

THE CRAZY OIK

ISSUE 2 SUMMER 2009

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THE CRAZY OIK
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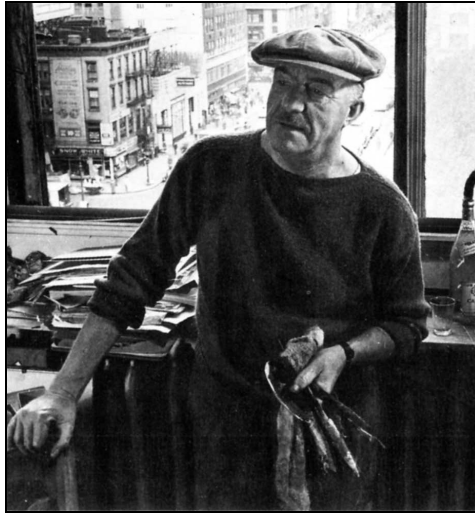
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Culture Shock appeared in *Voices* 5 1975, *Bark* 2 Summer 1982 and in *Nineteen Eighty Three – A First Trade Union Annual* in May 1983 it is part of Ken Clay's collection **Nietzsche's Birthday** (see the Crazy Oik Collection p92)

Intensive Care is from John Royson's novel **Hell and Night** Chapter 4 as yet unpublished.

A Musical Interlude is from Bob Wild's collection **The Dogs of War** (see the Crazy Oik Collection p93)

Front Cover - Ferdinand Leger: Spare Time Activities – Homage to Louis David 1948



Ferdinand Leger in his New York studio 1942

It was during the war of 1914, in the trenches, that he meets "people" and decides "to be very close to them while remaining demanding of myself and my art." He wants to be a "witness to his times." Seeing in the machine its dynamic necessity, he transcribes the optimistic images of our technological - and fraternal - civilization into a bold, clear, and joyful language....

He is a member of the Communist party, but avoids the errors of Socialist Realism. His style is perfected. His theory of the figure-object, fashioned during the 1930s, prevents him from falling into pathos and laboring sentimentalism.

This is shown, among other paintings, in Leger's Homage to David. Only he could express "paid vacation" so joyfully; the lone exception may be Cartier-Bresson, with his 1936 photos of the Popular Front. Leger is the only one in the whole history of art who could draw with the callused hand of a laborer.

Art of the 20th Century p 523

Back cover: On the Balcony (thanks to Alexis Lykiard)

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EDITORIAL

OIK MODES

Some readers of previous prole lit mags complained they were mostly about blokes banging on about work. The Crazy Oik has avoided that snare up to now but, then again, work is an important part of oik life, almost a defining characteristic, so the Oik welcomes such excursions and makes no apology for leading this issue with Tom Kilcourse's fine memoir of mining. Remember that when Old Etonian George Orwell went prole hunting in Wigan he didn't join the writers' circle, he went down the pit. And surely if he hadn't been distracted by the Spanish Civil War then offered a desk job at the BBC he'd have stayed down there. What larks they must have had in that dangerous darkness! Such illuminating accounts of real work could never arise from the desultory pecking at some professional writer's keyboard.

Anecdotal autobiography is another oik trope. Yes it can feel like being trapped in a corner by the pub bore if the narrator sticks to the facts and fills in the life history of every fleeting actor. But childhood is a rich lode since it's here the young oik runs into authority and sex. Ray Blyde struggles with the arcane rituals of the print industry and courting while Steve Howarth renounces nooky on the advice of his priest. Bob Wild relives the wounding rejection of his music teacher and retaliates by desecrating some of our best loved hymns. All true no doubt and not without a certain grisly fascination.

But the true crazy oik is contemptuous of facts – they're for sociologists. Reality is just the starting point for his mad imaginings. He's a deranged EA Poe (as if the actual one wasn't deranged enough), a bogus Borges. An example of how things get out of hand would be John Royson's *Intensive Care*. This extract from his unpublished novel *Hell and Night* describes the oik hero being force fed after being beaten up by police at a demo. Although Buckley has had five pints and four pies only hours earlier nurse Ratchett is going to make him pay for his lechery, or copping a perv (as they say in Oz). Mad, obviously. We have similar difficulties believing Horse-

field's account of a meeting with Empson (although the letter looks authentic) Likewise with Aquinas and the dustman – such a conjunction is surely preposterous. Bundlethorpe's wrestle with the problem of identity manages to avoid the analytical aridities of AJ Ayer but seems, somehow, to be blind to the subtleties of the arguments put forward by his cousin's distinguished tutor Ludwig Leavis. As for the frankly incredible events in *An Incident at Sainsbury's*, verification is demanded. I think our readers should be told exactly where this branch of the superstore is.

Translation can be problematic and it is with some diffidence we include an item by the well-known Polish plumber-poet Stefan Jaruzelski. He claims *Biggles Pulls it Off* was printed originally in Polish as *Biggles nyciaga go* and was dropped on the Lodz ghetto from a Lancaster in 1943 to boost morale. We can find no reference to this particular item in the WE Johns archive at the Bodleian library, but grudgingly concede that Stefan has transcended his normally fractured pidgin and produced a quite Johnsian rendering. With French we feel on firmer ground having ordered many *café au laits* in that country. Du Camp may well have been an anti-clerical but we are suspicious of this scarcely credible evocation of monastic routine. A corroborative visit to the *universite de Eurodisney* is indicated.

Finally P Myshkin is obviously a *nom-de-plume* but here at the Oik we don't demand I.D. The poor devil may well be a regular at Southport's excellent bookshop just off Lord Street and would certainly be *persona non grata* were he to be outed.

Ken Clay July 2009

ILLUSTRATED

October 18 1941



MEET EVAN JONES, MINER

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

Tom Kilcourse

Nothing that he experienced on the training face adequately prepared Brendan Kelly for the Roger seam. The contrasts could hardly have been more stark. It took little time for Brendan to appreciate that the training face had been a playground, a well lit, cool, spacious area where he could pretend to be a miner. There, under the scornful, watchful eyes of Les Tobin, he heaved stones into the wall of the pack, set props, and learned to handle a spade without overloading it. When Tobin's great bulk waddled off to some other part of the face, Brendan and his two fellow 'packers' rested, joking about the old deputy's weight and his loud, foul mouth. Their banter, and rest, would be disturbed within minutes by roars of contempt for their idleness emanating from Tobin's tobacco stained gorge. Between gasps for air, the fat deputy would apprise the young men of their chances of ever being miners. "You wait, you idle little bastards. Just wait until you get on a real face. You'll wish your mother had kept her fucking legs crossed".

Brendan would have thought it bizarre then if told that he would shortly wish himself back in Tobin's care. Yet, such were his thoughts before the end of his first shift on face number five. The day began well enough. Eager to lay claim to the collier label he climbed into the top deck of the four deck cage, to be dropped with seventy-nine others down the thousand yard shaft. This was no new experience for someone who had worked down the pit for two years as a haulage hand. Nor was the mile long walk to the brow. The training face was a roughly equal distance from the shaft bottom. Only upon reaching the brow did novelty intrude. There, with the collier to whom he was assigned for a short apprenticeship, he climbed aboard the trams, a line of low four-seater bogies attached to a steel rope. By this they were lowered down the brow, a thousand-yard long tunnel with a one-in-four slope.

Dismounting from the trams the men walked in line for another half mile before reaching the top of the face. By then Brendan was dripping with sweat, his shirt and jeans wringing wet. The draught com-

ing up the face was like a desert wind, warm and heavy. The young man followed his collier's example and shed his shirt and jeans. He stood for a moment, feeling ridiculous, his underdeveloped body appearing frailer than usual with the broad leather belt strapped round his waist and the heavy battery resting on his buttocks. The collier smiled, holding out a piece of ragged cloth. "Here son, stick this under your battery, or you'll end up with acid burns on your arse". Brendan took the offering and tucked it under his belt to protect the threatened cheeks. Then, stooping, he followed the collier onto the oven of the face, descending the steep slope for forty yards to reach their stint.

The older man probably found his apprentice more of a hindrance than a help, but he did not complain or chivvy the young man when he made a mistake. Old enough to be Brendan's father he probably had teenage children of his own, or so his patient manner suggested. He made few demands on the youth, other than asking him to help lift a bar or set a prop. Only once did he ask the lad to hammer home a wedge, but then took the tool from him when it became apparent that those thin arms lacked the power for such tasks. Nevertheless, when half way through the shift the pans stopped and the face fell silent as men squatted to eat their snap, Brendan was exhausted. He sat on the ground beside the stationary pans and opened the lunch tin his mother had filled with cheese sandwiches. Placed over a bar at the beginning of the shift, the tin had lain in the hot air for some three hours. After taking a couple of mouthfuls Brendan laid the food aside, finding the warm cheese inedible, and far too much in quantity. He must remember to ask his mother for a smaller pack tomorrow, and not cheese. The lad lay back on the rough stone floor, loose pieces of coal that had spilled from the pans digging into his naked back. Despite such discomfort, he drifted into sleep and failed to waken even when the pans again screeched and clanged into raucous motion. What returned him to consciousness was an insistent tapping close to his head. It was the deputy's stick, and the recumbent youth woke to see the supervisors scowling face. "Come on lad, this isn't a fucking dormitory." As the deputy continued on his rounds Brendan jumped to his feet, banging his helmeted head against a bar. Picking up his spade, he joined the collier in shovelling coal onto the pans. The man patted his

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

shoulder. "Sorry about that son. I left you to sleep for a bit and didn't see George coming."

As well as contrasting his new location with Tobin's kingdom Brendan compared it with the Oak, the pit in Oldham where he had been sent for his initial training. There the shaft was no more than 300 yards deep, yet it terrified him in the beginning. He recalled the first time he passed through the air lock at the pit-head to see the inch thick steel cable disappearing into the large round hole in the floor. That his life depended on that metal thread frightened him, and had there not been two other youths starting that day he would have turned back through the doors. Had one of the other lads funk'd it Brendan would probably have followed, but he was not prepared to be the only one to chicken out. But all that was history now.

During the next couple of weeks Brendan became accustomed to the heat of the face and learned much from watching his collier. He quickly realised that sandwiches were not recommended fare in such conditions, and copied Norman in confining snap to an apple or orange. He learned also to conserve his water. On the first day he emptied his eight pint, metal canteen a good two hours before the end of the shift, gulping great drafts of the tepid water at each quenching. Norman showed him the wisdom of taking just a mouthful and swilling it round the gums before swallowing..

Having learned what he could about working a stint, Brendan was placed on the night shift to work under the supervision of one of the packers. Ivor, a small, wiry Welshman who moved like some demented mouse around his pack and in and out of the gob, that area between packs where the roof is left unsupported and allowed to collapse. Ivor took little interest in his trainee except as an extra pair of hands. His aim was to complete the pack as quickly as possible and leave the face for the coolness of the brow bottom. Packers built a wall, a three sided box that abutted the pack built the night before. They used stone that had fallen from the gob roof, and filled in the box with smaller stones to form a solid pack between floor and ceiling. The coalface was like a tunnel, a hundred and forty yards long, that moved sideways into the seam. On one shift colliers

would load coal that had been cut, drilled and blasted beforehand, supporting the newly exposed roof with metal or timber bars held in place by pit-props. Later, fitters would dismantle the conveyor and reassemble the pans in the space left by the colliers. On the night shift, packers extended the packs into the space previously occupied by the conveyor. Packs were several yards long, with pack and gob alternating the length of the face.

At the end of his period on packs, Brendan found himself working with a gang of rippers. As the coalface moves sideways the tunnels leading to it have to be extended. The tunnel along which the coal was taken from the face on a conveyor belt, and provided air to the face, was six feet higher than the face itself. Therefore, as the face moved forward large amounts of stone had to be 'ripped' so that steel arches that support the tunnel roof could be inserted. The ripped stone was used to build a pack in the sump, a few yards of face that ran beyond the tunnel. Building that pack was a particularly arduous task because the inflow of air from the tunnel turned up the face, leaving the sump hot and airless. It was the usual practice for the men to take turns at working in the sump, changing over every hour. Unaware of this, Brendan did not argue when, on his first day at the rip, he was sent into the sump for the whole shift. It was a cruel joke.

A shift in the sump was a picnic though when contrasted with a later situation in which Brendan was placed. His training officially completed he continued working on the face while waiting to be given his own stint or pack. One week he volunteered to work overtime on Sunday night doing some work in the lower tunnel, when the face would not be running. On reaching the pit bottom the group was told that there was 'weight on face five'. This was a normal occurrence, though infrequent. As the face advances the packs cannot possibly provide support as firm as the removed coal did. Their purpose is to allow controlled collapse into the gobs while stabilising the rock strata above. Eventually though, the packs prove inadequate and yield to the weight above them. On these occasions the roof of the face begins to press down towards the floor.

Brendan knew little of this as the group took to the trams and de-

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

scended the brow. At the bottom they split up, Brendan and the deputy taking the upper tunnel to obtain tools, while the other three went to the lower tunnel where they were to work. At the tool-tub the deputy told Brendan what tools to bring, and carried on to inspect the face. When the young man followed his boss there was no sign of the deputy at the face. He could see metal props bending under the increasing pressure, and here and there were piles of fallen rock. Fearing that the deputy was trapped Brendan continued onto the face and started a crouching descent, calling out as he did so. After scrambling a few yards down the slope he could see that just ahead the roof had come down almost to the level of the pans. He stopped, squatting on his haunches to consider whether or not to continue. Just then, a nearby timber prop some eight inches thick broke like a matchstick with an enormous cracking sound. Moving with surprising speed on bent legs he raced back up the face to the safety of the tunnel. That breaking prop probably saved his life. When he eventually rejoined the group, having walked the long way round along the two tunnels, he learned that the deputy had descended the face safely.

Through such incidents Brendan learned to look after himself down the pit, shedding his naiveté. Experience hardened him, so that eventually he not only endured the cruelty that can exist in pit humour, but was able to dish it out. About a year after he finished his training he put an end to the antics of Roy Stevens, a shot-firer. Stevens' job entailed moving around a great deal and he was noted for taking sly swigs from any unattended water bottle. He carried only a one-pint bottle on his belt, quite inadequate on the hotter faces. The men tended to hang their eight-pint bottles from a prop, and Stevens would take great gulps of their water when he thought them inattentive. As a result men occasionally found their bottle exhausted before the shift ended. Deciding to be a victim no longer, Brendan hung a water bottle where he knew Stevens would see it, but the water was heavily laced with laxative. Stevens must have gulped a good half pint before he noticed the unusual taste. He was not seen for the rest of the shift, for the rest of the week indeed. It is said that he had to travel to the surface alone as no other miner would get in the cage with him. Brendan won friends for that prank, which was talked about for some time. Another of Les Tobin's 'idle

little bastards' had made it at last.

Brendan worked for twenty years down the pit before it closed. Among those made redundant he was lucky in finding alternative employment. Later, earning his crust in the physically undemanding role of a security guard he heard it said that the closure of the pits was a good thing as men should not have to work in such conditions. Yet he remained filled with nostalgia for his years working with men whom he trusted and respected, cruel humour or not.

MEMOIRIES OF EMPSON

Dear Crazy Oik

Our Charlene is doing English at Manchester University. She was briefly under that Dr Hicks and I said I was going to report him but she said the conjunction was of no consequence; she wasn't sure that penetration had been achieved since Dr Hicks had mumbled something about Percy not coming out of his overcoat. Anyway the poor old sod was nearing retirement and she didn't want to jeopardise his pension. Last week she was rooting about in Broadhurst's of Southport when she came across a first edition of William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* 1951. In it was a letter from the sage himself. I thought I would draw your attention to it.

