

THE CRAZY OIK  
ISSUE 21 SPRING 2014



# **THE CRAZY OIK**

**ISSUE 21**

**SPRING 2014**

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**The Stuff that Kills Germs Dead** and **The Rhetorics of Constipation** are from Keith Howden's **Gospels of Saint Belgrano** (PPP 2013)

**Facework** is from Tom Kilcourse's autobiography **It's Only Me**



Front Cover – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner *Female Nude  
with Hat* 1911 Museum Ludwig Cologne



The line "Whenever I hear of culture... I release the safety catch of my Browning!" wasn't actually one of Goring's but from a play by the Nazi writer Hanns Johst. Goring considered himself an art connoisseur and regularly backed a lorry up to the side door of the Louvre. Herman today would probably have a house full of Jack Vettrianos. The works of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner would not have been on his wish-list.

As the Nazi party took power in Germany, it became impossible for Kirchner to sell his paintings. In 1933, he was forced to resign from the Prussian Academy of Arts. Kirchner became increasingly disturbed by the situation in Germany, writing: "Here we have been hearing terrible rumours about torture of the Jews, but it's all surely untrue. I'm a little tired and sad about the situation up there. There is a war in the air. In the museums, the hard-won cultural achievements of the last 20 years are being destroyed, and yet the reason why we founded the Brücke was to encourage truly German art, made in Germany. And now it is supposed to be un-German. Dear God. It does upset me".

Hitler glorified the likes of Arno Brecker (see back cover) and put on an exhibition of Decadent Art in 1937. The exhibition included 25 works by Kirchner; later 639 of his works were removed from museums. Kirchner continued to work and organised a major exhibit in Basle, which received mixed reviews. Throughout 1938, he became increasingly upset with the situation in Germany. After Austria was annexed Kirchner became disturbed by the idea that Germany might invade Switzerland. On 15 June 1938, he took his own life in front of his home in Frauenkirch.



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## EDITORIAL

There's something of a European air about this issue. We continue with the fascinating autobiog of the Hungarian Ivan de Nemethy and precede his episode with a story by the Secretary General of the Slovakian Writers Society, Pavol Janik. This is followed by Jim Burns' review of Paris-Amsterdam Underground. Stretching a point we might remind readers that Tom Kilcourse lived in France for 17 years (but is now back in the UK) and that John Lee, formerly of Manchester, now lives in France and Spain, on which he reports in his story At O'Donnell's. Tanner too has emigrated from the extra-territorial region of Liverpool, about which he continues to write, like James Joyce in Paris, with a kind of *nostalgie de la boue*, to... Swindon?! Bob Wild has Irish antecedents and this allows him a character assassination of an innocent Irish dog-loving transvestite – just as Samuel L. Jackson can freely use the word “nigger” and Woody Allen take the piss out of Jews. A squib by PJ Fell celebrates another example of Irish masochism (Father Ted). Locals Keith Howden and Dave Birtwistle have a crack at the English scene, in case you were feeling deracinated.

On more metaphysical matters we recycle Rhian E Jones great rant on the oik cultural straitjacket and how to get out of it - by reading. Read loads. Read your bleeding head off. Read till your eyes drop out. I couldn't agree more and regard this as a healthy corrective to celeb hungry oiks who might be tempted to sign up for a creative writing course. I must thank Fred Whitehead of Kansas for digging this up. He has an astonishing radar for such things.

Apropos of creative writing I recycle a snippet I found myself. It's hardly obscure. Indeed Ian Jack's piece in the Guardian of March 8<sup>th</sup> was followed the week after by trumpetings from wounded pros in the subject – eg Jeanette Winterson, Blake Morrison, Toby Litt et al. Here's the original torpedo:

Hanif Kureishi thinks creative writing courses are a waste of time, which is a dangerous thing to say given that he makes his living (not, all of it, but probably; more of it than he does from his novels) as a professor of creative writing at Kingston University. Telling a story well took a rare skill, he told an audience at the Bath literary festival last weekend. He estimated that perhaps 0.1% of his students had it. Could it be taught? Kureishi didn't think so. Would

he pay money to take an MA in creative writing himself? "No... that would be madness."

We should feel sorry for all concerned: for a university that may consequently face a sharp drop in fee income; for Kureishi's students, who have paid £5,800 each (£12,700 for non-EU citizens) for their professor's useless course; and not least for Kureishi himself, biting the hand that fed him out of a rage confined as an occupation to those who had private incomes or the patronage of philanthropists and academics.

What tempts students towards such an unfeasible career? A clue lies on Kingston University's website: "A Kingston University creative writing MA graduate has been snapped up in a six-figure deal by one of the world's biggest publishers after her self-published books topped the Kindle download rankings, selling tens of thousands of copies." In other words, like winning the national lottery, it could happen to you.

Well, there you have it. Save your money – just read, write and subscribe to the Oik.

*Ken Clay April 2014*

## EMILIA”

“Pavol Janik”

*“Translated by Heather Trebaticka”*

That day Dr. Grossmann woke up feeling decidedly ill at ease. His wife was still asleep. Something was wrong. He could tell that at a glance when he caught sight of the dawn in the orchard through the closely gathered net curtains. He could rely on his first impression. It had never failed him. Never ever. In all his life. And that was not in just any life, but in his life - in the life of Dr. Grossmann. Those who knew anything at all about the world in which Dr. Grossmann had lived in the course of six purposeful decades and one harmonious marriage, should know what that meant. Dr. Grossmann was not in the habit of being mistaken. It could be said that as a rule he wasn't mistaken, although it is true that he was never mistaken - on principle. Appreciation of this rare characteristic of his could be seen in a number of souvenirs presented to him by grateful bank employees.

Dr. Grossmann slipped on a shiny dressing gown with the coat of arms of the Krasnohorsky family that was such excellent proof of his dear wife's aristocratic roots. He was proud of her noble birth. *Equis hungaricus* - that never failed to raise his practical spirit to starry heights. At such moments he understood the nobility of his life's endeavours, he realised the historical significance of his existence. He was fond of lofty thoughts, but everything in moderation - that was his primary belief.

Standing under the heavy chandelier, his back to the dawn, ignoring peacefully sleeping Emilia, he pondered that for a whole week now he had not left the house to go to the bank. That thought made him miserable. He had nowhere to hurry to, he had no reason to be irritable. Nothing was important, neither possessions nor honour, not even that pitiful carnation in the buttonhole of his jacket. It didn't matter what colour suit he chose. His life had lost its rules. There were no pivotal points in the calendar which had helped him manage his time so successfully. Not even the thought of his afternoon meeting with his friends in the Carlton Hotel could inspire him with any enthusiasm. He was looking forward to it, it was true, but surely that couldn't be his one and only prospect for the future.

He suddenly made a move without first ringing for Mancika. Who knows whether he had any reason for not ringing or whether he just didn't want to wake Emilia, but maybe it was because it had gone out of fashion, or because Mancika was no longer among the living.

