d become quite animated. On her suggestion he’d agreed to take photos and to return with them the following day, which he did.

Jen had held the small screen close to her face. This looks quite remarkable, what I can see under all the greenery. If it’s what I think it is, I didn’t know there was one this far south. It’s not recorded. Can I download these to my computer while you are here? And do you mind leaving your details and I’ll ring you in the morning?”

Mollie put the key under the mat before they finally set off home. There were clean sheets on the beds, the fridge and kitchen cupboards were restocked with essentials all ready for Jen and a colleague, who were due to arrive at the cottage a few days later. It seemed a sensible arrangement, as they would need to clear most of the bracken away from the enclosure, before they could even start to investigate the site fully.

As they drove away Al resisted the temptation to glance back at the cottage and the little bay. The car wound its way down the narrow lane past the farm, until the familiar view was hidden by the wind-wracked trees lining the coastal road. Mollie respected his silence.

Once across the border, they pulled into a motorway cafe. Mollie leant across the table and took Al's hand. "Have you ever thought of getting in touch with the Murdo brothers again?"

"Not really. They moved to Whithorn years ago. Bought a farm over there."

She knew how much he'd tried to block out those memories of his happy childhood because of what had happened to Angus. "Let's look them up when we get home. They should hear about your old den."

The Murdos took some finding. Al played little part in the search, but Mollie persevered until, within the fortnight, she was able to hand over their phone number to her husband. "There! You do it. You're their friend."

"Was their friend," corrected Al.

"Come on! It's not that difficult." She watched him hesitantly pick up the phone, before leaving the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

It was Jimmy who answered. He was puzzled at first by Al's slightly anglicised accent and faltering delivery. "My God! It is you! My God! It must be all of forty years since you left to get married. Wait 'til I tell Donald. He's in the milking shed. He's still a bachelor you know. I expect you heard I married a girl from Port Logan - Eliza. We've got two lads - Dougie 12 and Fergus 14.

A month later, Mollie waved her husband off, on his return visit to the cottage where he was to be joined for the weekend by the Murdo brothers and Jimmy's two sons. A full team of archaeologists had already set up camp in the neighbouring field and begun working on the newly confirmed iron-age broch. There were to be some preliminary excavations around the enclosure, and the plan was to clear away all the undergrowth, and eventually to restore the huge stone structure to its former glory.

Mollie watched the car disappearing down the road.....with great hopes for the restoration of her husband's spirits.

SUTTON OWLFIELD

(A Sonnet)

The Owls in Royal Sutton what a hoot,
A competition for children at school
Community centres and others to boot.
A creative project without a tool,
Just imagination that's all it took.
Some at Grace Church Centre some at Town Gate.
Come all Suttonians just take a look
At Holland house too so please don't be late.
Owls and owlets all over the city
Painted and sculptured from many a type,
Looking so wise or so full of self-pity.
Sent all over the world by means of Skype.
An owl and an owlet on our doorstep
Fly over the City and by the Rep.

THE CAKE SHOP

A man slightly unkempt and quite scruffy is standing in front of newly opened patisserie ogling at the mouth-watering display of cakes. He had only arrived in London a couple of days ago; he was homeless and had been sleeping rough; he was very hungry and had used up his last pound yesterday.

He noticed that the shop was empty except for one young shop assistant. He glanced furtively quickly scanning the street and then he took a decision.

He quickly entered the shop and just then the shop assistant disappeared from view bending down to retrieve something from the floor behind the counter. This was his chance he thought. She had heard the door open and as she stood up she saw the man grab the pre-packaged cakes and run out of the shop.

She went to the phone on the wall behind the counter and rang 999. She was frightened and looked quite ashen. "To think that I had only just opened the shop and the delivery for this morning is late."

She heard the police sirens; she smiled tentatively, gathered herself and prepared herself for the next task wondering if the man would be caught; she almost wished she hadn't phoned the police for it was obvious the man was hungry – this sort of snatching shouldn't happen in the 21st century she thought.

Later in the afternoon the police constable came and informed the shop assistant that despite the chase by panda car and on foot the man could not be apprehended.

"Perhaps you should consider installing a CCTV."

"Surely not in a cake-shop"! What is this world coming to!

MASSACRE

What do you think of this massacre in Paris? Why that blank look! I am talking to you. You don't know about the massacre? Of course you don't. How can you? – You don't read the newspapers and you don't listen to the news on the radio and you only watch soppy soaps on the telly.