But first some background. I met Empson once in Sheffield round about 1969 – the date of the letter. No I wasn't at the University – what would I be doing in that emporium of tosspots – No I was at the railway station coming back to Manchester after visiting my auntie Elsie who'd just had both legs off on account of smoking. I'd eaten an awful pie and decided, feeling a leak coming on, to descend to the Gents. There was a bit of a swell round the blocked stalls so I pushed open a door to one of the traps. In there was a spiky little geezer with a tache kneeling on the floor in front of a big, bald bloke with thick specs in a dingy mac and wearing bike clips. The little geezer was fumbling with the big bloke's willie. He turns to me – shocked like – and says “my colleague has trapped his privates in his zip and can't extricate them himself on account of his arthritis. Perhaps you could help..” It looked like Empson. I'd seen his face in the Sheffield Argus only the day before welcoming some poncy Hull poet to the University. His utterance was somewhat incoherent since he had no teeth in. One might easily jump to the wrong conclusion in the circs but I later read that he'd occasionally lecture his students oblivious of this prosthetic deficit. I believe his talk on *Some Solecisms in Siegfried Sassoon* was virtually incomprehensible. I didn't recognise the big bloke and thought he was just a piece of rough trade till I noticed his exquisitely tailored pinstripes. Empson introduced himself and his companion as Bill and Phil. I declined his offer to help untangle the swollen but now flaccid hampton since it was a bit crowded in there. Whereupon Bill of-

ferred to take me back to his place to have a crack at his missus (or more accurately “miffif”) provided he and Phil could watch. I was about to accept this invitation being somewhat hornier in those days when there was a clattering of hobnails on the stair. Phil, in a sudden remission of joint pain, quickly pushed in the supposedly trapped member and zipped up his pants. Empson jumped up off the floor and the pair of them shot off up the stairs, past Plod descending, like a couple of rats up a drain.

These events came back as I read the note. Charlene thinks it could be valuable and might even warrant inclusion in the OED as the first appearance of the f word in official academic correspondence. Yis, I know it’s commonplace now and on the telly almost every night. Throughout society too; I wouldn’t be surprised if HM the Queen didn’t call Phil the Greek a clumsy f***** when he treads on a corgi. But in them days? In an official letter? Well both Charlene and my wife Enid think it would be worth at least a monkey if not an archer. And this is why I am writing to you with a copy of the note enclosed.

Enid is a cleaner and does for a Ms Sonia Treadgold (B Ed) of Didsbury. They get on coz they both come from Catford – as indeed do I. Usually when Enid turns up at Spath Road there’s nobody in so she pours herself a large gin, gets a fag on and settles down with Sonia’s latest issue of The Crazy Oik. So great is Sonia’s consumption of these narcotics that Enid’s depredations go entirely unnoticed. Anyway Enid says your readership would be keen to acquire such an epistle from a famous oik. Therefore I propose an auction (with a 10% commission to your good self natch) conducted through the pages of your organ or its forthcoming website.

Finally I’d be interested to know if any of your old fart readers could confirm that A.P Riley got the job?

Yours truly,

Ron Horsefield 6 Rushford Avenue Levenshulme Manchester



PROFESSOR W. EMPSON
PROFESSOR F. BERRY

TELEPHONE NO.
78555

WE/DHW

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
THE UNIVERSITY
SHEFFIELD
S10 2TN

7th. March, 1969.

R. Hillman, Esq.,
School of English and American Studies,
University of Sussex,
Falmer,
Brighton,
Sussex.

Dear Mr. Hillman,

We plan to open a whole course on American Literature (one lecture hour a week, instead of half a course), and Mr. A. P. Riley has answered the advertisement for a suitable Lecturer, giving your name as a reference. Please tell me in confidence your opinion of his suitability. Is this fucker up to the job?

Yours truly,

W. Empson.

Professor and Head of the Department of
English Literature.

Bill, Phil and the Letter



MY LIFE IN PRINT

Ray Blyde

CHAPTER FOUR

The next few days Sed kept his head down and concentrated on doing whatever he was told and going where ever he was sent, ignoring any adverse comments in his direction about his lack of industrial family tree. He was soaking some matrix blankets in the large zinc bath when a young girl about his own age came into the department and knocked on King's door, he heard King say "come," and thought how pretty she was. Ralph interrupted his train of thought.

"Put your name down here!"

"What's it for?" queried Sed suspiciously.

"Its our syndicate for the football pools, its only a shilling a week, everyone's in it."

"I haven't a shilling to spare until I get paid on Friday."

"Don't worry I'll put it in for you, give it to me next week."

'Ok, thanks'," said Sed keeping an eye on King's door. When she came out she swept past giving him a gorgeous smile.

"Who is that?" he asked Ralph.

"Who?" Sed nodded in the direction of the lift. "Oh that's Debbie. She's a bit of all right isn't she?" smirked Ralph, digging Sed playfully in the ribs.

"Where does she work?"

"In the reader's, she's a copyholder, you know, looks for mistakes and things". Sed remembered. He couldn't imagine her having anything to do with that snotty nosed kid he met on the day of his interview.

At five o'clock Sed got changed, ran up the stairs three at a time and almost collided with Debbie as she was about to clock out.

"Gosh," spluttered Sed. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, you're the new boy?"

"Y..yes," his face burned,

"What's your name?"

"I'm Sed...Sed Kirk."

"What's Sed short for - Cedric?"

"No, it's not short for anything, its just Sed"

"I think it's nice!" Sed fell into step with her

"Thanks," said Sed feeling as though he was walking on air. "What bus d'you get?"

"I don't get a bus, I get the train. I live in Bromborough."

"Gosh! That's a posh area."

"Its not really, what about you?"

"I live in Anfield, near Liverpool's football ground."

"D'you like football?"

"Its ok, but I don't go very often. D'you like football?" She wrinkled her nose, and shook her head.

"Not very much, one of my brothers had a trial for Tranmere Rovers last year."

"Gosh! he must be good," said Sed, marvelling at the opportunity.

"He thinks he is!"

"What does your other brother do?"

She looked at him with her baby blue eyes, and that finished Sed, his whole being seemed to be on fire.

"He causes as much trouble as possible," she replied finally.

"Oh!" Sed couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"I'll leave you here, I get my train at St James street."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"You will if you keep your eyes open." He stood and watched her, her blonde hair bounced on to the collar of her coat as she strode away. Sed had no idea what love was, but his feelings told him that something special had happened to him. He turned around and nearly walked into a lamppost.

The next few days Sed could not concentrate on anything of consequence, he couldn't sleep properly, and his conduct at work was causing more than a little concern. He was walking around like a zombie. His daily run out for errands was a farce. He gave Charlie Backhouse forty fags and he didn't smoke, George Walker finally

got his toilet roll when he'd asked for a buttered roll. Eddie Trynor thought he'd won the pools, he got change of a five pound note, when he hadn't given him any money in the first place. To put it mildly, it was a fiasco. King had him in the office to try to ascertain what sort of disease he was ailing from.

"What's the matter with you Kirk, your mind's not on your work this week. Sed stood there fidgeting with his hands, and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. King adjusted his glasses and waved Sed towards the empty chair.

"Sit down lad before you fall down." Sed sat down.

"I,...I'm sorry Mister King I don't know what's wrong with me, but whatever it is I won't let it interfere with my job again."

"Mmmm," said King. "I hope not. I took you on despite opposition from the union, so think on and don't let me down." Sed thanked him and made a quick exit.

Sed couldn't get it out of his mind what King said about taking him on despite opposition from the union, so he approached the F.O.C., concerning the matter. Jack listened attentively as Sed related his conversation with the boss, and his worry about the implication.

"Well," said Jack, "The reason we objected to you being taken on at this time is nothing to do with you personally, it could have been anyone. According to the rules twelve months has to elapse between one apprentice and the next, in fact only nine months have elapsed between Slater and you. So you won't start your apprenticeship proper for another three months." Sed felt a big wave of relief.

"So its nothing to do with the fact that I've got no relatives in the trade?" Jack smiled.

"What makes you think that?"

"It's been said often enough since I've been here."

"A lot of it is sour grapes, a bit sort of incestuous."

"Incestuous?" queried Sed.

"A lets keep it in the family. Look lad if you keep your nose clean and do as your told you're as good as the next man.....well, as far as I'm concerned anyway, ok?"

"Great, thanks Jack." Sed felt more as though he belonged for the first, time since he started in the job. Despite Jack's assurances he

was still kept at arms length by some of the men. Sed decided not to worry anymore about it, Rome wasn't built in a day.

Sed saw quite a lot of Debbie in the intervening weeks and tried his best to keep his feelings under some sort of control, so that he could concentrate on doing his job. It wasn't easy but running errands and cleaning up after other people didn't exactly tax the intellect. He concluded that being in love was the most wonderful feeling he had ever experienced. He felt a rush of adrenalin whenever he thought of her. His brother Lloyd was home from the merchant navy, and Sed usually made a big fuss of him, however, this time he hardly noticed he was there.

"Whats up with the young un, he looks like he's in a trance?"

"I don't know, he seems very preoccupied since he started this job, but he's happy enough I think," mused Mrs Kirk wistfully.

"How yer doin' young un?" quipped Lloyd sparring, flicking out a left lead towards Sed as he came through the door from work.

"Pack it in Lloyd, I can't be bothered," growled Sed ducking underneath Lloyd's outstretched arm.

"Is that all you can say to your long lost brother home from the sea?"

"Grow up Lloyd, I'm not your snotty nosed kid now you know!" His mother shot him an admonishing glance.

"That'll do Sed, you have a bit of respect for your brother, he's been away for six months, aren't you glad to see him?" Sed looked intently at Lloyd and in an instant they both burst out laughing.

"Course I'm pleased to see you brud, but I wish you'd stop larking around sometimes."

"Hey, don't start getting too big for your boots or you won't get that something I've brought home for you."

"What's that? enquired Sed full of expectation.

"You'll have to behave yourself, any of your old buck and you won't get a smell of it."

Sed was undeniably curious about what the something was. He couldn't sleep that night thinking about it. As a youngster he used to root through Lloyds sea bag as soon as he came home, the opportunity usually presented itself when Lloyd and dad went out for a

drink and his mother had gone out shopping. He pulled the heavy leather bag from beneath the bed opened it and saw the package immediately, it was medium sized wrapped in brown paper and wondered if that was it. He had a further search but only came across a packet of condoms, one or more had been used. The dirty sod thought Sed, and could be used as a bargaining chip at some time in the future. His girlfriend might be interested to know about it thought Sed glibly. A few days passed, nothing was said by either party until one Saturday afternoon Sed was getting ready to go out to meet Debbie when a smirking Lloyd pulled the packet from behind his back.

"Here ya young un, the pressy I promised you." Sed took it, and thanked Lloyd and started to tear it open. The first layer of paper revealed another identical cover, and then another. Sed by this time was in a frenzy of frustration and anticipation. As he stripped away each of the wrappings the parcel was becoming smaller by the minute, at the same time Lloyds smirk was broadening with each wrapper. The bastard's enjoying this thought Sed as at last the mystery was solved. It was a book. Sed opened the dark blue stiffed backed cover.

"What is it?" queried Sed almost out of breath with physical exhaustion.

"It's a book," replied Lloyd.

"I can see it's a book, I'm not stupid."

"It's a book on printing, you're going to be a printer someday aren't you?" Sed flicked through the pages.

"I can't understand a blind word, its not in English."

"I know, I realised it when I got back to the ship, its in German. I couldn't change it because by that time the ship had set sail."

"Well what am I supposed to do with it?"

"You could show some appreciation, Lloyd brought it all the way back for you," interjected his mother sharply. Sed sighed with exasperation.

"Its no use to me, I can't read it, it's in a foreign language!"

"You could go to evening classes and learn to speak German." grinned Lloyd thoroughly enjoying himself by this time. Sed

chucked the book on the settee, grabbed his coat off the back of the chair and flounced out. The last thing he heard before he slammed the front door was the sound of Lloyd gurgling with merriment. When he got home it was fairly late, and he thought he would have some explaining to do. However, his mother was in bed, and his father and Lloyd were stretched out the easy chairs drunk as skunks. This was the usual pattern of events when Lloyd was home from sea. They would go out boozing three or four nights a week. Lloyd would spend the rest of the week with his girlfriend whoever the current one was at the time, until his money ran out, then he would reluctantly sign on again at the seaman's pool. His stay at home varied between eight weeks and three months, by which time everyone had had enough. His father was fed up with Lloyd's sponging off him and so was his girlfriend. Sed looked at the pair of them. His father was snoring his head off with his flies wide open, and Lloyd had the best part of his dinner down the front of his shirt. Sed looked down and noticed that both of Lloyd's shoelaces were undone, and feeling somewhat benevolent towards his brother decided to fasten them, to each other, then went upstairs to bed. He was awakened sometime later by a loud bump, followed by a mouthful of unrepeatable obscenities and deduced that Lloyd had got up from a recumbent position. Sed hugged himself under the bedclothes and promptly went back to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a branch union meeting at Renshaw Hall and Jack informed Sed that it might be in his interest to go along, just to get an idea what goes on at one of these meetings. He would not, he was informed, be able to vote or make any comment whatsoever, just sit there observe and listen. He was sitting next to Dick Stacy who everybody called "Pint of Water," which Sed thought was a peculiar name for the man. However he was to find out why as the meeting progressed. Before the meeting started Dick turned to Sed whispered hoarsely

"When you're at one of these 'ere meetings lad always get up and 'ave yer say, don't sit mute like most of these 'ere." The chairman opened the meeting, read the minutes of the previous meeting. He

was about to ask the meeting for a proposer and seconder that the minutes of the previous meeting were a correct record when Dick got up and shouted,

"Point of order Mr Chairman!" and promptly sat down again. The chairman looked over in his direction, and again asked for a seconder. Dick shot up again, "point of order." Suddenly Sed realised why he was called "pint of water!" With his thick Scouse accent, "point of order" sounded like, "Pint of water Mr Chairman." Dick was up and down like a fiddler's elbow and made a thorough nuisance of himself that the stewards bundled him out. From that point on it was utter chaos. There was a fracas going on at the back of the hall which ended in fisticuffs, and the meeting closed before they got to any other business. When he got outside Jack caught him up and asked him what he thought of the meeting.

"Well they didn't get much done, but it was very entertaining." Jack laughed.

"It's not always like that thank goodness, otherwise we'd get nothing done, no some heavy fines will be imposed after that debacle." When Sed reached the bus stop it was starting to rain. When the bus finally arrived he was cold and thoroughly soaked to the skin, and to make matters worse the conductor shouted, "Two only," and put the chain across as Sed attempted to climb aboard. He cursed and decided to set off walking. He couldn't get much wetter if he'd fallen into the Mersey. The next bus came as he was between stops, and that one looked full as well. The rain was getting heavier, it beat against his face so fiercely that he couldn't keep his eyes open. He decided to shelter in a shop doorway for a while. He smelt the aroma of fish and chips, and suddenly felt ravenously hungry. He looked out of the shop doorway and spied the chippy at the end of the block. He sprinted towards the light and was just about to push open the door when he was grabbed roughly from behind by an outsized figure of a motorcycle policeman.

"Now then what' the rush young man?"

"I..m sorry," blurted Sed. "I was just trying to get out of the rain."

"You were were you?" said the policeman giving Sed a resounding slap on the back. The blow winded him. "Bloody 'Ell," gasped Sed. The policeman stood back and looked hard at Sed.

"You don't recognise me do you?" Sed looked up at him, then shook his head. The cop removed his helmet.

"Henry....Henry O'Neill you old so in so," exclaimed Sed in amazement. "I didn't know you were in the police."

"Only just finished my training as a motorcycle cop."

"Christ you're a big sod."