Along the wall facing the window stood a row of heavy, dark wooden cupboards. Quite inexplicably, for the first time in many years, Dr. Grossmann went over to the one in the corner. It held all kinds of memorabilia. There was his grandfather's glass eye, which Dr. Grossmann, when he was not yet a doctor, but just a bright boy, had taken from his forebear's bedside table, so the respected pharmacist had had to procure a new prosthesis. Here was his school-graduation suit, in which he had so incredibly quickly been transformed from a school-leaver to an adult and respected gentleman. There were a hundred useless items here that he had never had time for. He had gradually stored his busy life in this cupboard, so that one day the cupboard would bear witness to the averted face of an active existence, would reflect the soul of a thinker, hidden beneath the fame of a renowned money man. The only important things in his life that were not in the cupboard were his love letters. Those did not belong in the bedroom. They lay at the back of the bottom drawer of his writing desk, tied up with a silk ribbon. As could be seen, Dr. Grossmann devoted as much attention to his emotional life as it deserved. Dr. Grossmann had an appreciation of spiritual values, even though service to the economy, nation and country pushed them into the background, into his little home museum, his modest corner reserved for memories. Even in the emotional sphere, Dr. Grossmann maintained order and style.

He stared briefly at this valuable piece of furniture, before suddenly and resolutely opening the door. It creaked horribly. Emilia was torn from her sleep.

“Heavens! What was that?!”

“Sorry, dear! Go back to sleep.”

“What's going on?! Is anything the matter?”

“No. Don't worry.”

(Emilia sat up and looked around the room.)

“Aren't you going to sleep any more? Should I wish you good morning?”



“Good morning to you, too, darling. Are you looking for something?”

(She cast a puzzled look at the open cupboard. Dr. Grossmann shrugged his shoulders as if at a loss.)

“I think I should tidy things up here. “

“As you like.”

She sighed and lay down again. Dr. Grossmann reverently pulled a shiny watch out of his pocket. Pure gold shimmered in his smooth hands. Its owner saw his eyes mirrored in the lustre of the superior metal. His hand put the watch to his ear. It had stopped. It was silent. It didn't care what time it was, it could even be said it scorned it. Next it was the turn of the coal black school graduation suit. Dr. Grossmann examined it lovingly and gently stroked its dark texture. On an impulse, he slipped off his dressing gown and hurriedly pulled on the shabby jacket. No easy matter, but he managed it. He dived into those commemorative trousers, too. Then he went over to the large wall mirror and admired his reflection. He was delighted to see how well he had preserved his appearance and figure throughout his life. He set great store by that. He believed that it not only reflected his wise lifestyle, good taste and healthy habits, but he was also convinced that it was an indication of his personality, his firmness of will and adherence to principle. He was trying to make the last adjustments to his clothing, when he discovered that he couldn't fasten the trousers, because just at that point the cloth was in tatters, damaged by the destructive work of clothes moths. This distressed him considerably. He didn't hesitate and in a moment he was again back in the haven of his dressing gown. So, even mementoes can disappoint a person. Dr. Grossmann dropped his school graduation suit indifferently onto the carpet. The buttons quietly clinked as it fell. Emilia stirred.

“Do you need something, dear?”

“On the contrary, dear. I don't need anything.”

“Not even my help?”

“Not even this useless school graduation suit.”

“And what are you going to do with it?”

“Well... I don't know... We'll throw it away, won't we?”

“That's a good idea. You're right. We won't.”

“Then I'll throw it away myself.”

“That's where you're mistaken. You'll hang that suit up again where it was. In the cupboard. In its place, where it belongs.”

“But, dear, you agreed I should tidy up here a bit.”

“Of course, but that doesn't mean you're going to throw away our property.”

“That can't be classed as property. It's an ordinary school graduation suit.”

“It's not an ordinary school graduation suit, it's *your* school graduation suit.”

“Of course, my forty-year-old extra-ordinary school graduation suit.”

“I'm glad you've got the point at last. And now you can happily hang it up where it belongs.”

“It belongs in the dustbin. It's no use for anything.”

“It will still come in handy.”

“Please, be so kind, don't be sentimental. We're not going to store things we don't need just because they remind us of something.”

“Why because they remind us of something?”

“What other purpose could this useless suit serve?”

“Wearing, of course.”

“Where on earth could I show myself in such an ancient suit?”

“At a funeral.”

“Whose funeral?”

“Whose funeral?”

“Whose funeral?.”

“You can guess.”

“Come on. I've no idea. Has someone died?”

“Someone - that's for certain.”

“And we're going to their funeral?”

“D'you want to go to just anyone's funeral?”

“Me? I don't want to go to any funeral at all. It was you who thought

that would be a splendid opportunity to use my school graduation suit.”

“And what don't you like about it?”

“Everything.”

“That's just like you. You don't like anything about me.”

“Who's talking about you, for heaven's sake?”

“You. Who else would add to my suffering?”

“But we're talking about a suit, not about you.”

“Trust you to contradict me.”

“Are we talking about the suit?”

“Yes.”

“I'm glad we're talking about the same thing.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

“And the truth mine.”

“What do I care about your truth. We're talking about the suit.”

“We're talking about the suit and about the dustbin.”

“That's where you're mistaken. About the suit and a funeral.”

“What funeral?”

“I've already told you, you must guess.”

“Is someone dying, or what are you on about?”

“Everyone will die one day, won't they?”

“Yes, that's very true.”

“I'm glad you agree I'm right. And now you can put that suit away in the cupboard with a clear conscience.”

“Listen here!”

“I'm listening.”

“Listen carefully!”

“Of course, I'm listening carefully.”

“Listen carefully to what I say.”

“I'm listening carefully to what you say, but so far you haven't said anything.”

“Tell me...”

“I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me whose funeral I could show up at in this school graduation suit?”

“You still haven't guessed?”

“Just imagine...”

“I’m imagining.”

“Just imagine, I really haven't guessed yet.”

“Well, just as I've already told you: I'm imagining. And there's nothing exciting about it. For heaven's sake. It should be something worth imagining. I'm imagining that you really haven't guessed yet. Well, so what?”

“Well, for heaven's sake tell me please, whose funeral I could show up at in this school graduation suit?”

“At your own.”

The clock on the wall was just striking the quarter. Dr. Grossmann cast an uncertain look at Emilia, the suit, the mirror and the gilt clock face of the pendulum clock. His beloved wife's words sounded so natural. There was a lot of truth in them. They contained nearly the whole truth and almost all of them were sincere. Emilia was always sincere, truthful and wonderful. There was nothing special about that. But all the rest was fundamentally new and strange. It didn't suit their flat, it didn't match the colour of their furniture. Above the garden the sun became a blotch in a wet sky.

“So you seriously think I'm going to go to my own funeral in that school graduation suit, do “

“I don't know if you'll go there. I even doubt it, but you'll get there somehow. There's nothing to worry about. You won't be the first deceased. Leave that to the bereaved. It's their worry.”

“Even so, there's one thing I don't understand. I don't understand why you think you will outlive me. That's not clear to me.”

“You see how many things are still not clear in our perfect family life.”