Anyway I'll tell you so listen; this French paper called 'Charlie Hebdo' – funny name for a newspaper but must mean something to the French people; wonder if Hebdo is a surname. - Anyway in its pages the editors chose to print some cartoons taking the mickey of the big religious chief Mohammed; the Muslim folks didn't like it; to them it was insulting and blasphemous....something funny, so they decided to kill the editor and employees of this news-paper – 12 people were shot dead. Bit drastic, I thought, an overkill I would say.

Don't you think? Are you listening!

The two guys who did the shooting said that they were "protecting their prophet." How is that possible? I think he has been dead hundreds of years, so how can you protect someone who is not there! I think some of such young people have no jobs; they want what others have; they are fed up so the one thing that can provide a thrill, a buzz, an excitement in their hearts is to go about shooting innocent people and not care about dying in the name of religion. I know nothing about Islam – I think that is the religion of the fellows who did the shooting in Paris – I ask you, aren't religions supposed to be all for peace and love towards all?

To my way of thinking there is a lot of ... what do they call, it's a big word hippo something; it's come to me, 'crazy hippo' or is it the other way round 'hippocrazy'...?

I don't understand it all, do you?

After the killing there was a lot of talk about 'freedom of speech' and that it is valuable and should be kept for ever. But tell me does freedom of speech mean that you can say what you like even if it causes insult and upset – to my mind you can't. What do you think?

Anyway have you heard about the American & Russian presidents? You see they were talking about 'freedom of speech' and the American president said: We in America can stand in front of the White House and insult the President. The Russian president said: we too can stand in front of the White House and insult the President!

Did you get that? Oh never mind!

RETROSPECTIVE

Decrepit now, and looking back, I see
a stream that never reached a river,
much less the sea.

But rushing on, took many a wrong turn,
and lost her way repeatedly,
and did not learn.

No need though, for reproaches or regret.
The stream has found her own true course
and runs there yet,
nor will forget.

oooOooo

THEY SHALL NOT GROW OLD.....

Fictional detectives that is.

Agewise they seem to fall into three groups. Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* appears to have been born an old lady and remains so, although her mental powers were unimpaired to the end. *Hercule Poirot* seemed to be middle-aged when he arrived here as a Belgian refugee in 1919 ('The Mysterious Affair at Styles'). His friend, *Hastings* – younger than him – was born in 1890 (the same year as Christie), yet in 1966 Poirot was still solving crimes at the age of 85!

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Lord Peter Wimsey* seems to fall somewhere in the middle, where ageing is concerned. Never exactly young, he aged much slower than most. Similarly *Harriet Vane*, whom he met in 1930 ('Strong Poison') and eventually married in 1937 ('Busman's Honeymoon'). Her aging process must also have been delayed, because she produced three sons in her forties, at a time when I.V.F. hadn't even been thought of.

Ngaio Marsh's *Roderick Alleyn* aged slowly but seemed to go into a period of suspended animation. In 1938 ('Death in a White Tie'), his mother's age was given at 65, which would make him 45 at the youngest, and *Agatha Troy*, his intended, possibly 35. Yet in 1977 ('Last Ditch'), their student son, *Ricky*, seemed to be 19 or 20, making his birth year 1958, when Alleyn was 65 (possible) but Troy 55 (improbable). And Alleyn himself was still sleuthing away at 85!

Josephine Tey died rather young in 1952 and, consequently, her detective, *Alan Grant*, was only able to age seventeen years between 'The Man in the Queue' and 'The Sing Sands'. It appears he could have retired, age

unspecified, but found the prospect unthinkable. He also toyed briefly with the idea of marriage, but decided he was married to the job.

Margery Allingham's *Albert Campion* comes into the third category in that he did appear to age with his creator. Born in 1900, he first came into print in 'Sweet Danger' in 1933. He courted *Amanda Fitton*, married, went away to war ('Secret Service'?), was surprised to meet his son on his return in 1945 ('Coroner's Pidgin'), and was still going strong, if a bit creaky, in 1968 ('Cargo of Eagles'). This was published posthumously, Allingham having died, sadly, in 1966.

There are probably many other anomalies I haven't spotted yet, but thank goodness none of these mathematical hiati detract from the enjoyment of this marvellous canon of detective stories. Long may they remain in print.