"Six feet six in my bobbies helmet!"

"I remember you at school, you were the smallest in your class."

"Aye, and I was bullied unmercifully by one or two. I got even with one of them last week. I caught him breaking into our local church. I thumped him silly, then arrested him. He wasn't half surprised when he found out who I was. I said, "You nasty little-bastard, you used to bully me at school. At first he said he'd never seen me before in his life."

"Who was it?" queried Sed.

"That maggot Littejohn."

"Oh, I remember Littlejohn, he punched me on the nose and pinched all my pocket money when I was in the second year. He was head of the "Peanut gang".

"Hey!" said the chipshop owner. "When you two've stopped reminiscing and wetting my floor, you can either buy something or get out, scuffer or no scuffer."

"Sorry about that Degsy, what d'you want Sed?"

"Six pennorth and a fish."

"Right two sixes and two fish Degs. Incidentally how are you getting home Sed?"

"The bus if I can get one."

"D'you fancy a lift on the back of my bike, I've finished my shift."

"Great!" replied Sed. "Is it allowed?"

"Not really, but who's going to see us on a night like this?"

The rain had eased off, and despite a bellyful of fish and chips he began to feel chilled to the core as Henry sped swiftly away. He tucked himself behind Henry's great bulk, and the five mile journey took half the time it took the bus. Sed had never been on the back of a motorcycle before and discovered the euphoric feeling at the power and acceleration between his thighs, and resolved at some time in the future to buy himself a motorbike. Henry applied the brakes abruptly outside Sed's house, the bike skidded to a halt.

"Th...thanks Henry." said Sed through chattering teeth,

"You're welcome Sed. Incidentally, is that brother of yours home?"

"He is as a matter of fact."

"Well, give him a message from me will you?"

"Of course, what is it?"

"Tell 'im to keep away from my sister if he knows what's good for him!" He nodded at Sed, pulled his goggles down off his helmet and roared off into the night. Sed was puzzled by Henry's closing comment. He knew for instance that Lloyd and Henry's sister were in the same form at school, and for the life of him he couldn't remember what Henry's sister was called, and on second thoughts he didn't think he would say anything to Lloyd, after all it was none of his business.

One day after work Sed took Debbie to the pictures to see a musical called "London Town." Sed wasn't very keen on musicals, but it was the film she wanted to see, and just being with Debbie was sufficient reason in itself for going. The place was half empty so they sat on the back row. There seemed to be a fair amount of snogging going on around them so after a little while Sed ventured to put his arm around her, she snuggled closer and shared their sherbet lemons. Afterwards he offered to take her home.

"No Sed, it's too far, and you've got to get home!"

"I don't mind honestly, let me?" She kissed him gently on the cheek.

"All right but don't blame me if you get into trouble when you get home." Sed was floating so high off the ground he felt like "Superman." He was curious about the house she lived in, he knew it wasn't a council house and turned out to be a large semi with a wide tarmaced driveway. Arriving at the front door they found it open. Debbie walked in and shouted,

"Mum?" There was no reply. "Oh my God!" exclaimed Debbie in horror. "I think we've been burgled." The furniture in the lounge was overturned, the back of the settee was ripped open, children's toys were strewn around and broken. Debbie looked around and started to cry. Sed put his arm around her.

"Don't cry Deb, I'll ring the police. Have you got a phone?"

"I think you'd better go Sed."

"I can't leave you with this, where's you mum and dad?"

I think they went to my uncle Jack's. You'd better go because if my dad comes back and finds you here he'll blame you." Sed looked at her in disbelief.

"Me, how can he blame me?"

"You don't know him, he's got a vicious temper. He came home

once when the window cleaner was here, beat him up and accused him of having an affair with my mum."

"Bloody hell, what is he a heavyweight boxer?"

"No, he's a bosun in the merchant navy."

"Oh well, that explains a lot. I think their all headbangers in the merchant navy!"

"You get out Sed Kirk, I don't ever want to see you again, that's a terrible thing to say."

"I'm sorry, blurted Sed, "I only meant to say that I've got a brother in the merchant navy, and he can be difficult at times."

"Go!" replied Debbie starting to cry again. It was apparent that whatever he said now would only make things worse.

"Let me help tidy the place a bit Deb?"

"Please go!"

"Ok." Sed "walked away, very reluctantly, and let discretion be the better part of valour on this occasion. As he sat in the train on his way back to Liverpool, he mulled over the events of the last two hours. In a state of shock and a slip of the tongue, he'd lost the only person who meant anything to him. He loved her, he was sure of that, his longing for her gave him pains in his stomach. He anguished over what he would say to her when he saw her again, hopefully that would be on Monday. When he arrived home his parents wanted to know where he'd been until this time. He was too miserable to go into details and set about eating his dried up supper, when in strolled Lloyd sporting a magnificent shiner.

"Where did you get that"? they all chorused.

"I walked into a door in the pub!"

"Oh yeah," replied Sed perking up. "It didn't have a policeman's helmet on top of it, did it?"

On Monday morning after a weekend of regretful soul searching Sed went into the composing room to see if he could see anything of Debbie. He had a quick glance through the window in the readers as he passed. He didn't want to make it too obvious, she was there, but she had her head down working, he'd try and catch her at dinner time. When he got back to the lift Ralph was grinning all over his face.

"What are you grinning about?"

"I see Debbie's given you the dear John!" Sed was livid.

"How d'you know?"

"Little bird!"

"Anyway it's none of your goddamn business Slater!"

"Tut, tut, mustn't get upset. You might say something you'll regret."

Sed nearly exploded a straight left into Slater's gratuitously self satisfied gob, but he held himself in check, he didn't want to lose this job, he'd already had one warning. He gritted his teeth, pulled closed the inside safety gate, pushed the lever for down, dropped two floors when a window opened in the door on the top floor and a hand came through holding a tin of French chalk, shaken vigorously and the contents cascaded down on the top of Sed's head.



*After years of voracious reading JP Sartre found
that his eyes had adapted to read both the left
and the right hand page at the same time*

CULTURE SHOCK

Ken Clay

While the other apprentice fitters went to the match Trellie spent Saturday afternoons in the library. For three years he had been mining the shelves, hacking out random nuggets in search of that elusive vein of culture. He was working a meagre seam in the Parapsychology section, squatting on his haunches to flip through the latest Colin Wilson, when he felt a hand on his shoulder and a refined voice cutting the air over his head. He looked up half expecting to see Colin himself but there was this oddly wrinkled character with thick hair and a deep tan. His mouth was opening and closing over flat bright teeth like a row of bleached Victory Vs and in his lapel was a pink carnation which inclined Trellie to believe that he had just dropped in on his way from a wedding reception. He said he had met Wilson once, corresponded with him briefly, considered him a 'frightful fraud' but hoped that the price of his letters would 'augment' so that he could sell all five and buy one of Proust's laundry lists. Trellie stood up and felt his legs tingling under the iron grip of his heavy duty bike-clips. The man's name was Neville, a card was being extended, and he owned a signed first edition of *The Outsider* which he would be happy to let Trellie handle should he care to visit.

Trellie turned up the next day. It was a big house overlooking the park. Inside there were paintings and statues and plants and a deep, scented silence such as Trellie had never before experienced. He felt he was nearing his goal. Exactly what culture was he had only a vague idea. It included aesthetic thrills but also refined conversation, elegant manners and luxurious surroundings; everything, in fact, which he couldn't find at home or in the fitting shop. They drank wine which, to Trellie, didn't taste like port but, mysteriously, didn't taste like sherry either. Neville seemed to approve of his visitor's quest which, he learned, had started in early childhood. Trellie had never liked Tarzan, or Laurel and Hardy, or even the Three Stooges. The films he preferred had heroes who played the piano brilliantly or could quote long pieces of Shakespeare without refer-

ence to the text. Similarly with Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*, the only books in the house apart from the *Home Doctor* and the *Daily Express Book of the Garden*. It was the section entitled *Immortal Masterpieces Which Have Enriched the World* which gave him a peculiar frisson. Curiously this wasn't so much a product of the works themselves, although there were whole sonnets by John Keats and blue-toned photographs of Michelangelo's *David*, as of the enthusiastic, awestricken commentaries of Arthur Mee. Surely, he thought if objects like these can move people like Arthur to deliver such extravagant praise they must be the most important things in the world. Later he wrote poems; it was easy. Then he started to keep a notebook of his own ideas alongside those of other great writers.

Neville seemed greatly interested in all this and spoke at some length of his own passion for the nineteenth century French novel, particularly the *Rougon Macquart* cycle of which he gave an extended precis. Eventually Trellie left in a state of exalted fervour. Poised blindly on the precipice of culture he was somehow aware of the vertiginous, mind-warping prospect before him. His brain buzzed and flashed like a pinball machine as new cerebral circuits sprang into existence in an attempt to comprehend the experience. The world outside now had that flat, ordinary feel which he had come to know for the first time years ago after stepping off the Ghost Train at Blackpool's Pleasure Beach.

On his second visit a fortnight later he produced the notebook and read out an entry which had long puzzled him. The sentences had a peculiar property. Although they were written in English and although he had rewritten them with the aid of a dictionary, he still found them completely incomprehensible; they defied penetration. It had been a deeply disturbing moment in his life - his first confrontation with philosophy.

'Modern thought has realised considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it. Its aim was to overcome a certain number of dualisms which have embarrassed philosophy and to replace them with the monism of the phenomenon.'

Neville squirmed in his chair, arranging his arthritic hip in a more comfortable position. He regarded Trellie as he would one of the

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paintings on the wall. 'Monism of the phenomenon indeed!' he thought, 'Looks really are the only things worth bothering about, they can even compensate for this tedious adolescent thirst for culture.' He yawned politely without opening his mouth.

'Its from *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre' said Trellie staring straight at Neville with a look of powerful concentration, a look refined by long study of books he couldn't understand. Neville sipped his Chateau bottled claret and gazed up into the corner of the room as if the sight of anything more interesting would be a dangerous distraction.

'Sartre has a strabismus, poor fellow. One wonders how he keeps his balance.'

Trellie imagined an unreliable French motorbike.

'He lives in the rue Bonaparte now I believe. I used to stay in a small hotel nearby, the Hotel Moderne in rue Racine. I remember going there shortly after the war and presenting the concierge with a bar of chocolate. Her eyes filled with tears.'

'But what does it mean?'

'Well, its a philosophical statement.' Neville paused reflectively, 'You see philosophy is peculiar not only because it uses ordinary words in a special way but also because it manipulates abstract concepts for which there are no concrete correlatives. The English are essentially a positivistic and empirically minded breed disinclined to give serious attention to metaphysical speculation. What they fail to realise, of course, is that their apparently commonsense view of the world is itself a philosophical posture no more certain than any other. We have merely become used to it and somewhat seduced by the success of its application in science.'

'Jeesus!' thought Trellie. 'It's just like a book!' He felt a strong urge to turn round and see if the words were printed on the wallpaper.

'No concrete correlatives?' he asked, going back to the point where he had lost track.

'Precisely.'

He felt vaguely flattered but unenlightened.

'You should really read Hegel before tackling a work like that. It is virtually nothing more than an expansion of the *Self-Consciousness* section of *The Phenomenology of Mind*'.

Neville realised that little of this would impinge on his audience but he liked to indulge an academic bent and caress complex notions like an actor as they emerged into language. Trellie felt privileged to be present at their birth; their meaning, however, remained tantalisingly out of reach. They heard the thud of boot on football outside; it was a Sunday league match on the park.

'Were it not for this screwy little poseur' thought Neville, 'I could be standing behind the rubber plant with my binoculars ogling those lusty thighs.' He gulped again at the wine.

'Why do you read such things anyway?' The working class! What a collection! They imagined they could pick up culture like a pint pot! Only the other day his cleaning woman had told him she was going to night school to learn Russian.

'I'm interested in philosophy.'

'Schopenhauer said that genuine philosophers were perplexed by the world whereas lesser beings were perplexed by philosophy. Now he is remembered as the man who kicked a noisy neighbour downstairs whilst extolling the serene resignation of the East ... Excuse me a moment.' Neville got up with difficulty and retired to the upstairs toilet to fart. Trellie heard it distinctly. At first he could scarcely believe his ears, yet there it was, a real rasper! It was the kind which his workmates followed by sweeping an imaginary shotgun up to their shoulders. If it had happened at home his father would have said: 'See better now can yer?' But Neville had retired specifically for that purpose out of deference to his guest. Trellie felt the mysterious abyss opening up once more. Surely this too was an aspect of culture; one of the tiny elements of that complex fabric which couldn't be learned from books.

Neville lowered himself awkwardly into his winged armchair.

'I had used to be greatly interested in philosophy until I discovered something even more rewarding.'

Trellie felt he was on the brink of a great illumination. This cer-

tainly beat grubbing about in the library. On only his second visit he was about to be led into the inner chamber, the last secret recess of culture itself. His eyes seemed to be boring right into Neville's soul.

'And what was that?' he asked.

'Teapots' said Neville.

'Teapots!?' Had he heard right or was this French or German for some esoteric pursuit?

'Come into the library.'

Hidden fluorescents illuminated forty seven teapots on a shelf which ran right round the room.

'I thought at first it was just nostalgia, especially when I found myself strangely ravished by this bright green creation designed in the shape of a sports car. The driver's head, do you see, is in fact the handle of the lid. And then I came to realise that I was entering a relatively unexplored terrain, a land of magical naivety. As a collector I couldn't help being excited by such a rapidly appreciating asset, but the artist in me also detected in these domestic icons an emanation of subdued, civilised joy which no-one, not even Arthur Mee, had yet sullied with their critical analyses. These artefacts radiate the creative delight of simple craftsmen, much, I venture to think, as might the fabrications of your own young friends in the boilershop. And, of course, they have the pragmatic solidity of all functional art. We might say,' he added with a snigger, 'that unlike the propositions of philosophy ... they hold water!'

Trellie didn't know what to make of this. It certainly did not fit any of the categories of culture he had come to recognise. Yet, like a faint echo of his childhood experience with the encyclopedia, he felt moved by this eloquent enthusiasm.

'Like great works of art they vary from the wittily inconsequential to the nobly sublime. Just look at this magnificent Georgian piece, worthy of Flaxman himself. Unfortunately my cleaning lady dropped it, broke the handle, and crushed some of that beautiful snarling. Now, I fear, it is both useless and worthless and yet, as in some ruined Greek torso, one discerns the remnants of greatness.'

Trellie took the battered relic and tried to feel vibrations.

'I bet Ferny could fix it.'

'A colleague?'

'Best welder in the works. He can do aluminium gearboxes so that you wouldn't know they'd been welded.'

'Are you sure? It is solid silver. Several jewellers have refused even to try.'

'What do they know about it?'

'What indeed?'

This time, after Trellie's departure, it was Neville's brain which seethed with excitement. A fine, young craftsman was about to resuscitate that damaged masterpiece with a vivifying splinter of his own creative vitality. What was this mysterious rapport between the working class and the practico-inert? He fell asleep in the chair dreaming of Benvenuto Cellini.

Ferny, the man entrusted with this miracle, was nearly sixty. He was fat and hairy and possessed several attributes which Trellie found disgusting. He spat frequently, hawking up multi-coloured gobbets of phlegm with an exaggerated rasping noise; he broke wind at will and used this gift to punctuate his conversation; the entire wall of his welding bay was covered with pictures of naked women, and he had cornered the works Durex market and sold an astonishing variety of products to customers from every department. He was also famous for his feats of delicate precision. He seemed interested in the project and even more interested in Neville as Trellie expounded the cultured environment and lifestyle of his mentor. Books, statues, teapots, a cleaning woman! Each revelation pushed Ferny's eyebrows higher up his wrinkled head. He agreed to accept Trellie's commission and even appeared honoured to be chosen.