“I do see.”

“There was never anything wrong with your sight.”

"That's a fact, but even so, it's not clear enough to me why you presume you'll outlive me."

"You see, and yet it's so simple."

"Simple?"

"Simple."

"Then explain to me why you think that."

"Because it's so simple."

"But in spite of that, I don't understand."

"Don't let that bother you, I don't understand it either."

"Then it really is simple. At last I can understand it, too."

"What do you understand?"

"Do you know, I don't know."

"I know."

"You see how wonderful it is when we understand each other like this."

"That's a good reason for thinking that you'll understand this suit belongs in the cupboard."

"Oh, no. That's out of the question."

"Then tell me what, in your opinion, am I to bury you in? Be so kind and tell me, what I am meant to bury you in? You can't possibly think I..."

"You can't possibly think that you're going to bury me in my school graduation suit, which the moths have been living on for years and years."

"Of course I think so. You can't possibly think that I'm going to have a new one made for you. Especially for a special occasion like a funeral. Made to measure, so you'll feel comfortable, is that it?"

"To measure? I don't say that..."

"And what do you say?"

"I say, it needn't be to measure. It can be narrow in the shoulders."

"Look here..."

"I'm looking."

"Look here, dear!"

"I'm looking, dear."

"And what can you see?"

"The same as usual."

"Look, dear. Have you any idea how much trouble one ordinary funeral involves? You just can't imagine. To say nothing of the funeral of a retired governor of a bank!"

"The fact that I'm retired is what's troubling me now."

"Then have a bit of consideration for me, too. There simply won't be time for anything not absolutely essential, such as getting a new suit for the deceased."

"But why a new suit? Who said anything about a new suit? I've got a whole pile of decent black suits which haven't yet had time to live to a venerable age."

"Surely you don't want to be buried in an undignified manner in a suit which has not yet had time to live, or at least wait, until it's a venerable age? I shall bury you in that commemorative and truly historical garment, reminiscent of your eternal youth and undying education."

"Out of the question."

"You're mistaken, dear. I shall bury you in that school graduation suit. That will be right and proper - and economical. No one understands questions of economy better than you do."

"That's true, but it's not possible to save on everything and under every circumstance. There are times in life when magnanimity is called for, when economic interests do not have priority."

"Am I hearing right? If I hadn't known you so well for so many years, I'd probably believe you. But I know those are only magic words which open the public purse."

"That's not fair. That really hurts. "

"Can you explain to me why we have looked after your ceremonial school graduation suit all these years? Why you have denied yourself all kinds of pleasures all your life, just so as to keep your slim figure?"

"But that's completely different. Those are things that matter to a person, they're to do with your aim in life."

“You're right. My aim just now is to make you understand the value of this school graduation suit of yours. My conscience won't allow me to throw it away, just because I happen to have taken a momentary dislike to it. I have spent my whole life in the company of your suit. While you were away, it was everything to me. It took your place. It stood in for you.”

“And that's why you're going to bury me in it? Wouldn't the right thing be to keep it to remind you of me?”

“You haven't understood anything. You took turns in my private life. You and your school graduation suit. When one day you depart for ever, both of you will depart. In my eyes and in my heart you are joined by a bond that you can't begin to grasp. While you spent your time in bank offices, I lived my life with your suit.”

“So that's why you're going to bury me in it. How strange fate is. And you'll put grandfather's glass eye in my pocket, to make my departure truly complete. So I'll disappear without trace, you could say. So nothing will be left to remind you of me. As if I had never been. Well, you needn't worry. We'll get rid of this suit here and now.”

“I shall bury you in it.”

“When? When will you bury me in it? Now? As you please! I'm already lying on the carpet. I shall die the moment you give the order. Just give the sign and I'm ready.”

“There's no need to hurry. There's a time and a place for everything. You don't have to worry about that. Nature will take care of it.”

“What do I care about your Nature?! I don't meddle with it, so be so kind and don't meddle with my school graduation suit. I'm going to throw it away now, without batting an eyelid. Do you hear that? And then one day in the future - in the very distant future - you will bury me in one of my decent black suits. Is that clear?!”

“Yes. It's clear. Quite clear. I shall bury you in whatever I consider suitable.”

“At last you're talking sense.”

“And you know very well, that it's your school graduation suit that I consider suitable.”

“You really are marvellous!”

"That's just what you've been telling me all your life. So now I'm convinced it's true. It's not an unpleasant conviction. On the contrary. It's more refreshing than coffee or peppermints. Such a conviction can help in every situation."

"I'm glad you regard my share in your life like that, that you appreciate so sincerely my humble contribution."

"Why be so modest? Your deserts are much greater than you think."

"Don't exaggerate. Everything in moderation - that's the wisest approach."

"You've no idea how your affectionate words warm my heart."

"I'm glad you are beginning to be sensible about the misunderstanding you caused."

"That's marvellous! The misunderstanding I caused?"

"Of course. What's so surprising about that?"

"I can't believe my own ears. You couldn't possibly say that - ever. You just couldn't say such words. I mean, the idea wouldn't even occur to you."

"You're right. Until now I could never have said anything like that, or even secretly thought it, because it's a fact that until this moment you have never caused a misunderstanding. Never mind, it's never too late to start."

"That's the kind of objective view you should take of your school graduation suit - and of course your funeral, too."

"Since when has my funeral got anything to do with my school graduation?"

"Don't change the subject. It's not so much the funeral itself, as your view - your objective view of it."

"Then don't worry your head about my view. I can see things only too clearly and in focus. It would be more to the point to test your eyes, if you can't see this old suit has long been no use for anything, to say nothing of an occasion such as a funeral and my funeral in retirement in particular."

"At your funeral what will be important is not so much that you were retired as what you were before your retirement."

"You needn't try so hard. I understand you very well. I know what



you want to hint at, or rather, say. Yes, I'm no longer what I've been up to now. Either in society or in the family. And if you want me to spell it out: either in the bank or in the bedroom. But that still doesn't mean you have to punish me by disgracing me entirely - shamelessly getting your revenge at my very funeral. In public, in the eyes of my friends and colleagues."

"Strange, how suspicious you suddenly are. You never used to be like that. You were overflowing with confidence and now you don't trust me. You assume I have dishonest intentions. You give your friends and colleagues as an excuse, while they'll probably never even live to see your funeral. Just think of them, with all their complaints and ailments."

"Strange, how you're burying everyone all of a sudden. You never used to be like that. You were overflowing with joie de vivre and now you talk of nothing but death. You don't even give anyone else as an excuse."

"You're wrong there! I'm not talking about death. I'm talking about life, which will go on even after the death of your friends and colleagues."

"I'm sorry, but I don't intend to argue with you, and certainly not about such obvious things. It's the principle that matters to me. That suit will go in the dustbin. It won't hurt anyone. Believe me. No one will mourn. Not even you. I'll take care of that. After all, I haven't been anywhere in a week. I am retired, which is the same thing as resting, and I shall spend my retirement living with you in harmony. You must admit that suit no longer has a place in our household. I'm here - in person. It doesn't need to take anyone's place. To stand in for anyone."