THE ARTS

Henry Moore and Edward Hopper
to Thomas Hardy and William Morris,
gifted men of creation.

Inspiration, imagination of thought
dedication and skill they brought -
To their art and craft, one more draft.

Develop and design an image,
of the times in which they lived.

In later years, we had the works of
Ted Hughes and Charles Causley to name but two,
glimpse an image in many a view.

oooOooo

HISTORIC ARTS

Myon the fifth century Greek sculptor.
Then we have, Caedmon of the seventh century,
the oldest recorded, Anglo Saxon poet,
noted for his work, 'The Creation'.
Subsequently there was Homer and later
Geoffrey Chaucer in the middle ages.
Followed by the Flemish painter Vandyke
Then came the poet Dryden with his
'Heroic Stanzas' on the death of Cromwell
in the year 1658.

MODERN ARTS

John Betjeman stands alone, England his home.
Hepworth, Nollekens and Gill, masters in their
skill of form.
Others adept at their craft, like, Armitage,
Mc Gough and our present poet laureate,
Carol Ann Duffy.
As we see, the artistry of Turner and Picasso.
Followed by Rodin, Monet and Klee,
and the early Syrian writer, Kahlil Gibran.
With works like 'Broken Wings' and
'The Prophet'.

THE CHILD

Her big green eyes are always looking, always watching a world full of things new and strange and puzzling, things adults don't see any more.

Her baby fine hair is wild and wavy. Be wary on the days when it's full of tangles, the days when life's a series of battles to be fought and the first one's with the hair brush.

Her little button mouth opens wide to let the anger out. Her little tongue never still, so many questions to ask, stories to tell, songs to sing. Her little lips are just learning how to kiss.

Her sturdy legs, she can do so much with them: run on two legs, jump on two legs, hop on one leg, but not the other.

Her feet in shiny, patterned, pink shoes love to dance, with little grace but lots of joy.

Her tiny fingers are always busy in a world full of things which just have to be touched. Her little soggy thumb, always crinkled, pops in to tell me when she's sad or tired or just trying to make sense of it all.

oooOooo

THE DEJECTED VILLAGE

(A parody of "The Deserted Village"
by Oliver Goldsmith)

Poor Auburn, dreariest village on the plain,
Where poverty and sickness dogged the labouring swain,
Where pestilence her annual visit paid,
And man's departure not for long delayed,
How often have I stumbled on the scene,
Of copulating couples on the green,
Within thy bowers of incest and disease,
Where sexual perverts find a sport to please.
How often have I paused to wipe my feet,
Of piles of excrement upon the village street,
The clogged-up brook, the midden heap,
The village idiot and the scrawny sheep.
The hawthorn bush with seats in disrepair,
Where old crones gossip and the young ones swear,
Where many a pastime answered to the call,
As each lad tried to pee the highest up the wall.
The smutted youth who hardly ever spoke,
Except to tell his friends a dirty joke,
The brazen girl with well-developed chest'
Whose raucous laugh responded to the jest.
These were thy charms sweet village, charms like these,
Through endless days sought empty minds to please,
Around thy bowers their baleful influence shed,
These were thy charms, but all thy charms are fled,
And trembling, shrinking from the bailiff's writ,
Far, far away, thy children pack their bags and quit.

FRIEND

I sit in the lounge of the Hare & Hounds Pub waiting for Frank. It's a busy night with lots of punters and I've been lucky to get a seat and keep one for him. I warned Frank on the 'phone what could happen if Paul found out about the forged painting and he sounded really frightened.

I suppose I'm gloating, I can earn myself some serious cash as well as pay Paul back for stealing Jacqui from me, the conniving rat. Fancy him stealing a woman he knew I was mad about. I take a sip from my dry Martini and smile to myself, thinking it's a no brainer and Paul the bastard deserves it – he makes me sick with his oily smooth charm. If only I hadn't got so many business deals on the go with him I could terminate our so-called friendship, but for now I need to be at his beck and call or there could be serious repercussions. Thinking about this I begin to tense-up, but then I think of the revenge I'm planning and relax, oh yes he is not going to suspect a thing, I smile to myself in satisfaction.