Trellie collected the refurbished teapot on Sunday on his way to Neville's. In the cosy gloom of the lounge they unpacked it together, carefully peeling back layers of the *Sun* - an issue which seemed to consist entirely of page threes. The transformation astounded its owner. The crushed panels had been expertly pressed

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out and there wasn't a speck of surplus metal to show that the handle had been silver-soldered. The whole thing had been burnished and buffed to a dazzling finish.

'Quite extraordinary! Convey my congratulations to your young friend. And now for some tea!'

He scurried into the kitchen and returned with it on a salver alongside two bone china cups and a plate of digestive biscuits.

'Earl Grey - my weakness!'

Neville had never tasted tea quite like it before but, after all, Burke or Boswell might have drunk from the same source. Perhaps the second would be better. He lifted the pot again; a thin trickle emerged.

'Not leaves surely?!'

Frowning anxiously he introduced a slender corkscrew into the spout and, after considerable manipulation accompanied by the growing stench of hot rubber, fished out a black condom which spread its soggy, steaming length across the tray. He reddened, paled, then lurched towards the stairs. Trellie heard retching noises followed by a flushing of the lavatory.

A few days later Trellie got a letter with something heavy attached to it. The text was in cursive italics framed tastefully by wide margins. It ended 'Thine Neville' and mentioned a sudden holiday in Hammamet for an indefinite period. Neville looked forward to 'further stimulating exchanges' on his return. A postscript rhapsodised over the refurbished teapot and ended with the remark: 'Closer scrutiny of this eighteenth century masterpiece did reveal one modern accretion which I take to be spurious. Fortunately it was only glued to the underside and I return it herewith to your gifted colleague who, no doubt, has many objets d'art to which it could genuinely adhere.' To the bottom of the sheet was sellotaped a brass rectangle on which Ferny had engraved in his best Olde English script: '*A Present from Blackpool*'.



Susannah and the Elders
Artemisia Gentileschi

DIANA AND THE ELDERS

Dave Birtwistle

Bob put down his watering can and surveyed his small domain. Having an overgrown railway line at the bottom of his garden gave him the illusion that he was master of all he surveyed and much more. The garden tiered away upwards from the house so the furthest part was the highest, the terrace up on the brim, next to the embankment fence. Here separated by gravel paths, were two, long, raised beds catching the full sun. His onions were his pride and joy and were fattening up like small beach balls. Next to them his Savoy 'Ormskirk' cabbages surrounded by an elegant rustic frame and draped with a fine gauge, plastic netting swelled proudly and took on a wonderful turquoise sheen. The beds were proofed as was possible against slugs and pigeons and caterpillars and onion fly. But Bob knew, deep down that there was always the possibility of other organisms, new species, as yet unidentified invaders which could simply creep in or drift along on the wind then land here and sabotage his crop and he was resolute in his determination to find them, pursue them and eradicate them before they undid all his good work. Indeed the more successful he was as a gardener the more obsessed he became with eliminating even the slightest of chances of being caught out by something he hadn't planned for. For the first time this year he had completely flummoxed the carrot fly by planting his seeds in large tubs over two feet off the ground and the flies had completely failed to find them. The carrots were looking large and orange and sweet.

Bob smiled and looked up at the sky. The cloud was thinning into vapoury wisps and it was turning an unmistakeable Mediterranean blue. He visibly relaxed. He breathed deeply and as he exhaled he allowed his eyes to follow the lie of the land down the terraced beds, along the paths, past the greenhouse, round the side of the house, down the drive and across the road. And there she was. The divine Diana Dunstan his neighbour across the road. She was carrying a large laundry basket gracefully out onto the lawn. She bent over, placed it on the neatly mowed grass and prepared to peg out her washing on the line to catch the summer breeze and all the sunshine. The effect on Bob was dramatic. Without thinking he

dropped his secateurs and stared. His neck acquired the characteristics of a pecking hen, or more appropriately, a Rhode Island Red rooster. It shot forward and his eyeballs bulged. His lips made a strange, sibilant, smacking sound and from his teeth came a curious concentrated inhalation.

The object of his fascination, Mrs Dunstan was in her thirties, a sultry, red-headed woman with large lips and ample proportions and long, slender legs. To Bob she was the embodiment of everything erotic and unattainable, a composite of all the film stars and pin up girls he'd ever seen. Wintertime had been a time of torture and deprivation which pushed him to his limits. During the cold months he saw her only fleetingly, perhaps once a week. And even if he managed a glimpse of her, she was shrouded in coats and hats and scarves and raincoats with hoods and large umbrellas, seen only fleetingly whilst dashing out to the car or a cab and then to return, with hardly a 'hello' or even a word of recognition and re-enter her hibernation indoors. But now that June had been and gone there was a change of circumstance which produced a transformation in her behaviour pattern and such a dramatic reaction to it. Not only was she out and about a lot more, she wore clothing that was flimsy and much skimpier so that her attractions were even more obvious and in seemingly greater abundance.

He stood and watched her transfixed as she bent over, took her washing from the laundry basket, shook it and set about pegging it to the line. Blouses, towels, two sheets, knickers, socks, men's shirts.....Each time she bent and straightened up and reached for the line and pegged wasn't the simple, mundane movement of a housewife doing housework. It was Salome dancing. Hands on hips she surveyed her work, wiped her cotton apron and walked back briskly inside.

As though he were sleepwalking Bob returned to his plants. In a trance he filled his watering can with rainwater from the green, plastic butt and watered his tomatoes again. He was on auto-pilot now. He felt like his mind had been exploded and then wiped clean. He had to snap out of it and think of something else. The water began streaming out of the plant pots into dark pools across the floor and he realised he had deluged his crop. Still, the heat this afternoon would sort that one.

Leaving the greenhouse he heard a faint scuffle, a rustle of leaves, the snap of a twig. It was probably nothing but he prided himself on his survival skills and especially on his hearing. It wasn't a squirrel or a cat or the wind in the trees. He stopped in his tracks and listened, his senses now fully alert. He felt at one with the environment around him. Others may not have bothered to check or even sensed what he sensed but Bob cocked his ear and listened again. A faint scrape of something on wood, another rustling of leaves. He froze. Someone was on the other side of the fence down the railway cutting and struggling with an obstacle. Furthermore they were trying to disguise their presence and movement. It couldn't be a dog owner out walking his pet. It wasn't a rambler striding out or he would hear a regular crunching of boots. It was far too quiet and subtle to be a child or a group of kids. Bob waited. There it went again, a rustle of leaves, a slithering, the snap of a twig, a faint grunt.

His consciousness was already expanded from his previous experience. Not only was his hearing enhanced but his imagination and ability to see possibilities was greatly expanded. There was definitely somebody there and he was definitely trying hard to be very quiet and secretive. Somebody didn't want anyone to know what he was up to. His special domain was being intruded upon. Bob frantically began to assess the situation.

Since the railway and embankment gave access and cover right into the centre of town along a network of narrow, intertwining spaces, whoever it was he was sure they were up to no good at all. He began to think. It could be a scout working out an escape route for the hunt saboteurs protest march in Albert Square next month. If they clashed with the police they could scuttle off onto the canal towpath and head straight for the disused railway and get clean away. More likely, he thought, it could be an eco-warrior trying to find his way in and out of the airport before they started work on that new runway. Or was it a G20 nations protester working out details of a surprise attack on the summit meeting which was about to take place at the GMex centre? Half a square mile of the city centre was due to be cordoned off by a huge security operation. If it was used for infiltration, this path could take someone right through their lines and into the heart of the world's leaders right under the noses of the security forces!

There was a knot hole in the fence that Bob had widened with a rounded file. He had once heard kids using an air rifle and he had kept an eye on them. He crept up to it now and peeped through. In his field of vision he could clearly see the main winding track and the little side track to the left and the trunks of alder, elder and sycamore. He could see part of an old pram, some logs, a blackbird fluttering and even what looked like paw marks dried into the ground and probably made when the path was muddy weeks ago. There was a scent of earth and ferns mingled with a distant whiff of wild garlic. Nothing stirred at all.

Bob peered for several minutes but nothing extraordinary came into his field of view. No saboteurs, no student protesters, no eco warriors, no gun-runners slinking in and commando crawling along the interweaving network of Vietcong tunnels, no people traffickers, no drug dealers, no Morecambe cockle pickers, no east Europeans flooding in to take minimum wage jobs valeting outside Tesco. He stood up slowly and went and picked up his folding camp chair and placed it with his back to the fence. He sat down and his mind began to return to neutral. There was nothing happening at all either in his mind or in his garden, or over the fence or over the road.

Then a very close, sharp Kerrrrthud! He looked around him and still, in all 360 degrees there was nothing to see. A deep instinct told him to look up. To his right, from the nearest branch of the Sycamore tree which leant over the fence hung a human leg. Bob rose quietly and went over and inspected the shoe, the sock, the trouser and gave a pull.

"What's going on?" There was an "Oooh" and a cough and a grunt and the man unwound from the branch and let himself down.

"I didn't think you'd spot me!" he said, adjusting the strap on a large pair of camouflaged field glasses.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I was hoping to get an eyeful of that fit piece who lives across your road." And then confidently, as he dusted himself down, he said with a wonderful crazed expression on his face,

"With these binoculars I can see right into her bedroom!"

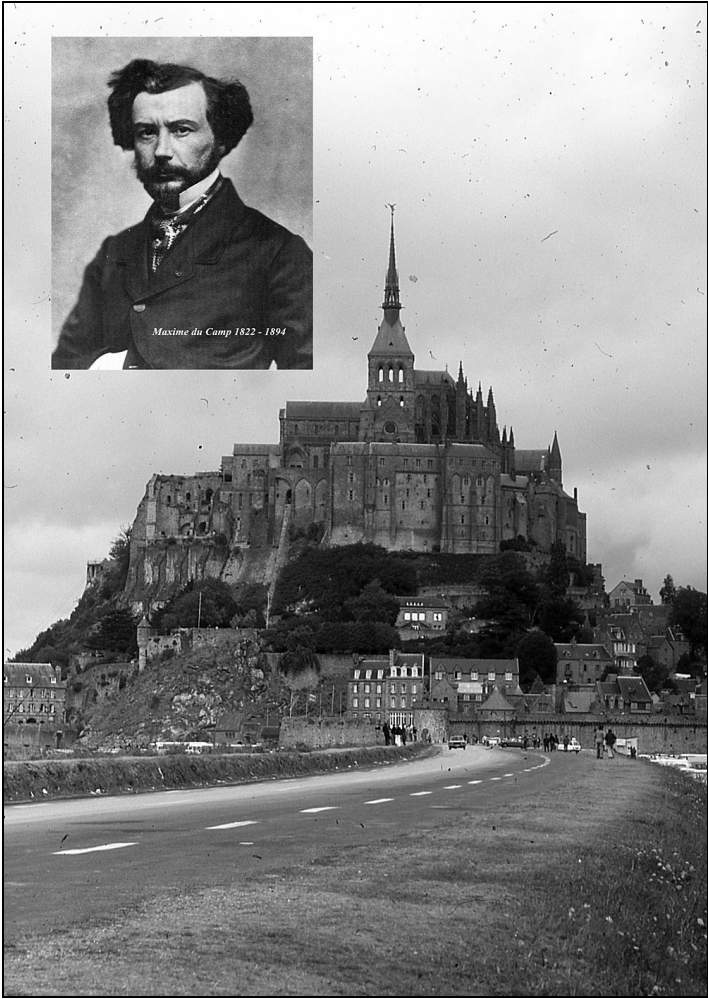
HAVE YOU EVER

Have you ever been chased by a lion,
And you find that you can't get away,
You travel as fast as your able,
But the darned things decided to stay,
Your poor legs won't run any faster,
Your lungs are bursting it seems,
You're just at the end of your tether,
When you wake up from one of those dreams.

Have you ever been on top of a building,
When somebody gives you a push,
The feeling of falling is shocking,
And the grounds coming up with a rush,
You see all your past life before you,
It gives you a feeling of dread,
You're shouting and screaming in terror,
Then you finally wake up in bed.

Have you ever been inside a harem,
Reclining in comfort sublime,
The attention of dozens of women,
As they supply you with good food and wine,
One dusky maiden you fancy,
Eyes you with romantic intent,
With aromas of perfumes exotic,
She slowly parades round your tent,
You feel that your life's just beginning,
The blood rushes up to your head,
What happens next, well I'll tell you,
You're clutching your pillow in bed.

Ray Hyde



MAD MAX

Ron Horsefield (trans)

Flaubert's early travelogue *Par les Champs et par les Greves* was a collaborative project in which his travelling companion Maxime du Camp wrote alternate chapters. Du Camp's contribution is rarely looked at these days but thanks to our French correspondent Ron Horsefield we are able to publish snippets from the manuscript he studied at the Université de Eurodisney just outside Paris. We can't vouch for the accuracy of Ron's translation but feel sure that his mastery of oik demotic renders these extracts far more interesting than the high flown stodge doled out by gloomy Gus.

Mont Saint Michel Mai 1847

On the Mont St Michel, that strange complex of ecclesiastical buildings perched on a rock 300 ft above the sea, there's a room containing a huge wooden treadmill into which are inserted naughty monks. It's also used to winch things up from the beach. But what if there's nothing coming in? Some evil buggers get away with nothing more than a gentle stroll. Or worse still, imagine the predicament of the Abbott as he reads in the refectory knowing that there's a big delivery tomorrow and nobody has stepped out of line ...

"And in the beginning God created...Hey! You! Brother Anslem! I distinctly saw your cassock twitchin! You've bin having lewd thoughts about Mary Magdelene again! You've bin bashin your beef bugle under the table!!"

"Who?! Me?! No, honest! On my mother's grave! I was lookin for me ankie!"

"Ankie? What's that then? This is the 14th century you dosy toe-rag - they've not bin invented yet. You use your sleeve or let it drip in your porridge like the rest of us. Two hours on the treadmill tomorrow mornin, 10 till 12."

"Ey! This is a fit-up! That's when the two tons of salted pork is due!"

"Is it? Oh hard luck. And you! Brother Boniface! What are you

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sniggerin at then? You're takin delight in brother Anselm's predicament. That's a sin!"

"No I wasn't Father Abbott. I..I..er..I'd just remembered a joke I came across yesterday in an illuminated manuscript!"

"Pull the other one! There isn't a funny line in the whole of the New Testament! One hour on the treadmill tomorrow - 12 till 1."

"Jeezus! That's when the flayed ox is turning up, and the forty hogs-heads of lager!!"

"Oooo Wot blasphemy! That'll be another half hour!"

Translated by Ron Horsefield

INTENSIVE CARE

John Royson

"Wakey-wakey Mr Buckley! Feeling any better now? If you can just sit up a minute to help us get this over with." He was dragged out of his thoughts by a staff nurse who looked as though she would be irrepressibly efficient. Not even light outside, and she was bustling round like a muscular WRAC sergeant who'd just come from a plunge in some icy lake and relished getting back into her Tweed underwear whilst still wet.

"Don't worry now. This little lot will speed you on the path to a quick recovery." He was less distressed by her clichés and guide-mistress manner than by the handful of very surgical instruments she was making no attempt to conceal. She also drew the folding screens round his bed with one sweep of her powerful forearm.

"Needn't let any of the early risers see what's going on, need we."

"Wuungh eeengh goongh uungh!?" he squeaked in alarm.

"Just lie back and relax please. This won't take long." All the equipment was assembled on a stainless steel tray then she leaned over him to inspect his mouth. He drew back instinctively.