"We two will never agree. We've lived two completely different lives, even though they were in some way connected. We've lived close to each other, very close, yet next to each other. Even so, I would still claim that we've never stopped, and we never will stop, loving each other."

"I can't contradict you there. I should be contradicting myself."

"I'm extremely glad we have at last, though in a roundabout fashion, come to an irrevocable decision to hang your suit up in the cupboard."

“Forgive me for being so blunt, but my reputation as a man who under all circumstances put forward the right opinion and had it accepted, does not allow me to agree with you in this case. That suit belongs in the dustbin and nowhere else. And, after all, we're not going to be the ones to go against that obvious logic. We'll throw it away.”

“I can assure you it won't make much difference if you pick that suit up and put it back in the cupboard.”

“Don't worry, it won't make much difference if we throw this suit away.”

“That's impossible.”

“It's unavoidable. Because it's impossible to do up the trousers of this suit, since the moths have destroyed them just at that point.”

“That's no obstacle. So far as I know, the deceased's hands are clasped in the coffin, so whether your trousers will or will not be buttoned up is neither here nor there.”

Dr. Grossmann thought about this for a while and then spoke in a brooding tone.

“That's a fact. Actually, you're right.”

He had to admit, as a person who admired the language of facts and reasonable arguments, that there was relentless, but pure truth in Emilia's words. He asked his beloved wife what she would like for breakfast and left the room. His school graduation suit lay lifelessly on the floor. No doubt after a while Dr. Grossmann came back into the bedroom bearing breakfast for Emilia. Just like in their student days. The only thing we don't know is whether that school graduation suit found its way back into the cupboard or whether it met a different fate. It's easy to guess, but hard to be sure. Yet that was never the important thing, anyway. Meanwhile, the dawn broke on a clear day in Dr. Grossmann's fruit orchard and a breeze blew in through the half-open windows. People are usually touched by Nature. There is something incomparably sentimental about it.

In the Carlton Hotel that afternoon a pleasant meeting took place of elderly gentlemen, inseparable friends, who had in common the years they had lived through together, unforgettable memories and above all noble characters. Without doubt, Dr. Grossmann was present at that meeting. It could even be said that it is highly likely.

## KEITH HOWDEN

### The Stuff that Kills Germs Dead

Birdy tonight was hopping  
buttock to buttock. He blames  
shrapnel in his bum, picked up  
dog-fighting Messerschmidts.  
I don't believe. More likely piles.  
That fat brother-in-law  
(once look-out on a submarine)  
now studies language. A wartime  
poster: *Always Wash Your Hands  
After Passing Water Or Stools*  
was the start of it. What was  
so dangerous in passing glasses  
of water ? And were stools dirty  
from being sat on? It spoiled  
his table manners. And what's Public  
about Public Schools? What's  
this fatal disease that budgies  
only sometimes die of? What's this stuff  
that kills germs dead? Is there  
some other way of killing things?  
But Birdy's philosophical.  
It's speculation night come round in its  
due cycle. What's buzzing in him  
is parallels he's dreamed between  
atoms and solar systems. We're a bit  
of some gigantic body. Could be God.  
More likely, since it's badly designed  
to be some scheme of Matron Thatcher.  
His stellar calculations  
and mumbo-jumbos of astronomy

have constellations twitching  
like buttocks. Birdy believes  
we're part of something's leg.  
Reckons he'll make the world's  
most powerful microscope and stare  
into the unimagined reaches  
of someone's leg. Something minute,  
manlike in there, he thinks, might be  
staring towards him through its world's  
most powerful telescope.

**Come Gentlemen. Your time is up.  
Your sojourn in this den of vice  
is at an end. Shift your arse, Birdy.**

It's time, almost, to mount  
the loony bus throbbing outside.  
That fat brother-in-law, he says,  
wants to know why, if notices  
insist *Dogs must be carried  
on elevators*, how come  
they're always full of people  
not carrying dogs ....



*Forceful gentleman on left (having borrowed the landlord's "Whitaker" in order to conclude heated argument) :*

**You are quite mistaken Monsieur Camus. Proust was never an invert and Andre Gide was happily married and even had a daughter – no trace of turd burglary there. Also LF Céline liked Jews and had many kike friends. And, to contradict your other assertion, JP Sartre's doctoral dissertation was not written by Simone de Beauvoir, nor did the boss-eyed existentialist fuck pigs.**

*Picture Post 1939*

## PARIS-AMSTERDAM UNDERGROUND

*Jim Burns*

The underground. “A place and an idea,” to quote from the foreword to this book. It’s something that operates below the dominant culture’s threshold of visibility. On a practical level the underground relates to a form of travel in places like London, Paris, and Amsterdam. But there is the kind of underground that operated in Europe during the Second World War. That certainly operated below the dominant culture’s threshold of visibility. It had to, the dominant culture then being one of control and repression. And, of course, we have the underground that was so much written about in the 1960s, though I can’t help wondering just how far underground it truly was? I have to admit to having a kind of involved interest, albeit in a minor way, being one of the contributors to the Penguin anthology, *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (1969), as well as to a variety of now-forgotten underground magazines, including an issue of *De Vrije*, published in Rotterdam in 1967. I also recall seeing William Burroughs reading in a little Left Bank club called, not surprisingly, La Bohème, in 1962. A wave of nostalgia sweeps over me as remember those heady days. I’ve got to admit that I later fell out of favour when, in 1970, I wrote an article called “How Far Underground?” which questioned many of the values and achievements of the so-called underground’ and especially the literary aspects of it.

But I’m digressing, and a lot of this book touches on matters which I knew about but never felt that they affected me in any significant way. The Situationists are inevitably invoked because of their renunciation of “the world of the spectacle,” and the way “they looked to desires, resistances, and struggles from below” to challenge “the current social and spatial order.” Also inevitably, the spirit of 1968 is resurrected, and I can’t help thinking that the various essays presented here were probably written by people who were only very young then (if they were even born) and may have a somewhat starry-eyed notion of what actually took place.

It’s appropriate to ask why the focus is on Paris and Amsterdam? There were always what can be called “conventional exchanges” between the two cities, but using the term underground implies that something else was happening. It’s suggested that the “underground

traffic” between the cities “most often occurred in avant-garde movements,” such as CoBrA, which stood for Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Paris also played a part in the foundation of the group, and I seem to recall reading that some sort of inaugural meeting of CoBrA in the 1940s was held in Paris. Whatever, it’s certainly true that Paris has to be considered as of key importance in developments in post-war cultural movements.