By the time Frank arrives, nearly thirty minutes late I am getting very impatient. I hardly recognise him with his hair slicked back, the new moustache and Hank Marvin glasses, in fact I wouldn't have done if he hadn't sat down in the chair I had my coat slung over. He glances around furtively, glares at me looking miserable and full of resentment. I ask him why he is so late. "There were things I needed to do" he says. I ask him if he is going to join MI5 and he sniggers. "I usually wear contacts but I've run out of the disposable ones and I don't like the others", he mutters "which is why I've got the glasses." I have to lean in close towards him because of the din going on all

around in the pub. I offer him a drink and he says "Yes I'll have a beer." We sit drinking in silence and then I say "Have you had time to consider my offer Frank?" He replies "Yes, I have and I don't like it one bit. I need that money to pay off the mortgage and all my debts. It's the first time I've ever done anything like this and I wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't desperate." I reply "I don't like violins Frank and we've already covered that ground." He says "Why are you doing this to your so-called friend Paul?" I smile, "That's my business Frank, all you need to know is that if Paul finds out, you're for the high jump - you wouldn't be the first to end up in a concrete bath, Paul can get very nasty." He looks shocked and frightened and his hand is shaking, spilling the beer over his trousers and the table.

He says "Alright I'll give you the £200,000 cash you vampire." I sneer at him and reply "Well it couldn't be easier could it with Paul having given you all that cash and watch yourself Frank or I'll double the amount." He gasps, "You can't. I've had to pay Ronnie half of it already". "That's your problem" I retort "and when can I have my money?" He looks angry and mumbles "I've got it outside in the car." "Good boy," I grin at him and clap him on the shoulder. He looks incandescent with rage. "I say let's finish the drinks and get the cash and I'll be out of your hair." "How can I be sure of that?" he asks plaintively, looking warily at me. "Well, Frank" I say, "I suppose you can't I'm afraid I've got you at the end of my string and if times get hard you're only a three hour drive away from me, but you'll just have to live with that knowledge." He growls and says "Lehht's go." We stand up, he is so small I tower above him.

We walk out of the pub into the carpark and Frank moans "I've had to park on the road because there was no space in the carpark." I reply "well you chose the pub Frank, said it was supposed to be up and coming, the only up and coming thing I noticed was the barmaid in that low cut top." We walk towards a side road which is poorly lit, with only two lamp posts working and the Landrover parked towards the end of the road, away from them. We arrive at the Landrover and I ask "why have you parked this far up?" He says "it was busy when I arrived, there wasn't any choice and it's a big car, I didn't want anyone going into it – I don't need any more expenses." He opens the Landrover door and says "Get in." I say "No just hand me the cash." He says "Don't you want to count it?" and I laugh, "No need I can always come back for more later." He reaches into the boot of his car and as he does I hear a slight sound behind me and turn in time to glimpse a figure in the dimness holding something like a thick stick, but before I can duck out of the way I feel an excruciating pain as something hard makes contact with my head.

oooOooo

A GEM

Shiny, soft as down,
Coat as black as night.
Almond eyes so brown,
Intelligent, bright.

Silky paws and tail,
Ever quick to race.
Fast - she does not fail,
Always speedy pace.

A beautiful face,
Some may call her small.
She's stature with grace,
Ears alert to all.

True and constant friend.
Welcome always there,
Joy from head to end,
Tail wags in the air.



Patient
Gentle
Funny
Happy
Poppy.

INDEX OF AUTHORS

	Page
Chris Bailey-Green	50, 53, 54, 98
Rosemary Bosworth	23, 47, 89
Rob Edwards	70
Andrew Hackitt	20, 26, 28, 59
Chris Hammond	79, 82
Susan Hundleby	30, 62
Daphne John	11, 64, 76, 78
Ajai Kapur	66, 87, 88
Ken Leeming	60, 68, 74
Yvonne Leggett	95
Sue Lippitt	42, 56, 58
Cedric Parcell	29, 63, 94
Diane Plesner	16
Pat Shoolbred	4, 24, 33, 93
Christopher Smith	37, 65, 77, 91, 92
Trevor Smith	5, 6, 8, 9, 10
Eve Thursfield	2, 38, 86
Eileen Whiting	3, 12, 48, 90
Gillian Wood	13, 22, 27
John Wood	14, 18, 32, 34, 58

Cover design by John Wood

Copyright © 2015 for all authors listed above.

The contributors assert the right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work. All rights reserved.



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

SUTTON COLDFIELD WRITING GROUP