"No, we'd never get in through there." She picked, with her fingernail at the corner of a huge sheet of Elastoplast covering his face. "Brace yourself a moment. It's best to do this quickly." Zzzzzziippipp!! She ripped the plaster off with a beefy flourish. The yelp of pain which followed was heard three wards away and it burst a couple of stitches in his mouth.

"No need to be such a baby. Now let's see if we can find a way through all that mess there." She poked around amongst the suppurating blubber and gristle, jabbing her finger upwards until it eventually disappeared into his face up to the second knuckle.

"There we are! No trouble at all." She produced something like a giant pencil and shoved it up into the located orifice to keep it open. His complexion had turned the colour of leaf tripe and perspiration was trickling into his eyes. He blinked them clear to watch as she plunged her hand into a pot of what looked like bacon fat then began to smear generous dollops of it along the length of a long rubber tube coloured brick red like bunsen burner piping. When the night nurse came round with a funnel and a two pint plastic jug he didn't want to see any more. But he felt the bung being removed and cold fingers thrusting the end of the greasy tube up into the raw flesh of his nasal cavity, felt it being pushed and eased round past his sinuses until it was bent round touching the back of his throat like flexible rods cleaning out a drain. Then it slithered over his pharynx and dangled into the back of his mouth. The nurse was paying it out like rope and in her enthusiasm went so fast that the live end, thrashing round like a snake's head in his gullet, bumped up against his epiglottis. He felt as if he was swallowing a long coil of snot still attached to the inside of a complete stranger's nose. He started to gag, but she called out to him

"Hang on now! We're nearly there!" and with a vigorous wrench shoved the tube past its obstruction and slid in what felt like an extra couple of yards for good measure.

The presence of this slimy pipe dangling in his viscera created an almost metaphysical sense of repugnance. There was a feeling of choking on strings of toad spawn or being stroked internally by a leprous finger. He heard the slop and glug-glug-glug as a soupy mixture was poured into the funnel above then waited, for a seeping of warmth into his stomach. But unfortunately the tube hadn't finally located itself in that region. He exploded with convulsions as the liquid food poured through his trachea into the right lung. A porridgy mixture was sprayed all over the ward., he was sick again like a fountain, the shock of coughing hammered at his head, and when the nurse pulled the tube out he felt she was drawing some dead animal's intestines back up through his mouth. But eventually, with an even more liberal application of grease, she managed to work the tube all the way back again and this time got it to slither down into his oesophagus. The pre-digested baby food they poured into him

(boiled haddock with egg and noodles) had meanwhile gone chilly in the cold air of early morning, but at least he couldn't taste it and managed to keep the stuff down whilst it was globbing slowly through the tube. With the worst part over he opened his eyes to see the muscular sister holding the funnel up in the air to keep a hydrostatic head on it, her hand tight under the conical section as if she were throttling it. She radiated goose-flesh and carbolic in her medical green uniform, yet because of his supine position he noticed that he could see the curly tufts of hair in her armpits as she stretched upwards. Her face was broad, tough, and masculine, the one half of her figure he could see was, appropriately enough, what people called 'matronly', and he could imagine the strapping pediment on which this superstructure was built. The mousey little night nurse was infinitely more attractive, yet the sight of a dark brown bush sprouting from the tender zone of its axillary cup made her inordinately desirable to him. It wasn't fetishism: he just suddenly felt an onrush of appreciation for this woman's surely neglected qualities. The damp curliness next to her white skin was an obvious reflexion of a similar conjunction of textures which in fact was immediately adjacent to his face as she stood in front of him. He began to imagine the colossus unsheathed, revealed in all her naked susceptibility and power. Obviously he was getting better. The resurgence of pleasant feelings was recharging his batteries. An onrush of freshly stimulated blood sent the worm-like glans into a state of almost structural rigidity. He gazed up into the perspiring beard whilst being fed, looked full into the nurse's face as she glanced down to check progress with a nod, and so long as he concentrated on his harmless little fantasy of the shedding of power as she removed her cloak of office, her submission before him, and the gigantic proportions of her offering, all was well. But then his imagination began embroidering the images, he slipped into a state of carphological enthusiasm, and at the crucial moment she looked down, noticed, his eyes roll upwards and his tongue loll out, then saw the delirious thrashing, and yanked the funnel away in disgust, "You filthy pig!" She grabbed the metal tray, pushed his screen back, and stormed off down the ward towing Bernadette in her wake.

He was left exposed and unattended but felt gloriously relieved. What a shame she had taken offence. Even though they often irri-

tated him, deep down he felt sorry for Puritans. He sunk back on the pillow and snuggled down into his covers, revelling in warmth and clean linen. And. in that sensually protective nest, whilst other inmates around him were being woken for bed wash and dawn was expanding to a brilliant morning outside, he sunk down into another bout of deep curative sleep - with the tube still dangling out of his nose.

AUTUMN

The old man's mind reflected
On that cold December day
Glimpses of nostalgia
For his home so far away

Autumn homes for autumn years
He heard his family say
You're growing old and senile Dad
Well have you put away
"Oh no you wont" the old man cried
"I'm sound in wind and limb
I won't be pushed into a home
On such a paltry whim

I'm not as quick as once I was
A few short years ago
My hearing may not be so good
My eyesight's failing too
But by and large you must agree
I'm still your flesh and blood
Don't throw me on the scrap heap
Because it won't do any good.

Come now Dad remember your nearly seventy two
And mother's not here any more
To take good care of you
We can't find room to house you
In our eighteenth storey flat
But when you've been to see us
There's been a. welcome on the mat

Ray Blyde



Lillian Bundlethorpe with baby Ralph, or perhaps baby Colin (left)
Cicely Cavendish with baby Colin, or perhaps baby Ralph (right)
Photo from the Ralph Bundlethorpe family archive
All rights reserved pending litigation

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Ralph Bundleshorpe

Me cousin Ronnie died last year (72, stroke). And who should come over for the funeral but one of me other cousins Colin. He lives in America now and is a rich git. I'd not seen him for forty years even though as kids we were close, went to the same school and were born within a week of each other with our mothers (sisters) in adjacent beds.

In t'pub after t'interment he were a big hit reciting Albert Ate by Lions and telling us how he'd scoured Annapolis (where he lives) for some kidney to make a steak an kidney pie. Finally he finds one shop which can help. The butcher brings a bag out the back and says to Col: 'Your dog's sure gonna like this!' Yanks! They know nowt about fine livin. Even Col (half Yank by now) is ravin about the pint of mild in the Dog an Dart (rat piss) while I'm remonstratin about the lack of Mouton Cadet and the absence of Chicken Kiev on the menu. 'Ooo no!' says the landlord 'we don't serve that commie shite here! And as for the wine I recommend our excellent Casa Roja brought in special from Morocco.'

Then observin Col with his social graces an thick wallet I raise an issue what has obsessed me even since he made it good. 'Col,' I said, 'I'm convinced that I'm really you an you're really me. I suspect that as our mothers slept after all that labouring some stupid nurse picked us up from our cots, took us to a nearby table, wiped our arses, changed our nappies and put us back in the wrong cot. And that, subsequently, I should have gone to Cambridge to study English and Philosophy under that Ludwig Leavis, spent ten years in Belgium learnin business, and then wound up in America as vice president of the Warner Lambert drug company, got a mound of money when Merck bought them out, dumped the missus for a younger tart an finally retired from New Jersey to Annapolis to live in a huge gaff in 13 acres on the edge of Chesapeake bay on which I sail my yacht. Consequently I believe some compensation should be forthcoming from the undeserving beneficiary of this accident. And since I find I have inadvertently left my wallet at home I'd be obliged, for starters, if you could see your way clear to order me

another glass of Casa Roja an a bag of pork scratchins.’

‘You mad sod Ralph’ he says. ‘What you’re grappling with is the problem of identity. If you’d gone to Cambridge instead of the local tech you’d have a firmer grip on these concepts. Me an Ludwig often discussed this kind of thing. F’r instance if I remark that I still have the axe my grandfather used a hundred years ago but since he died it’s had two new heads and three new handles you can see something queer is goin on – just as if I wonder at what exact point my sofa-bed changes from being a sofa to become a bed. As for wantin to be someone else that’s common enough. You might say you wish you was Mick Jagger or the Duke of Edinburgh – as aspirant oiks do – but to say this is to say you wish you’d never existed since Mick and the Duke exist already. What you really want is for you, Ralph Bundlethorpe, to look an sing like Mick Jagger, to own a chateau in the Loire valley, an to shag Jerry Hall, Tina Turner an a million other fit tarts. Or if you was the Duke you’d like the great uniform as top dog in the Army, the Navy and the Airforce, you’d like to insult wops, chinks an other assorted darkies an have your subjects say that Duke! He’s a geezer i’nt he! Wot a bloke! An you’d like to live in Buck palace and have other large gaffs dotted about and be able to wander down the corridor an give the Queen a good seeing to an praps remark, while so doin, that she’s not quite as horny as she looks on a tenner. An while doin all these things, unbeknown to the rest of the world, you’re still Ralph Bundlethorpe underneath. Is that barmy or what?’

Well, I was a bit gobsmacked by this tirade. It fair stopped me in me tracks. That Ludwig Leavis must’ve bin a right weird bugger if that’s what he talked about in the pub. I had to think of some rebuttal – all t’other cousins were listenin intensely to this joust. ‘Appen there’s something in what you say Col,’ I replied, ‘but if I remember correctly granddad never had an axe an even if he did that Leavis bloke is talking bollocks. If you claimed to have his axe an then I came along an said I’d kept the cast off head and handle of the first exemplar then it’d be obvious to anybody that I’d got his axe an not you.’ Then takin a swig of me Casa Roja and rememberin a question from last week’s pub quiz I thought I’d humiliate him further by asking ‘And tell me Col what *is* the capital of Peru?’ But the bugger

not only knew that but went on to describe how he'd stayed there once in the mansion of the Minister of Health. Cousin Derek stuck up for me 'Yis Ralph. That axe stuff is all balls and babies do get mixed up in the ozzie – I've read about it in the Sunday Sport. You *could* be Col I reckon. And I've always wanted to be George Best – until he croaked that is.' But me other cousin, Mavis, mad cow, corrupted praps by Col's largesse as women are prone to be, pipes up 'No Dek! Col's got a point. Just when *does* a sofa bed stop being a sofa and become a bed? Just thinking about it does me bleedin head in!'

A week later he's back in Annapolis (next funeral will probably be mine). But I'm still smartin over t'whole business an still convinced we'd bin swapped by some idiot nurse. Gets talking to me mate Eric who was with me at Tech. Now he *was* a clever sod. Came top in HNC Maths. Then, later after a career in the drawing office, he took an OU Sociology course. One of his tutors was a Workers Revolutionary Party member who dropped out after Gerry Healy got dumped and Vanessa Redgrave took over. We met in my local, the Cock and Trumpet, where the landlord knows my foibles. Eric had a pint of lager while I had me usual Kiev on a bap with a glass of Mouton Cadet. Eric soon got to the nub of things.

'Essentially Ralph it's nature and nurture. Fascist pigs like your cousin think they're born special and therefore deserve everythin they get. They'd be bright buggers and a success even if they were brought up by druggies on a sink estate. But us radical intellectuals (ie *Guardian* readers) reckon it's all nurture. You're not born special at all – you're just contingent flotsam on the rip tide of late capitalism.

Here's an example. Say Einstein's parents had gone with baby Albert on a holiday in the Congo. On their last night they eat too many deep-fried woodlice and get absolutely bladdered on fermented goat's milk – the specialities of their Ituri pygmy hosts. Next day they have to dash for the boat and, still feelin groggy, they snatch up not Albert but little Mbongo who's holidayin in the same hut. They're back in Heidelberg before they realise their mistake. Mbongo's parents are puzzled too but as the years pass they come to see that little Mbongo (aka Albert Einstein) is a much valued member of the tribe who can see much further, being twice as tall,

warn them about lurkin lions and reach really fat woodlice high up on the treetrunk. Meanwhile, back in Germany, the real Mbongo grows up. Well - not exactly *up* since the poor little sod stops at two feet six, but he learns German and goes to Heidelberg university. He fits in well being an Einstein and although they have to give him a high chair in the lecture theatre so he can see over the desk he's soon swapping ideas with top jockeys like Max Planck, Ernst Mach and Ludwig Boltzmann. Now it must be quite obvious to even the most obtuse observer that the real Albert Einstein – now Mbongo of the Ituri pygmy tribe – will never come up with the Special Theory of Relativity as long as his arsehole points downwards whereas, *mutatis mutandis*, it's almost a racing certainty that the real Mbongo – now known as Albert Einstein – *will* write something like the 1905 paper on Brownian motion which established once and for all the reality of the atomic hypothesis. Ergo we conclude that upbringing is key and that if you'd bin brought up in the Cavendish household – still a pokey little two up two down terrace I admit but with a dad who was in accounts at Crosfield's and helped you learn your French irregular verbs instead of the Bundlethorpe establishment with a dad who, admittedly won a cup for cricket in 1933 and was asked to go and trial for Lancashire but who, nonetheless, knew as much about quadratic equations as the Ituri pygmies – you too would have gone to Cambridge and become VP of Warner Lambert.'

'Christ Eric!' I said 'You're right! I *was* switched! I'm going to write to that buggar Colin tonight!' Eric took a swig at his pint and bit into his jumbo sausage roll.

'Americans are very litigious Ralph. I reckon you'll really put the shifts up him. No yank court is going to be impressed by all that bollocks about axes and sofa-beds, or the fact that he was a student of Ludwig Leavis. I reckon he'll settle out of court.'

'It's too late now for a major life change Eric' I said 'Justice is my main concern. I don't really want to sail a yacht on Chesapeake bay and a nation in which the steak and kidney pie is unknown is not somewhere I want to spend my last years. I might, however, buy a little git on the Haut Medoc near a Chicken Kiev takeout.'

A MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Bob Wild

Most of us used to treat Music as a bit of a joke which was a pity because the Music teacher, Mr. Edgar Lumsden, was an enthusiast and our attitude must have driven him to despair. He was a tall, painfully thin, narrow-shouldered man of about twenty-three with a shock of black, curly hair, prematurely streaked with grey. What was distinctive about him though was the extraordinary Adam's apple which ran up and down the front of his neck like the mouse up the clock in the nursery rhyme. We used to compete with each other to chime in its movements with a recitation of Hickory Dickory Dock.

Mr. Lumsden was highly strung, volatile, and much given to shrieking and the demonstrative gesture. If we sang out of tune or got the timing wrong he would throw his head back, screw up his eyes and open his mouth extremely wide to form an elliptical "O" and wail "No! No! No!, whilst stamping his foot and violently flapping his hands from the ends of his upraised arms. Had he started us off on songs with catchy tunes like the ones we had learnt at the junior school such as "Bobby Shafto's gone to sea", or "What shall we do with a drunken sailor", or even songs like "Cherry Ripe" and "Sweet Lass of Richmond Hill", songs we knew and could sing, he may have stood a chance but they weren't in the curriculum. "Saw a youth a morning rose" was not what kids with flagged back yards were into and "Who is Sylvia, What is she?" evoked a variety of bawdy answers from the swains who would rather commend her to lend her grace to the streets behind Piccadilly Gardens than to anything even remotely refined. Most of his teaching-life Mr. Lumsden lived in deep despair because despite his enthusiasm most of us didn't like his kind of music, or wouldn't admit to anyone that we did, and he couldn't inspire us to change our attitude towards it. Part of the problem was that those who were learning the piano privately were so far ahead of the rest of us that we felt excluded and only those who could afford instruments got a chance to learn how to play one. Most of Mr. Lumsden's attention was given to the musically able: the rest of us had to content ourselves with singing, and singing gave us all sorts of scope for tom-foolery. The problem was compounded by Mr. Lumsden's inability to keep discipline. He

struggled to do so but because he had to play the piano whilst the forty of us sang he could not detect who were the trouble-makers. Even when he let us sing one of the songs we knew, he couldn't win. But what infuriated him most was the fact that we had alternative words for all the old songs and that we sang them blatantly despite their obscenity. "Men of Harlech" was perhaps our favourite:

*"You're the guy who fucked my daughter,
Filled her belly with spunk and water,
Now she's got a baby daughter,
Coming through the rye".*

Had Mr. Lumsden somehow been able to engage our enthusiastic gusto for songs with a good tune and real-life lyrics we could have won the Welsh Eisteddfod for him, but "Who is Sylvia!". "Who is Sylvia!". I ask you!