As I read the essays I couldn’t help questioning some of the assumptions and generalisations, many of which tend to be backed up with quotes from other academics rather than from original sources. Andrew Hussey and Christopher Lindner go back to the 1950s in their search for the origins of underground as a way of defining “cultural resistance to mainstream power structures.” And they appear to approve of Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster*, which did arouse some controversy when it was first published but was rightly questioned about whether or not it represented any sort of mass movement. Likewise, Anatole Broyard’s 1948 essay, “Portrait of the Hipster,” which was said to have been based largely on one man, Stanley Gould, was more of a curiosity than a description of a whole group. True hipsterism, if it existed, was the province of a handful of people (musicians and their followers) around the bop world of the late-1940s and the 1950s. Broyard may have seen Stanley Gould as representative of a type who perhaps became more prevalent in the early-1950s. Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*, with its fictional portrait of Anton Rosenberg, is relevant, and George Mandel’s *Flee The Angry Strangers* could also be worth looking at for its portrait of some individuals who might be said to be like hipsters.

Hussey and Lindner then proceed to call in a sociologist who says that in the 1960s the underground went overground (true enough) and it became “a codeword to designate a way of thinking and behaving which, if not always totally new, was always at odds with received ideas.” I’m not convinced, and a lot of underground thinking always seemed to me very predictable and based on old assumptions about such matters as sex (women continued to be exploited) and money (there were plenty of sharp operators in the underground). Reading a recent book about Grove Press and its house-magazine *Evergreen Review*, both key players on the 60s scene, it was clear that underground soon became an advertising

gimmick and a way to suggest that plenty of pornography was on offer. Perhaps this is a minor point to make and does no more than relate to the fact that, as is stated elsewhere, there is always a tension in evidence as “the underground confronts the mainstream and becomes fragmented, dissipated, commercialised, or absorbed into contrary interests.” We only need to look around us to see that the underground may have temporarily disrupted “but did not dislodge established power structures.”

I’ve spent some time considering concepts of underground, with particular relevance to its cultural aspects. But *Paris-Amsterdam Underground* isn’t only about such matters. An interesting essay about the artist Jean Dubuffet looks at a series of paintings he did of the Paris Metro. It’s said that the Metro provided him with “a mundane set filled with everyday characters that suited the artist’s claim to avoid high culture and classical beauty and depict instead the ‘common man’ in his daily routines.” Furthermore, it’s pointed out that Dubuffet’s approach “played with the conventional notion that painting thrives on light and on representing its effect on the nature of things. Depicting an underground space lit with artificial light only made a clear statement about the pedestrian nature Dubuffet wished to confer on his art.” Did this constitute “a secretive, dissident art practice removed from the mainstream culture and from the avant-garde”? He claimed: “True art is always where it is not expected, where nobody thinks of it nor says its name.” I can’t help thinking that Dubuffet in his way was far more radical than many of those in the cultural underground and most of those among the “pop revolutionaries.” His underground was different.

There have always been differences of opinion about what underground meant. According to Hussey it only became popular in France in the 1970s and followed the “seismic cultural shifts that occurred in the wake of the revolts of May ’68.” Hussey also says that Amsterdam was the place where “the European avant-gardes met and sometimes dissolved into groups which in various ways blended into a ‘counter-culture’ on the Anglo-American model, meaning that the priorities were pleasure and freedom rather than just the apparently outmoded language of class struggle.” Hussey’s main concern is to explore the “brief but intense collaboration between Guy Debord and the Dutch artist Constant between 1957 and 1960.” The role of the Situationists in developing theory and



practice in Paris and Amsterdam in relation to an idea of revolution as “lived experience,” rather than as metaphor, is interesting and Hussey usefully explores it. He also throws in some words about the delightful 19<sup>th</sup> Century utopian thinker, Charles Fourier, who projected a future world where “the sea would become as sweet as lemonade,” and the “North Pole as mild as the Riviera.” He did also say there would be 37 million poets, which a not a thought I’d ever want to entertain.

Changes in sexual attitudes were more noticeable: “In the 1960s, the sexual underground exploded: it grew enormously and parts of it entered the mainstream, often in different forms.” Gert Hekma inspects what happened in Amsterdam (“A sleepy town turns into a sex capital”) with some knowledgeable surveys of publications which focused primarily on sex. Some also included material about drugs and pop music. With *Suck*, one of the more outrageous publications, Hekma suggests that it “seemed a competition who could tell the strongest story,” with incest and bestiality among the topics involved. Perhaps there was sort of “liberation” programme at work here, but unless someone’s tastes ran to such things I would guess that a lot of people were just turned off by that sort of material. And commercial interests soon moved in. They had always been there, of course, with pornography and prostitution providing openings for criminal elements. And as Hekma points out: “A revolution that only included the sexual would lead to commercialisation and continued erotic misery of oppressed groups such as women in a liberal, capitalist society.” From what he says elsewhere about the activities of supposedly radical groups it would seem that they too were likely to continue forms of oppression. He refers to the philosopher Fons Elders and “a group of lawyers and doctors” who formed something called “The Erotic Syndicate” which staged sex shows in Amsterdam: “The syndicate propagated tolerance and support for erotic imagery and play as a necessary antipode to the arms race and commercialisation – a critical reference to militarism and capitalism, cornerstones of the existing order. They resisted sexual exploitation for anti-sexual aims. The shows included boys and girls playing school kids in shorts and with bare breasts, the boys at some point in cross dress and wearing fetish clothing that could be bought on the spot and removed from their bodies – leaving the children nude. Elders liked qualities such as enthusiasm and amateurism in the sex show.” Am I naïve, or does it

not occur to anyone else that those “boys and girls” were being exploited? As for the stuff about the sexual play being “a necessary antipode to the arms race and exploitation,” I’m inclined to quote George Orwell and say, “You have to be an intellectual to believe something like that.”

My own observations of the underground, at least in Britain from direct activities and experience, and America from reading about it, is that commercialisation quickly took over. I’ve never been able to understand why anyone thought it could be any different, especially when pop music became an integral part of the underground scene. The music thrives on mass appeal, on selling records and playing gigs which attract large audiences. Agents, record companies, impresarios, and others, are involved and they certainly don’t have (they never did) any sort of radical aims. Quite the contrary. The same can be said of the performers, no matter how much they claim to be revolutionaries and lead hedonistic life-styles. A phrase that crops up elsewhere, “A commercially exploitable notion of freedom and tolerance” seems apt.

Some of the best parts of the book seem to me to be when the contributors leave theory alone and get down to fairly straightforward accounts of what actually happened. In 1975 riots erupted in the Nieuwmarkt district of Amsterdam as the authorities attempted to re-develop the area for extensions to the underground railway system. Squatters had occupied some of the buildings and they provided many of the materials (posters, leaflets, etc.) and bodies needed for protesting. Some of the established residents supported them, while others thought that they were a disruptive influence and interfered with practical negotiations about compensation and re- housing. There were concerns about the fact that many of the newcomers were outsiders, often from abroad, and were just “in search of cheap housing, alcohol, and drugs.” They “disturbed the social fabric.” It’s noted that histories of the protest movement usually ignore the “dissenting narratives” and favour an idea of a consensus of opinion about opposition to the authorities. To be fair to Ginette Verstraete, writer of this essay, she doesn’t fall into the trap of proposing that all underground actions were necessarily positive. But she does point out that more thoughtful activists did do good work in terms of highlighting financial mismanagement on the part of the local authorities and what they saw as flaws in the scheme

to extend the Metro.

The chapter on the Beats in Paris suggests that they were a kind of “displaced underground” in terms of their relationship with the United States. Unlike some Americans (the ex-Hollywood writers, for example, who moved to Europe when blacklisted) people like Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Corso had not been harassed all that much, though they were all likely transgressors of social conventions and laws relating to drugs and/or homosexuality. They were in Paris, according to Alan Hibberd, because they “found the atmosphere freer and more conducive to creative activity than the United States was at the time, bound by Puritan morals, haunted by Communist witch-hunts, and writhing in the clutches of the Cold War.” That may be the case, but even Hibberd admits that many Americans have seen Paris as a place to visit or live. I don’t think the Beats were unique in that respect. There is, also, the romantic idea of Paris as somewhere where most of the great 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century literary and artistic movements had their origins. Ginsberg was certainly aware of that side of Paris, and the poems he wrote there, especially “At Apollinaire’s Grave,” reflect that fact. As for Burroughs, he was once quoted as saying that Paris meant nothing to him as a place and was just where he happened to be at that moment. Some play is made of how he and Brion Gysin developed the cut-up technique of composition while in Paris, though I wonder just how important it proved to be other than to academics and historians of the avant-garde?

I have to say that Hibberd does challenge the view that Burroughs was just an outsider in Paris, and he quotes sources (academic ones, of course) that claim he had an awareness of the Situationists and other groups like the Lettrists. I wonder. It’s certainly possible to draw comparisons between ideas in Burroughs’ work and that of the Situationists, though they could be examples of minds working along the same lines in response to what they perceive as general tendencies in society. Hibberd does have to add that “claims for direct influence remain speculative.” I’m not convinced that, Ginsberg apart, the Beats produced anything major while in Paris. Corso wrote an entertaining but minor prose work, *The American Express*, and a few poems, and Burroughs did publish *Naked Lunch* with Maurice Girodias’s Olympia Press, but it had existed in chaotic form when he was in Tangier and was put together it would seem

largely by Ginsberg.

I suppose there is a kind of romantic aura that hovers around the idea of the underground, whether in its cultural, literary, or social form, especially now that we live in a conservative age where state surveillance and control appears to be on the increase. Those old days of protest and experiment must look quite appealing. And it's hard now to go underground. Carolyn Birdsall notes that "commodification of the underground is accelerated by contemporary trendspotting and cool hunting, whether in informal networks and social media, or by the marketing and advertising industries." What's left of the underground is, in Joyce Goggin's words, "tempered with the more banal considerations of commerce."

There are some interesting things in *Paris-Amsterdam Underground*, along with some doubtful theorising and the kind of academic jargon presumably meant to elicit admiration from one's peers and keep out the rest of us. As an old veteran (sort of) of the underground of the 1960s I have to admit to being amused by it now being a subject for academic research. But 'twas ever so.

PARIS- AMSTERDAM UNDERGROUND: ESSAYS ON CULTURAL RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION, AND DIVERSION

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## MOTHER

*Ivan de Nemethy*

Born in the Tisza river?

My parents were unmarried, both my mother and my father were on the run, Hungary was a police state and they couldn't go to the local hospital where a birth generated the baby's weight in official paperwork, so for reasons of secrecy, I was in fact born in the dead of night in a first floor apartment at 2 Kelemen utca in Szeged.

My parents needed to legitimise my al fresco birth so when it came to registering it they said I was born at 98 Tisza Lajos körút but they couldn't risk naming my father and, of course, they didn't have a marriage certificate. The local Catholic priest, whose status in Heaven depended on the size of his flock, was a lot less particular about these things than the births registrar and my father felt able to declare his input on my christening certificate two weeks later without fear of reprisals.

Number 94 Tisza Lajos körút is indeed the Klinikak Klinik with a frontage of fifty metres, and if you walk past 94 looking for 96 you cross a grass verge leading to the river bank.

Keep on walking and you'll fall into the Tisza River.

Körút means ring road but not in this case, the whole of the Eastern half of the Tisza Lajos körút is missing, it never existed because the Tisza was there first, an example of Hungarian ingenuity, the reflection in the Tisza counts as the missing half of the ring road.

Hence 98 Tisza Lajos körút was unarguably in the Tisza River.

As a proud Hungarian, my father would certainly have picked a grand building for his first son to be born in, so it follows that number 98 must have been at least as prestigious as 94, else I would have been born at 94 instead. Allowing for a suitably grand marble entrance hallway with a horseshoe staircase and a desirable room with a view of the river, puts me at the far end of the building at 3am on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1945 so it looks like my figure of twenty metres from the river bank may well be conservative.

Make that thirty five metres?

My mother was born in the Pestszenterzsébet district of Budapest on

26<sup>th</sup> March 1914 but was raised by her grand parents and four widowed aunts near Csurog in Northern Yugoslavia because her father Károly (where I got my second Christian name) was one of the first Hungarians to die on the Eastern Hungarian Front a few months after my mother was born. My grandmother declined to raise my mother, claiming it had been her father's wish that she should live with her aunts if anything happened to him, my mother's brother and sister being much older than my mother.

It amuses my family that in civilian life, my mother's father was a hairdresser. I don't see anything funny about that, I'm just relieved he wasn't a solicitor or accountant. My family think it's funny because, as an officer, they always pictured him in a resplendent Huszár uniform charging the Russians on his horse, mirror polished boots, tassels flying, razor sharp sabre outstretched, now they picture him rushing forward in slippers and a white smock with a pair of scissors in his hand.

I still see my grandfather on the horse, only he has a bit more Brylcreem on his dyed black hair, his moustache is waxed and he's a foot shorter than I first thought.

The four aunts all lost their husbands and their brother (my mother's father) in the First World War. They owned a small isolated farm of about thirty acres, mainly crops with a few cattle and some chickens and ran it without farm hands or machinery. The four of them raised my mother and a cousin of hers who was profoundly deaf, as if they were both their own. The farm was a hundred and thirty miles away from Budapest, a lifetime in those days, two lifetimes after the Hungarian border was redrawn fifteen miles north instead of two hundred miles south of the farm. My mother returned home to Budapest only once, when she was sixteen, border restrictions having prevented her going back earlier, but was again rejected by her mother and also her elder sister, although her brother Sándor had wanted her to stay.

My mother returned to Yugoslavia and was married six years later in the Church at her local village in Csurog, her husband's name was Gazafi Iván. Sadly, Iván, the unrequited love of my mother's life, died within a year of tuberculosis, and after a long period of mourning at her in-laws in Subotica, twenty miles West of Csurog, my mother rejoined her widowed aunts at the farm.

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My mother's brother Sándor was a civil engineer and he was press-ganged during the War years by the Germans into building airfields for them. His life ended late in 1945 when he disappeared in a Russian Gulag and he was never heard of again so nobody knows when he actually died.

I don't know if it's better to hope he died quickly or not – quickly, I guess.