And despite his efforts at Christmas time to get us to sing the right words to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" the next lines for most of us were always:

*"Beecham's pills are just the thing.
Oh so gentle, Oh so mild!
Two for mother, one for child.
If you want to go to heaven,
Take two three four five six seven.
If you want to go to hell
Take the bleeding box as well".*

One day Edgar Lumsden kept me back amongst a dozen or so other boys: candidates for the school choir. I can say with certainty that nobody on that day longed for the wings of a dove more than I did but unfortunately Ernest Lough, the celebrated boy soprano, must have been using them at the time and God, about whom I had serious doubts even then, but to whom I none the less fervently prayed for deliverance, missed yet another opportunity to convince me of his existence. I would have given anything, even my best conker, to have been able to fly far away, far away out of the window and on to

A MUSICAL INTERLUDE

the football field where I should have been, and would have been, but for a tolerable rendering of "The Trout" by an invisible small boy standing behind me in the music lesson that morning. To my astonishment, after the class Mr. Lumsden asked me to come to an audition for the choir at one-thirty. Despite protests that I was down to play football and couldn't sing a note he said: "I'll be the judge of that. One-thirty this afternoon".

At one-thirty those of us who had been earmarked for the choir flocked in from the playing-field and clustered round the music-room door. Edgar Lumsden, or Elgar Lumsden as we called him for reasons unknown to most of us, said he would listen to us one at a time: "to separate the sheep from the goats" was how he put it. Unfortunately, because my name began with a "W", I was almost the last to be heard so I had to listen to all the other boys, bleating away, for most of the afternoon.

When at last it came to my turn Mr. Lumsden stood close beside me, his head cocked upwards to one side, his large Adam's apple quivering in his throat and his big, round eyes fixed high on the music-room ceiling as I attempted to emulate the famous Master Lough. I got as far as: "far away, far away would I . . ." when he interrupted me.

"Yes, that will do. Coat!"

"Goat?!" I shouted back at him in shock and disbelief, imagining hours of agony on stage rehearsing for school concerts or up there on show during morning assembly to be sniggered at as a sissy.

Mr. Lumsden looked at me impatiently.

"Coat!, I said, not goat! Get your coat and go and join the others".

Greatly relieved, I followed the flock of rejects down the corridor and out through the door into the fresh air. It was too late for a game of football but at least I wasn't in the choir, and that was certainly something to sing about.



AN INCIDENT IN SAINSBURY'S

Gilbert Harrington

When we got to the checkout Big Irma seemed to be having trouble reading my Visa card. I knew it was Big Irma coz she was wearing a thin lycra top, several sizes too small, on which was embroidered "Big Irma – I Love to Serve". Finally, with an exasperated sigh, she squeezed her huge tits together with her upper arms, leaned forward, and said:

"Give it a whizz through there chuck. That should clean it up"

"Are you sure?" I said querulously "I can pay cash"

"Gerronwivit you miserable old git" she demanded. But it still didn't work.

"It'll have to be plan B" she said. At this point she popped the card into her mouth, and sucked hard. I could see, among the fetching indentations of her cheeks, the outline of her mobile tongue as it scurried vigorously up and down the magnetic strip. She rolled her eyes lasciviously.

"That usually does it" she said. And indeed it had, but I was more concerned for my companion Bob who had come with me after spending an introductory morning on the Internet. The banana he clutched seemed to be bursting out of its yellow-black skin. His face was red and his eyes bulged. Without a word he ran to the toilets.

"Bob!" I shouted, "You'll lose your place in the queue!" And indeed I was astonished to see a long tail of customers stretching back into the store although all the other tills were free. They were mostly old gits like myself, many holding only one item; a tube of Steradent or a tin of beans and all, without exception, clutching a garish rectangle of plastic.

"Wot's wrong wiv him then?" asked Irma.

"He's probably forgotten his credit card" I said.



THE AWAKENING.

Steve Howarth

I inched into the pitch darkness of the cubicle. A faint body odour lingered in the air from the previous occupant. As my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I could make out a small, square grille through one wall and below it a place to kneel. There was a thin light through the grille but this was obscured by a curtain, the colour of mud.

A tightness gripped my stomach as I knelt down, bringing my face to within a few inches of the grille. The wooden knee-rest lacking a cushion began to bite into my flesh so as I waited I transferred my weight from one knee to the other.

After a lifetime, a faint rustling sound from the other side of the curtain signalled that he was ready so I began.

'Bless me Father for I have sinned. It is two weeks since my last Confession.'

'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, tell me, my son, what sins do you want to confess? If you are truly sorry and make a good Act of Contrition together with a firm purpose of Amendment, I will absolve you from these sins in the eyes of Almighty God.'

I winced in the darkness. The Irish voice betrayed Father Anthony a man notorious for his stiff Penances. My heart sank. I launched myself into the litany of sins I had prepared.

'I have missed my morning prayers four times.

I have missed my Grace before meals three times.

I have disobeyed my mother four times.

I have thought bad thoughts about people five times.

I was inattentive at Mass twice.

I was late for Benediction.'

My voice trailed away. When you are only eight years old, you have no more than a passing acquaintance with the small change of sinning.

Father Anthony suffered with his sinuses and made a high-pitched whistling sound when he breathed. I found this noise fascinating

and my thoughts began to wander.

'Is that all?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, Father'.

'Then for your Penance say six Our Fathers and six Hail Marys and make a good Act of Contrition'

On the other side of the curtain I could picture Father Anthony, a pink, plump man, with small white hairs growing out of his nose and as he intoned the words of Absolution, I calculated that the Penance would take me the best part of a quarter of an hour.

I emerged from the box to be met by the blank stares of those still to be unburdened of their guilt and there was a good deal of shuffling and grunting as they stood up to let me pass along the pew. My footsteps echoed as I walked over to an empty part of the church, found a suitable bench, knelt down and began my Penance.

The calculations proved to be too pessimistic and in a little over ten minutes I had finished and was ready to leave.

I stepped into the aisle, genuflected, made the Sign of the Cross and turned on my heels to the back of the church. I was about to leave when I remembered my mother's instructions to light a candle for my grandfather, so I turned to the far corner where there was a big, black crucifix, lit by the flickerings of some three dozen candles. I put my two pennies into a wooden box and selected a candle, lit it from one of the others and fixed it into one of the vacant holders. I knelt down once again and said a short prayer to God, asking him to make my grandfather better. He had been an invalid for as long as I could remember. Deep down I didn't feel God could help, but after all, they were my mother's instructions. Whilst I was talking to God, I asked him to help Manchester United to beat Liverpool the following afternoon. I felt I had more chance of success with this one than with grandfather.

I walked out of the church into the evening drizzle. I felt a great sense of relief, a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. On Monday morning, when Mr. McLean, the headmaster asked who had been to Confession and Communion, I could raise my hand with the rest of them. To be in a state of Grace was a good

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feeling, it was a thrill to realise that if I was knocked down by a bus at this very moment, I would miss out Purgatory and go straight to Heaven. I looked forward to going to Communion on the Sunday morning, the bit I didn't like, though, was going without my breakfast. By the time Communion came I was always starving and I had to resist the urge to chew the Host into little pieces.

In between the routine of going to Confession every two or three weeks, I passed my time doing two things. Firstly, I went to school and secondly, I played football. As an only child I had lots of time to myself. My parents both worked, and I spent most of the time kicking or heading a ball against a brick wall. My mother didn't encourage me to play with the other kids in the neighbourhood and the ball was my best friend.

About ten days after Liverpool had handed out a severe beating to Manchester United, I was, as usual booting the ball against the wall. My only mate, Eric Gomersall was defending the goals, which were marked out in chalk. Around the corner came a gang of five boys and rather surprisingly, one girl. Among them I recognised Raymond Harrison, a bigger boy of about fourteen. Three of the others saw the ball and ran towards it, jostling and pushing each other, trying to get the first kick. One of them caught it a good wallop and sent it soaring into the air, narrowly missing a bedroom window and it finished up about thirty yards along the street. That was the end of the game.

'We're goin forra walk on t'canal' Ray said to Eric, 'D'yer fancy comin?'

'Sure, Ray.' said Eric, to my disappointment.

The big lad must have noticed my crest-fallen expression for he looked down on me and said,

'D'you wanna come too?'

'Sure,' I said, 'But I'll need to get my ball first' As I scampered down the street to retrieve my ball, my mother's continual warnings rang in my ears. The canal was a dangerous place. Raymond Harrison was a bad boy, a tearaway from a rough family. I put these thoughts to the back of my mind and trailed after the rest, my ball cradled under my arm.

We trudged through the rows of terraced houses towards the Roch-

dale canal. Usually these expeditions were interrupted by some good-natured wrestling or a spot of stone throwing target practice, but on this occasion, their tread was purposeful and there was an air of expectancy about them that I couldn't understand. The presence of this girl puzzled me too. Normally girls were totally excluded from our company. I knew this one Stella Phillips, she was in the top class at our school and would be leaving this summer. The pace quickened and we soon reached the canal, a grey fetid gash amid grey buildings. I was surprised to see Ray act the perfect gentleman with Stella, holding her hand and helping her over the wall. The rest bounded over, vying with each other to be the highest and the quickest. Eric helped me up then climbed over himself. Ray and his mate Alan led the way along the canal bank, Stella and the others in single file behind with me and Eric bringing up the rear. We walked along in silence, except for Stella, who seemed strangely excited, and was giggling and speaking in a loud voice.

About a mile along, we reached an overgrown patch of waste ground which had once served as allotments, a sooty oasis in this bleak wilderness, squeezed between a disused mill and a chemical works. Rusted iron railings marked the former boundary. There was a number of gaps where the railings had been bent and mangled and to my surprise, Ray stepped through one into the allotments. Stella and the rest followed him and I was about to clamber through when Ray put his hand on my chest and said,

'You'd better stay here and keep a look-out, give us a shout if anybody comes'

'Sure, Ray' I said, wanting to please, so I stayed behind at the entrance while the rest disappeared into the undergrowth. I could not understand this at all. The allotments were not one of our usual haunts and the only person that came this way was the lock-keeper and he wasn't a fast runner anyway.

I squatted there for about half an hour becoming more and more uneasy. I passed the time throwing stones into the canal and watching them make rings in the oily surface. I wondered what they could be doing. There was no real room to play any decent games. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me and Eric emerged, red-faced and flustered.

'Come on, it's your turn now.' he said, 'I'll keep a look-out'.

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'My turn for what?'

'You know.' he said and pushed me towards the interior, knocking me off balance and making me drop my ball. I retrieved it and clambered inside.

At first, I couldn't find them and I blundered about in the muddy undergrowth, then I almost stumbled across the group, sitting and lying on the grass. My jaw fell open. Four of the boys had taken their trousers off and Stella was lying on her back, her skirt up around her waist and her bare, white legs spread-eagled. The ruddy tinge on her cheeks was the only indication she was taking any interest in the proceedings.

'Go on, quick it's your turn.' said Ray in his off-white underpants.

I looked at him in puzzlement, trying to keep my eyes from looking downwards. I could feel my face beginning to burn with embarrassment. I tried to say something but it just came out as a gurgling in my throat. I stood there mute and still.

'Give us yer 'and.' he said, grasped my palm and thrust it downwards to the mound of fine hair at the top of her legs. The whiteness of her thighs dazzled me and gave me an excuse to close my eyes.

The warmth of this contact shot straight up my arm, engulfed my whole body and came to rest somewhere deep inside my stomach.

I recoiled horrified.

'Let's see yer prick.' demanded Ray, this time his voice threatening.

Anxious to please, I unbuttoned my fly and exposed my limp willy, holding it delicately between my thumb and forefinger.

The others began to guffaw and howl with laughter.

'He dun't know what it's for.' chortled Alan.

'He's a proper mammy's boy.' yelled another.

Tears welled up and everything began to swim in front of my eyes. I turned and ran, their cackling ringing in my ears, my fly still undone. I stumbled and fell into the mud, scrambled up, blundered past Eric at the fence and ran back down the canal, blubbering and whimpering.

A week later it was my time for Confession once again. The painful

events in the allotments had been constantly on my mind. I knew that I had been a party to something wrong. It felt wrong. It must be a sin. The guilt weighed heavily. But what sort of sin was it?

I searched through my Catechism, all the usual stuff was there

Who made you?

God made me.'

Why did God make you?

God made me to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next.

It was all there, the Beatitudes, the Commandments, the Deadly Sins, but none of them seemed to fit the happenings in the allotments.

Back in the confessional, I waited, my heart pounding, dreading the coming ordeal. I listened to the preamble mechanically. How could I possibly ask for forgiveness for this unmentionable sin?

As if from a vast distance, I heard him ask what sins I wanted to confess, so I took a deep breath and began.

'I have missed my prayers four times.

I have disobeyed my mother six times.

I have thought bad thoughts about people three times.

I was eating sweets during Mass.

I er-'

Silence.

'Yes my son?'

'I er-'

'Yes, what is it?'

'I have committed adultery' There it was out.

A long silence. It was probably the worst sin he had ever heard.

'Tell me, my son, what exactly did you do?'

'I er- touched a girl'

'Where did you touch her?'

Silence.

'Was it above or below the waist?'

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This was a strange question.

'Below'

I figured that must be worse because there was a further long silence.

'How many times?'

'Once.' Surely people didn't do it more than once. Another silence. I waited while he considered the heaviest possible Penance.

'Well for your Penance say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys. But remember, my son, you must say a decade of the Rosary to Our Lady whenever you come into temptation. You must pray to her for she is the Queen of Purity and she will help you to resist the temptations of the Devil. You must remain pure in thought, word and deed. You must fight the temptations of the flesh and you must promise not to go with this girl ever again.'

As he said the words of Absolution, tears flooded my eyes, I sobbed silently with relief. I promised - oh how I promised - I would never do anything like it ever again. I would pray to Our Lady all the time, every day and she would keep me pure and protect me from the Devil.

I did keep that promise for quite some time, I even prayed once or twice to Our Lady, but the warmth of that touch lingered and was to remain with me for a long long time to come.



St Thomas Aquinas

TOM AND HARRY

Tom Kilcourse

Significant similarity between Harry Chump, a middle-aged Barnsley dustman, and St. Thomas Aquinas, thirteenth century theologian and philosopher, is not immediately apparent. Certainly, any likeness is effectively masked by the many differences. More than centuries of time separate the two men. On the physical level, artists' impressions of the saintly scribe suggest a noble figure most unlikely to be addicted to chip butties and Tetley's bitter, the main causes of Harry's misshapen hulk. Chump's sturdy frame, mounted on short, thick legs, is ideally suited to carrying heavy bins, and the button-bursting gut he hoists before him. This weighty structure would not fit readily into a pulpit. Intellectually too, the gap between saint and refuse disposal agent is sufficient to suggest a species gap. Harry's own mother has referred to her pride and joy as '...thick in th'arm and thick in th'ead'.