The details of what happened to my grandmother and my mother's sister will be in the Budapest archives in Pest but I don't care about them. Their Budapest home at 8, Hajnal utca, above their hair dressing shop, was demolished to make way for a disgusting Commie Block in 1976, which was no less than they deserved for the way they treated my mother.

My mother never got over being rejected by her mother and then losing her teenage husband by the time she was eighteen.

My mother's name (except for the year of her marriage to Gazafi Iván when she will have been called Gazafi Ivánné – Gazafi Iván's wife), strictly speaking, and consistent with my status as a proven bastard, was Lévai Ilona until she came to England when she would have Anglicised her name on arrival to Ilona Lévai

Lévai is not a Jewish name, you're thinking of Levay or Levy or Levi. My mother's was Lévai and is derived from a town called Léva, renamed Levice by the Czechs when they stole it etc (cf Trianon Treaty above). Lévai means from Léva.

Németh, surprisingly, means German, Némethy denotes a highly prized Celtic Teutonic ancestry and de Némethy means, according to a Scottish chiropodist I knew socially, but never as a patient, (his name was Bruce as in "Robert the", so he was clearly a practising expert in bespoke ancestral names), that my father, when asked his name on arriving in Edinburgh, hesitated and said,

"drrrr Némethy? That'll do me!"

It took three trips to Hungary and an abortive trip to Belgrade to track down these few details. My daughter Tors had just started working in Budapest when Lesley first went to Hungary on her own and they went to the Pestszenterzsébet district to find my mother's birth certificate. The clerk demonstrated with index and middle finger that my grandfather was a hairdresser, much to the clerk's

bemusement when they both burst out laughing. They went on to Szeged and found my birth certificate. The clerk there, when she opened the Anyakönyv (Parish Register – Mother book), looked aghast and very apologetic when she found the entry. They all exchanged looks and eventually the clerk held out her right hand (opposite hand to Westerners), fingers spread out, and passed her left hand over her right in quick succession, indicating no ring, as in no wedding ring, and then pointed to the seven dashes in the book where my father's name should have been, she then passed her hand from her shoulder to her waist, indicating my parents might have married in a civil ceremony, thinking the shock of my bastardy would be too much for Lesley and Tors, who didn't let on that they already knew.

When we went to the Miskolc synagogue asking if we could see the records the Rabbi looked upset and explained that he had lost his own family in the war as he took us to a room full of massive bound leather books. He looked carefully through all the books covering 1908 without finding anything and finally pulled out the most worn book on the shelf and opened it – the entries in the book had stopped dead in May 1944. The Rabbi showed us the names of his murdered family and then raised the back cover so the pages streamed past our eyes, the second half of the book was blank.

None of the books had any Némethys or any male births on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1908.

The Rabbi escorted us into the synagogue, motioning that we should sit near the back and then went out through a small door at the front. We waited, wondering, and then the Cantor came out, looked sympathetically at all four of us in turn and then filled the synagogue with a rich mournful song before disappearing through the door he had come in through.

We all had tears in our eyes as we left.

The Catholic priest at Miskolc was true to Catholic form. We had tried three times to speak to him and each time he was busy, shooing us away, claiming an imminent Mass that I couldn't find listed on the church notice board but the fourth time the church was empty, save for a cleaner who took us through to the back and we caught him on the hop, not quick enough to come up with another excuse, his deliberately off putting opening line being "Mi a baj?" (What's the



matter?) He sighed deeply when he found I was too fluent for him to get away with the usual evasions and then half heartedly had a look at a few books.

We left empty handed and unconverted.

When Tors applied for her Hungarian passport and the passport office was researching to establish she was entitled to one a clerk had told me on the phone that records in Belgrade showed that my parents had applied for a marriage licence in January 1945 in Subotica, so in 2000 we drove to Belgrade in Tors Trabant only to find that the records had since been decentralised so we drove back via Subotica, passing within ten miles of Csurog, but at that stage we knew nothing about the Csurog connection. The Subotica records yielded nothing.

In 2001 Lesley and I flew out instead of driving to Budapest as usual because we were coming back in grand style – Tors was coming home having lived and worked in Budapest for five years and, I'm relieved to say, hadn't found a Hungarian she wanted to settle down with, so she was driving us back in her Trabant via east Germany where all Trabants were born (they stopped making Trabants when the Berlin Wall came down and recycled the fibre glass bodies of part constructed cars by dissolving them and making bright coloured buckets out of them). We were setting off early the next day, Trabants do fifty miles an hour flat out and it was a two thousand mile journey back. Tors drove us on a Goodbye Budapest Tour and Lesley suggested we try the Catholic Church in Pestszenterzsébet one more time. Tors and Lesley had been a number of times and it had always been shut. We were hoping that, my mother having been born a Catholic in the parish, they might have details of her christening and more details about her parents.

The Church was shut, as usual, but we tracked the priest down by asking a local in the church grounds. We found him in his home in a corner of the square with the massive white church in the centre, surrounded by pastel coloured buildings skirting the grounds, all with the steep clay tiled roofs dotted with snow hooks and fat galvanised gutters and down pipes needed to cope with the winter snows. The priest's housekeeper had already let us in the twice padlocked side gate and back door so he grudgingly agreed to look through the records because I made it difficult for him to refuse, even though he made a show of dropping his napkin onto a hall table to

make sure we knew how inconvenient it was. He pulled out a leather bound book from a stack of about fifty, turned the pages, looked morose, almost angry, as he took out a six inch by four inch card from a drawer, labelled KERESZTLEVÉL (christening certificate) and started to fill in my mother's christening details from the book. He was almost finished before I realised what he was doing and then I stared at the book which had writing on it that was about my mother and had been there on that page throughout the whole of her life, was still there as I read it, thirteen years after my mother had died.

I cried as the priest wrote down my mother's name.

I felt closer to my mother at that moment, than I had since before she had died. I wish I had reached out and touched her name in the book, but I didn't think of it, maybe next time, if I can face it.

The priest handed over the completed card and looked expectantly at the door, so I thanked him and we left. He hadn't said a word throughout. When we examined the card later, we found the entry for my mother's marriage in 1931 giving her husband's name as Garafi Janós and her village as Csurog, so one day we'll drive on to Csurog, via Budapest and Szeged. My mother was married in the Catholic Church in Csurog and maybe we'll find the farm where she grew up.

During the war my mother had worked for the occupying German forces in Yugoslavia, organising transports of food grown locally to be sent back to Germany, thus alienating the local gangs of Chetniks (underground Serbian nationals) because, as dyed in the wool anti-fascists, they didn't like the Germans, especially the ones going round eating their chickens and corn and raping their women.

Later, the Hungarian image of the Germans was repainted in a more appealing colour by the arrival of the Russians, the Russian men soon earning a reputation for gang raping the chickens before then eating them raw and wastefully shitting out the corn still intact because they failed to chew their food properly, what was left of their Bolshevik teeth never having seen a Capitalist toothbrush. Hungarians now remember the Germans as gentlemen in comparison to the Russians and there are even authenticated stories of Russian women soldiers beating up Hungarian men for refusing to service them, which, I suggest, is because of the Russian women's poor

desirability, a theory heavily supported by the Russian men and the chickens stories, rather than a deficiency in the Hungarian men's virility.