Yet, there are common characteristics, not least in their religious devotion. Harry is a god-fearing man, doubly so as a regular worshipper at his local Catholic church, and a member of the Salvation Army. This dual devotion causes problems for Harry, forcing him to sneak from his terraced house and past the church wearing a long raincoat, and hiding his uniform cap in a plastic bag to avoid searching questions from Father O'Gill. Such inconvenience is tolerated because the 'Sally' provides opportunities to play his beloved cornet. Even so, there are many devout men who are not bracketed with the medieval genius. What really brings Tom and Harry together is their shared revelation. Both men have undergone a similar experience, to St. Thomas during Mass, to Harry Chump as he tussled with a computer game. Though superficially the men's responses to their revelations were different, St. Thomas claiming that 'All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me', while the more prosaic Harry Chump simply exclaimed 'Bloody hell!'. The distinction has a cultural explanation, St. Thomas was cultured, Harry is not. More significantly, each man's behaviour was changed by the event. The saint, author of some eight million written words, ceased to write, and Harry, not

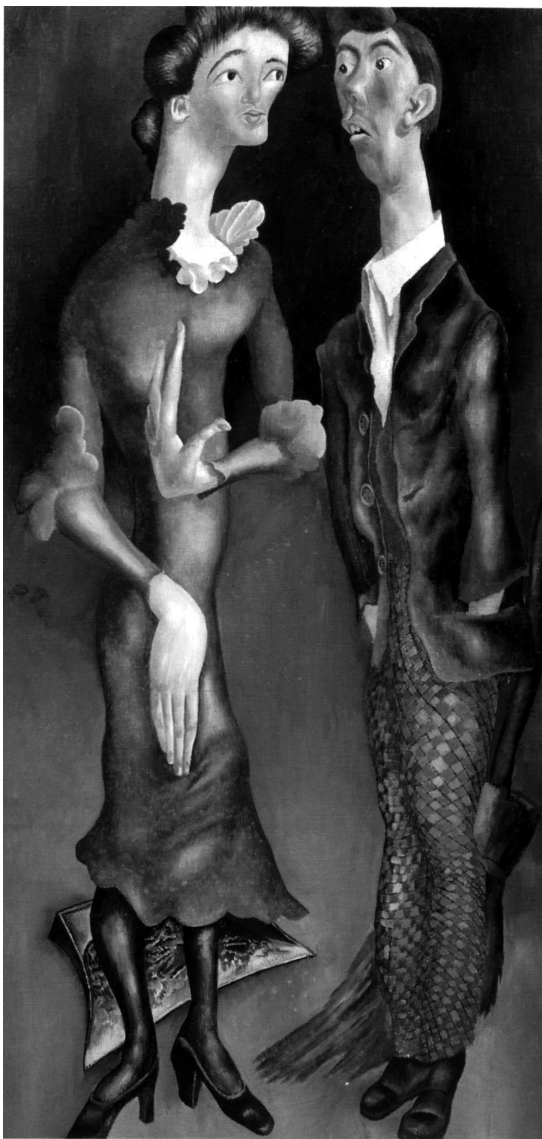
known for his literacy anyway, ceased to go to church, and to play the cornet.

Just as Aquinas refused to describe his revelation, Harry has always maintained silence on the matter, a rare quality in the normally garrulous Yorkshireman. When I first asked Chump for details of his vision he told me emphatically that wild horses could not drag it from him. Only later did he soften his line and accept three pints of Tet's. What he told me was truly staggering, and one can understand his reluctance to talk. Father O'Gill, among others, would be furious if advised that he was entirely superfluous and his lifetime's ministry was worth no more than what Harry described so evocatively as 'a bag of crap'. Essentially, Harry gained the truth straight from the horse's mouth, God, that is. While squatting before his computer, absorbed with the responsibility for saving the planet from invading space monsters, the holy dustman heard a voice, not a great, booming voice, as one would expect God to have, but a still whispering. Indeed, we use the word 'voice' loosely here, for Harry explained that he did not actually hear anything. Rather, the words were planted in his head, soundlessly. As I was given the information in the strictest confidence, I must ask the reader not to pass on what I am about to reveal.

Father O'Gill and his ilk, the Bishop of Bogsville, the Imam of Weston-super-Mare and Rabbi Lionel Goodmorning-Goodmorning are all entirely unnecessary to our relationship with the almighty, indeed they are impediments. We, every one of us, are linked personally to the creator. We have direct lines on which the proselytisers have no place: there being no need for switchboard operators. God revealed himself to Harry as an amorphous, timeless, massless entity to which all are attached. Tom, Harry, and your good self are simply terminals on a limitless, eternal net comprising all the thoughts and emotions that ever existed, or will exist. Our being is two dimensional, one part in the concreteness of the present, the other in the otherness we call God. During the waking day we exist in the first dimension, while at night we log-on in our dreams, surfing the spiritual net, sampling the thoughts and emotions therein, and adding to the whole. Furthermore, Harry revealed to me a cause for rejoicing, that a new messiah is in our midst, a man whose purpose is to bring

TOM AND HARRY

heavenly reality into our concrete day. Incredible though all this seems, I am convinced. What clinched it for me was Harry's use of the word 'amorphous'. He could never have made that up. Perhaps you would care to join Harry and me in prayer. Our father, which art in California, Bill Gates be thy name....



Beatitude 7 : Romantic Meeting
Stanley Spencer 1938

MYRTLE & REG

Rosemary Evans

Myrtle was meticulous, no-one could deny that.

"She's scrumptiously clean" said Gladys Poole who lived next door.

"She washes the kitchen units down with bleach every day and white-washes the inside of the dustbin."

"Gerraway!"

The eyes of the other two women moved in unison towards Myrtle's red front door. In the glass at the top a golden sun was setting over a black outline of Bo Peep while three bored sheep gazed into the immaculate hall.

The subject of their conversation appeared suddenly out of the entry and the women dispersed, trying to look dignified and uninterested. Myrtle was wearing rubber gloves and a flowery, plastic pinny over her neat summer dress.

She carried a bucket of soapy water and a cloth with which she began to wash the dusty hedge. When this was finished she took an old toothbrush from her pocket and cleaned out the soil from between the paving stones in the path. The small front garden was a fervent, nerve-jangling mass of colour. The minute a plant showed signs of flagging it was replaced by another, equally startling bloom. She had thought of filling the whole garden with plastic flowers but they would have to be washed every day and she really had enough to do. She knew that she was considered a bit peculiar, obsessive even, but she liked things nice and anyway the neighbours were a mucky lot. That Gladys Poole made you sick to look at her. Dirty feet flowing over split shoes, a huge backside that looked like a jelly on springs and the most enormous bust Myrtle had ever seen.

"Bet she has to tuck one under each arm when she takes her shoes off"

Her own slim figure was a source of great pride. Just wait till she finally said yes to Reg. Would he get a surprise!

Myrtle's one indulgence was a visit to the working men's club on a Saturday. She had a game of Bingo and two gin and bitter lemons and then left at about 10 o'clock. Reg Ruskin was the organist at the club. Most of the time the instrument was covered by a large plastic sheath, the removal of which caused vulgar merriment and ribald comments from the club members.

“Reg is getting his organ out”

“Oo-err. What a whopper!”

“Never seen a nodder like that before”

Myrtle was not shocked by these comments but she was not going to smile. She sat upright and expressionless, sipping her gin.

Reg was a dapper little man who worked on the bacon counter at the Co-op. He had wanted to be a professional musician but there was no chance of that if you came from his sort of background. All queers and midgets went into the entertainment business. There'd be no willie-woofers at the Co-op.

Reg had taken to Myrtle straight away. She was always smart and neat. No black toenails or hairy armpits THERE. Not like his mother with her mucky house and a bra held together with a nappy pin. Myrtle was a lady.

Romance blossomed gently. Reg didn't try any funny business in case Myrtle thought that he was vulgar. He didn't suppose she'd like sex much but after they were married she might be nice to him now and then.

The wedding was quiet and restrained. No-one got drunk and Myrtle looked as smart as ever in her day-glo pink two piece with white accessories.

They went straight back to Myrtle's house after the reception. Honeymoons were expensive and it meant leaving the place to get dirty for a whole week.

It was a bit nerve-racking for Reg. He stayed a long time in the bathroom so that Myrtle could get into bed and he wouldn't see anything. He mustn't be too eager. Eventually he crept quietly out and tiptoed into the bedroom. Half-hoping that she would be asleep. Myrtle was under the covers but she was smiling invitingly. Maybe it was going to be alright after all.

“You took your time didn't you?”

Her voice sounded harsher than usual and her eyes were glittering in a funny way

“Come here you sexy bugger”

Reg's mouth dropped open. She winked elaborately and swept back the covers. His eyes bulged. Jesus Christ he'd never expected this. Not Myrtle. She held out her arms to him but he backed away, clawing for the door handle behind him.

Myrtle's body, from neck to knee was covered in vibrant tattoos. A

MYRTLE AND REG

swirling mass of birds, butterflies and flowers and in the middle of her chest - St. George, proudly slaying the dragon.

Reg grabbed his suitcase and his new copy of *Organist's Monthly* and ran and ran, shaking with horror and disgust, all the way back to his mother's mucky maisonette. He would remember for the rest of his lonely life her parting barb:

“And you can take your *Onanist's Monthly* with you. You’re going to need it!”



Broadhurst's of Southport

DOSTOIEVSKY IN SOUTHPORT

P. Myshkin

I parked as usual behind the large store. It was a gloomy, cold mid-winter day with an icy blast that made me huddle in my expensive mac. To the north, across the bay, the flickering lights of Blackpool illuminations left their eerie spectral reflections on the lowering clouds. I could hear the grinding and moaning of the ice floes on the Marine lake. I hurried across Lord street and past the white tiled edifice of the Palace Cinema glimmering in the mid-day darkness. It was being demolished to make way for a boutique hotel. Rounding the corner of Market Street I entered the cosy warmth of the book-shop. I threw a contemptuous glance at the grey-haired crone behind the cash desk and rushed upstairs, excited by the prospect of great finds.

Stretched out on the upper landing with his right leg touching the opposite book-lined wall lay an ancient, grizzled, book-bibber in a filthy anorak. He was grubbing at a bottom rank of obscure Bohn classics. I regarded him with hostile amazement “Fucking pillock!” I muttered under my breath as I strode awkwardly over his leg. “A hillock you say sir?” he piped “Yes, it is a bit of a hillock, I’ll allow, but not one which an agile person such as yourself will have much trouble o’erstepping I’ll warrant. I am, you see, riddled with arthritis and find it impossible to accommodate your passage by standing up. I’m sure you will sympathise and understand being a fellow bibliomane”

‘What an oddly archaic locution’ I mused inwardly ‘And odd too that my own narrative is becoming replete with redundant Edwardian elaborations – it must be a Constance Garnett translation’. I entered the fiction room. Yes! There they were as I remembered from last week – two tall stacks against the wall inside the doorway. And yes! The great classic was still there but almost at floor level. How to extract it? Arthritis afflicted me too - in the hands - the baleful legacy of a lifetime’s bike riding, book-holding and masturbation. I gave the trapped volume a desultory tug and felt a stabbing pain in the thumb. Did my companion grin? I thought so and glared at him

menacingly. Having no other recourse I lifted off the top books and started a new stack in the doorway. I rushed, carelessly constructing the pile in my passion to get at the book. However, as I placed the great work on top, preparatory to opening it to check the translation, I slipped on a gobbet of phlegm, hawked up by my neighbour who had been spluttering continuously since my arrival. The whole stack crashed across the floor. A weighty Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables* complete in one volume) bounced off the ancient's head. My own prize disappeared under a welter of heterogeneous English trash. I lurched forward shouting "Fyodor! Fyodor! Where are you Fyodor!!" treading, in my intemperate haste, on the recumbent's testicles. He howled in agony. Were these organs also arthritical? Rediscovering the lost masterpiece I jumped up and headed for the stairs leaving a rubble of scattered volumes in my wake.

On the next landing I met the crone rushing up. Her hair stood off her head in an aureole of terror. "What's burning?" she yelled. I snarled, pushed her roughly against the psychiatry section and grabbed the banister. Just then the upstairs codger, still prone in some arthritic spasm, thrust his head through the stairway balustrade and yelled "The firedoor! He's looking for the firedoor!". The crone shrieked hysterically "It's an auto da fe!!" The man upstairs, suddenly realising that his head was now trapped between the narrow spindles like a child's in park railings, began to holler in panic. "I'll be roasted like a suckling pig!"

In an upper attic the bookshop owner stirred behind a locked door marked Victorian Pornography. Peyotr Nikolaievich Brodhursky appeared on the landing. His flowered waistcoat was undone, his bowtie askew, his striped shirttail poked out of his hastily buttoned fly. He looked down on the melee, grasped a red bucket full of sand and threw the contents down the stairwell. He'd filled the buckets himself on the beach. Their contents had the familiar tang of salt, excrement and crustaceans. I cursed him loudly, pulled a spider crab and two prawns out of my hair and continued my hurried descent.

The cash desk was, of course, vacant so I rushed at the door. There I was met by a young assistant who, trained to apprehend shoplifters, raised both arms and blocked my passage. "Sir!" he shouted,

“You must pay for the volume. We are poor shop assistants. You are stealing the food from our mouths!” A pertinent remark since he was, at that hour, preparing his customary lunch, frying bacon on paraffin stove. In the opposite corner, by the exit, an octogenarian fur-coated Jewess (there are many such in Southport) was assessing the *Jewish Slimmers Cookbook* with a foreword by Ariel Sharon. I dug into my pocket and produced a handful of coins – a sum far greater than the marked £3.50 price of my acquisition. “Judas!!” I yelled at the youth “Here’s your filthy lucre! But what have you done to deserve it? You are no better than a moneylender in the temple” and I scattered the coins into the back of the shop. He plunged after them greedily. The stove tipped over. A flaming trickle of paraffin and fat snaked across the carpet. The Jewess, alarmed at the commotion and perhaps reminded of the ovens at Auschwitz by the burning pork began to wail in that exaggerated Semitic manner. Further rumblings resounded upstairs as Peyotr Nikolaievich and the crone struggled to free the old git. There was a cracking of strained woodwork as the three of them fell into the Mountaineering section. As I ran through the doorway a tottering tower of Alan Bennett’s latest, stacked with hyperbolic optimism by the homosexual proprietor who was once a catamite of the tyke shirt-lifter, caught fire. A sprinkler spurted briefly and dried up. The fire alarm wailed. I ran up the dark street, back past the looming bulk of the doomed Palace and across Lord Street.

Before plunging into the alleyway next to Bargain Books I paused in the shop’s garishly lit doorway. Smug scousers in fur-lined tracksuits leafed through the biographies of footballers. Their mouths worked simultaneously at the vocabulary and a beefburger. Fat girls in crop tops, their sun-bed tanned flab hanging over their low cut jeans, fingered titles like “Humped and Dumped – He’s Fucked You now He’s Fucked off. How to Bounce Back”. I stopped in the doorway and harangued them, “This volume is worth more than the entire contents of this sordid emporium. You will all rot in hell!” A few heads turned.

I ran up the blackened brick alleyway. It stank of piss and dogshit. I crunched over half empty pizza boxes and splattered noodles. A pile of rags moved. A hoarse voice cried out “Excellency! A donation if

you please. I fear I am near death! £3.50 will buy me a mozzarella and tomato wrap and a latte to go! I beg you Excellency!!” I leaned over him. My eyes adjusted to the gloom. I snatched a half-empty bottle of Woodpecker from his hand and dashed it against the wall. “You miserable wine-sodden derelict” I bellowed “This is what’s killing you! And this...” I wagged the volume in front of his eyes “Is your salvation! If you only knew it” At this an adjacent sack resolved itself into a mangy mongrel. It growled and tugged on the string tethering it to a drainpipe. With surprising speed and ferocity it snapped at my fine Aquascrotum tearing off a considerable chunk. I sped on up the alley. The voice followed desperately “All right then...a quid...for a bottle of Perrier!” and then, after a short pause, fainter, “or perhaps a small torch to read by”

I got to my car and switched on the light. It was indeed the best translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky of, for me, the most fascinating of the master’s late works *The Demons*. And it had a foreword by the great Josef Frank. I began to read it enthralled. There was a tap on the window. I recognised the red uniform of the accursed traffic warden. “Fuck off you worthless bloodsucker!” I shouted through the glass “I am a simple servant of the State sire” he said pointing to his badge “In spite of your tirade I must issue a penalty notice.” He tapped the tiny keys of his machine but to no effect since he was wearing mittens. “Imbecile! Incompetent!” I yelled, starting my engine. As I reversed out my wing mirror smashed his preposterous gadget. He slipped on the rime-encrusted asphalt. My front wheel rolled over his leg. He bellowed in pain. His peaked cap rolled down the slope into a shop doorway. The lambent northern lights of Blackpool still flickered green and blue. Over Market Street, in the opposite direction, there was a red glow. I headed home, away from this sink of ignorance and greed.

BIGGLES PULLS IT OFF

Stefan Jaruzelski (trans)

Squadron Leader James Bigglesworth DSO, DFC and bar looked out of the window of his Douglas DC3 Dakota and saw an endless carpet of green unrolling 20,000 feet below. The forests of the Belgian Congo were an unexpected sight considering this was 1943 and that he was one of the best pilots in the RAF. His was a special mission to bring vital supplies from Angola to the beleaguered island of Malta. The mighty Pratt and Whitney R-1830-S1C3G Twin Wasp Radial engines droned reliably.

He turned to his navigator Ginger Hebbelthwait.

"What's Algy up to back there?" he drawled languidly lighting a Woodbine.

"Just checking the cargo sir" replied Ginger fingering a slide rule nervously.

"Perhaps you'd better go and look." said Biggles. Ginger disappeared into the rear of the plane. Half an hour passed.

"What the devil are those two up to?" Biggles muttered angrily. "Better go and find out for myself". The Dakota didn't have an autopilot but Biggles had rigged up his own version by lashing the control column to a strut with a spare pair of braces. He pushed through the cabin door and saw an astonishing sight. Algernon Lacey had his trouser fly undone and was rubbing his erect member while gazing fixedly at something lying on the sack in the middle of the hold. Ginger, standing behind him was similarly occupied. Both were groaning loudly and seemed oblivious to Biggles' presence. "What the blazes!!..." exploded Biggles. Suddenly they noticed him, turned red and became apologetically flaccid.

"Sorry sir" said Algy, "Couldn't help myself. I was leafing through this copy of the National Geographical magazine when I came across this picture of a Watutsi maiden suckling her baby. I mean sir - just look at her! She looks like a dead heat in a Zeppelin race!" "And what about you Ginger? What have you got to say for yourself?"

Ginger looked sheepish and then blurted out "I came up behind Algy sir and noticed, on the adjacent page, a picture of a young Ma-

sai warrior polishing his spear.” Biggles looked at the magazine closely. “That’s not a spear Ginger” he said.

“No. Do you think they hang weights off it sir?”

“Look” said Biggles decisively “I know these long haul freight operations can be tedious and that boredom inevitably leads to...erm...So let’s get this over with as efficiently as possible. Form a circle round the sack and reach round to grasp the todger of the man in front. Hence I’ll pull off Algy, Algy can deal with Ginger, and you Ginger can give me a good seeing to. Got that? Right ho! Trousers down”. Soon the three of them were grunting and groaning in ecstasy while the mighty Pratt and Whitney engines continued to drone reliably over the endless green of the Congo. After reaching a simultaneous climax and ejaculating noisily into the sack which comprised the cargo they fell back exhausted onto the floor. Suddenly a harsh voice boomed from the intercom. Biggles had inadvertently left the communication channel open.

“Squadron Leader Bigglesworth” the voice rasped harshly “Are you receiving me! This is Air Commodore Foreskine-Knobworthy speaking from Valetta control tower. That sack of fresh coffee is required for the prime minister’s breakfast tomorrow. I trust you are still on schedule. From what I overheard on the radio it sounded like the lot of you were tossing off in the cargo hold.”

“Bigglesworth, Foxtrot Alpha Golf, to Valetta Control. Everything in order sir. We had a slight problem with the seminal fluid pressure which was getting dangerously high. We’ve sorted it out now sir. E.T.A. Valetta is 1830 hours.”

“Don’t try and bullshit me with that techno nonsense Bigglesworth. I’ve been on enough dreary cargo flights to know what goes on. How are your mighty Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp Radials?”

“Fine sir. Steady at 4000 revs.”

“Good man. Look forward to your arrival. And close that radio channel. If Goebbels gets to listen in there’ll be hell to pay. Over and out.”

Valetta was in turmoil because of the prime minister’s visit. Biggles landed the DC3 with his usual aplomb, feathered his props and parked in a far corner of the airfield. Two burly MPs in a jeep whisked the sack off to the senior staff quarters. Biggles awoke early next day, gazed fondly at the still sleeping forms of Ginger and Algy

BIGGLES PULLS IT OFF

and then quietly left the Nissan hut with his goggles and flying helmet. Soon he was at 25000 feet over the blue Mediterranean. He managed to come out of the sun behind a Junkers 88 on its way to bomb the harbour and shot it down. Then he was ambushed by two Me 109s but with a quick climb and a tight turn in his borrowed Spitfire Mk VII he got behind them too and shot the pair of them down.

Later that day, in the officers' mess, he was approached by Air Commodore Foreskine-Knobworthy.

"Damn fine show Bigglesworth. Winston was delighted with the coffee. Said he'd tasted nothing like it since 1933. Said it took him right back to his days at Harrow. There was a flavour he couldn't quite identify but he finally decided it tasted just like a young boy's cock. So well done. There'll be a gong in this if I've got anything to do with it."

"Thank you sir. Perhaps the contributions of Hebbelthwaite and Lacey could be recognised too."

"Those two tosspots? I doubt it. By the way, somebody took off in a MkVII Spit early this morning. It came back with the guncovers shot away and later the navy reported three German planes in the sea. You wouldn't know anything about that would you Bigglesworth?"

"No sir. Sounds highly irregular" replied Biggles languidly lighting a Capstan.

Two days later Biggles was back in London. Knobworthy was as good as his word. He was to report to the King at Buckingham Palace to receive a bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross. The King was, as usual, looking grey and distracted. He stubbed a fag out on the arm of the throne as soon as his visitor appeared at the door. "B..b...b..b.igglesworth!! N..n..nice to s..s..ss..ee you again. And what is it th..this time? Another bar to your DFC?? I think you and M..m..att B..b.braddock could win the war on your own" He flipped open a small padded jewel case. Suddenly a speaker behind the throne rasped into life. It was the King's direct channel to Radio Berlin.

"Garmeny calling! Garmeny calling!" the familiar contorted accents

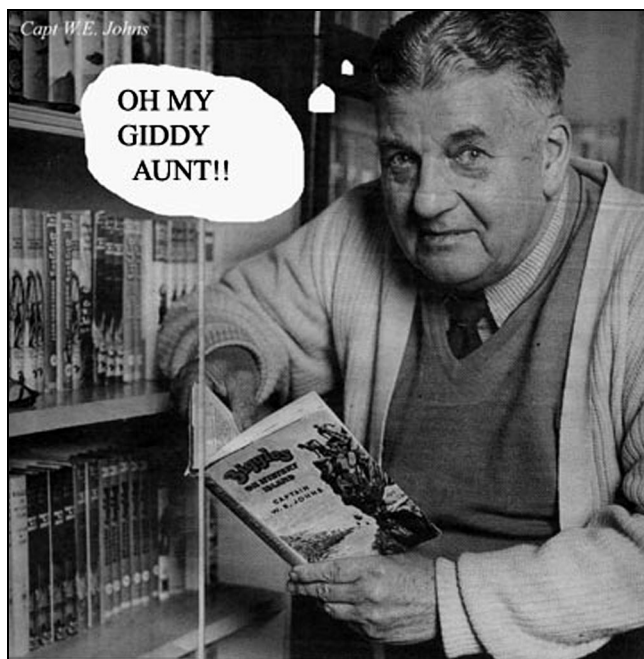
of Lord Haw Haw filled the throne room. "So Englishers. How do you like working fourteen hours a day through the freezing winter and living on dried egg and spam while your beloved leader, the international gangster Churchill, is sunning himself on a deck chair in Malta and drinking fresh coffee? Fresh coffee, I add, brought specially by air ace Squadron Leader James Bigglesworth in a privately chartered DC3 which could have been better employed bringing food from America. But then who cares about a few thousand workers dying of cold and hunger – the prime minister must have his perquisites. Also something of a waste to have national hero Squadron Leader Bigglesworth kicking his heels over the endless green canopy of the Belgian Congo. This flawed hero is, however, not what he seems. He and his equally degenerate crew decided to have an orgy at 20,000 feet, pleasuring themselves with a kidnapped Watsutsi maiden and, to cater for the perverted tastes of Hebelthwaite and Bigglesworth himself, a young Masai warrior. We end today's broadcast with a recording of the proceedings on the plane picked up by our monitoring station in North Africa."

The sounds of grunts, groans and ejaculations resounded through the throne room. The King went even more pale, snapped shut the jewel case and said:

"D..d..did I hear an air-raid s..s..siren? P...p...p...perhaps we'd b..b..better postpone this award to a m..m..more convenient time"

Biggles strolled back down the Mall. "Who needs a DFC anyway" he thought "I've got two already" He lit a Navy Cut languidly and re-orientated himself. "I know" he said "I'll go to the Charing Cross toilets. Might find Matt Braddock in there"

BIGGLES PULLS IT OFF



Captain W.E. Johns

THE CRAZY OIK COLLECTION

The Crazy Oik is available only from the Oik office at 10 Albert Rd, Grappenhall, Warrington WA4 2PG or from our South Manchester representative Bob Wild at 6 Rushford Ave Levenshulme Manchester (yes – he lodges with Ron and Enid Horsefield).

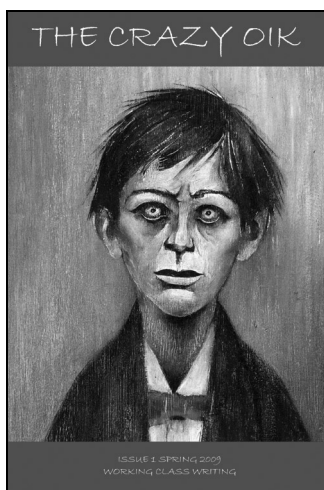
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THE CRAZY OIK COLLECTION.

BACK ISSUES



The Crazy Oik Issue 1

Spring 2009 - £3 – 96pp

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Bob Wild

Ray Blyde

Ron Horsefield

Tom Kilcourse

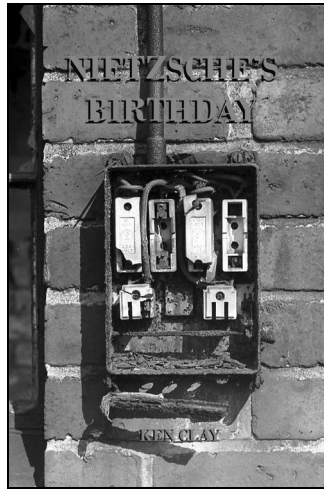
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NIETZSCHE'S BIRTHDAY



Nietzsche's Birthday – Ken Clay 140p

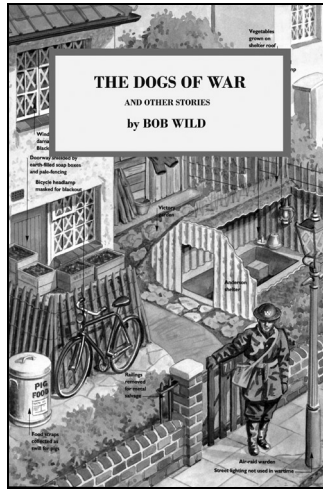
When the title story appeared in *Voices* in 1977 people wrote in saying it was disgusting. Ken wondered whether to write back saying that was exactly how blokes in workshops spoke – but then decide he couldn't be arsed. This story probably ruined his chances of writing for the parish magazine.

Maybe the Communist Party of Great Britain thought it was libelled too but it collapsed before a complaint could be lodged.

Feminists will also find Ken's difficulties with girls hard to read – as will women of a nervous disposition. Well, let's not put too fine a point on it -if you are middle class, a woman or a prude best give this one a miss.

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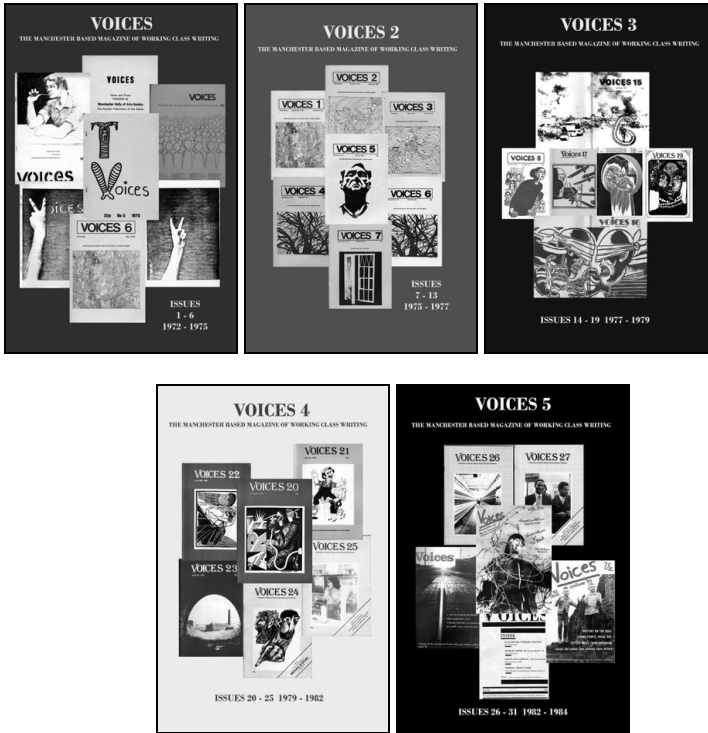


***The Dogs of War* – Bob Wild - 260pp**
ISBN 978-1-4092-8890-9

Bob Wild was born in the 30s in Prestwich Manchester. He became a printer who later went to University where he took a doctorate in Sociology. Back in printing he became Acting Head of the Printing Department at the Metropolitan University. He taught sociology at the Open University. He finished his National Service as a sergeant in the RAMC. This gave him an encyclopaedic knowledge of body parts. Bob's extraordinary powers of recall vivify these tales of oik life in the years of dearth. Many readers compare him to Proust. Putting down a story they usually say, with a sigh, "Well it's not Proust is it?" But if Bob had been born in Paris sixty years earlier and had a rich dad and cultivated Jewish mother (rather than the impoverished inadequates described here) and been ten times more intelligent he might well have written *la recherche du temps perdu*. He wasn't and he didn't but this is as close as you get in Prestwich. The style is classic oik-anecdotal and has some of the mannerisms of the great French master; the narrative suspended as we stand entranced before a butterfly or a bottle of Bovril, the catalogue of working class grotesques, the struggle for mother's affection, the gastronomic delights of the fish and chip shop. Just as Proust's great novel revealed treasures of cultivated sophistication to a country of philistines so Bob's account shows modern readers a society as odd and barbaric as that of the Ituri pygmies. Recommended (by Bob)

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THE CRAZY OIK ISSUE 2



VOICES 1972 – 1984

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