By late 1944 the Germans had gone from Yugoslavia. Csurog having been taken from Hungary in 1920 had been captured lost and recaptured several times by both sides during the War. As the Germans retreated the local Serbs were on a mission, one Hungarian family who had prevented their daughter from marrying a Serb, were dragged up and down the village streets behind a team of galloping horses until there was nothing left to drag. In all, two thousand Hungarians from Csurog are estimated to have been massacred by Serb partisans, the mass graves have never been investigated because there are no Hungarians left in the area.

My mother, unlike her Serbian aunts who were born at the farm, was a Hungarian and she had worked for the Germans, so my mother fled and was lucky enough to be given a lift on a horse drawn cart by fleeing Hungarian soldiers, scared of both the partisans and the oncoming Russians. My mother often spoke of her escape, crying as she told us how guilty she had felt as the cart passed mile upon mile of escaping Hungarian refugees, four or five generations carrying their belongings and their babies on their backs.

My mother was working privately as a seamstress in Subotica, easily the largest town in the region, when my father bowled in wanting her to make him half a dozen shirts. Unlike me, I'm told my face in repose looks stern if not angry, my father was a real industrial strength charmer, all MADAME, gigawatt smile, clicky heels, bowing from the waist and kissy kissy hands even when he was strutting round Ramsgate High Street wearing his worn out Jesus sandals, short sleeved shirt stretched tight across his pot belly, the lowest two buttons missing because they couldn't stand the strain, very large baggy shorts and a French beret (the only personal item of his that I still have) looking like he owned the place, whilst I tried to look cool in my grey pearlised Cuban heeled winkle pickers cruising with my teenage friends who always seemed to spot him before I did, but then my father didn't stand out so loudly for me, he was my dad - that's how he always looked.

Given that most of the locals in Yugoslavia no longer had shirts on their backs in 1944, six shirts was a significant order and entailed numerous visits which soon led to my parents applying for a

marriage licence at the Subotica town hall in January 1945. I was born the usual nine months later in Szeged.

Born nine months after the marriage license?

So how come the bastard bit?

The marriage licence was issued but was never used, the fact that I was born exactly nine months later doesn't strike me as a coincidence and I deduce that the license application led directly to my conception within courting distance from the Town Hall, on the lines of....

"The license is in the post."

I was twenty nine when I found out that my parents weren't married.

My mother was due to retire and the DHSS or whatever it was known as at the time were quoting conflicting dates sourced from my father whom we hadn't seen since we had left him ten years earlier.

Having married, having tried and rejected employment after just two jobs in three years, and having had two daughters of my own I had begun to better appreciate just how hard it must have been for a man as proud as my father to start again at forty at the bottom of the English ladder, a "Bluddy Furriner" refugee with an unpronounceable name from the losing side in the War, in England, in 1948.

So I saw my father in a kinder light, forgot the hurts, remembered all the good and was pleased to be able to get a letter to him via the DHSS.

A few weeks later Lesley fielded a call from a call box, was about to put the receiver down thinking it was a breather when finally a strange foreign voice said, "Allo? Allo? Thees ees Iván de Némethy spikink, kaan I spik vit Iván de Némethy?"

My father had done exceptionally well for himself in the ten years since I had seen him. He owned a Bentley, houses in Blackpool, Edinburgh, Cornwall, a row of six cottages in Ireland and he was having to call from a call box because some workman digging the road had cut through his telephone line. He couldn't let me have his number until after it was repaired in case they ended up mixing the wires when they got round to reconnecting them on account of they were ignorant peasants. To his credit, he did get a phone within weeks (no mean feat in those days of three month waiting lists and

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I'm sure the £80 cost was significant to him). The Bentley had to go before I had a chance to admire it because he lost his licence as a result of a champagne dinner held in honour of his Congratulatory First from the Open University.

My father was sixty five.

It was good to have him back.

Amazingly, and I still can't believe I did it, I was so pleased to have found my father that I invited him to join us and my mother for Christmas in Oxford. My mother lived just quarter of a mile from my sister by then in a very decent council flat on the ground floor in a twelve storey block in Margate and she always spent her Christmases with us, travelling to stay with us three or four times a year. We drove to stay with her three or four times a year. Whenever we were due to drive down to Kent, my mother would go to a call box and check the AA weather report to warn us if there were any hurricanes, blizzards or leaves on the road.

True to form, but also probably because he had more sense than me, having promised to turn up at noon, my father didn't turn up at all and after twelve painful hours of waiting my mother turned to me in tears and told me for the first time that he had never married her. Lesley, sharp as ever and fully deserving her nickname of "DragonLady", tried to make light of it and said,

"I always knew you were a BASTARD!" I roared with laughter, my mother didn't, because she was bleeding and it upsets me still that I did that to her.

My inadvertently torturing my mother on December 25th 1974 was almost as crass as my returning my mother's spare flat key after I got married but she never complained....not complaining was what my mother did best, she just quietly got on with protecting and raising us and worrying about us like all mothers should.

My father, having been welcomed back by me, paid for a phone to be installed in my sister's house in Margate, but my sister didn't ring my father.

My sister never forgave my father's haranguing her at long range on the telephone when, barely seventeen and pregnant, she had spent five months in hospital with a broken thigh. His angry Hungarian father calls, on top of the rest of her woes, had permanently scarred

my sister.

My already pregnant sister and her husband to be had been hit by a car from the left as they were turning right into a side road on a subsequently scrapped but very Mod Vespa scooter (both my sister and her husband are still full blown Mods) festooned with the usual ten or more rear facing chrome framed mirrors that can have been no help whatsoever when it came to spotting oncoming traffic, possibly even a hindrance on one or both of two counts:

First, the wall of mirrors may have obscured the oncoming car and second, the mirrors were all angled so that the driver could check his hair rather than check the traffic behind.

As it turned out, the car driver, not the scooter mirrors, was blamed for the accident so my sister and her husband got £5,000 plus in compensation, the price of a large detached house in 1966 Margate. Unfortunately, instead of investing the money in a house they chose, on the advice of the Mirror share page (I didn't know either) to invest the money in shares, buying and selling their stocks daily on the Mirror's recommendation, not realising that the Shyster stockbroker (Lloyd's Bank) was charging five per cent of what was left of their money in brokerage fees, each and every time they telephoned from the call box at the end of their road.

Some months, and a few dozen brokerage five per cents later, they put what was left as a deposit on a one bedroom bungalow and they live there to this day together with their mortgage, their children having found their bedrooms converted to a utility room and a dining room in their temporary absence, opted to move out.

Not at all surprising then, that my sister was not pleased when I told her I wanted to see my father again, not surprising either that she was unable to accept my change of mind, not having experienced a change of mind herself since puberty.

What about my sister changing her mind about her shares? That was the Mirror changing its mind, not her, my sister has agreed with the Mirror since 1965.

When I recall my sister's phone number, it always reminds me of how my father, wanting to believe he was part of our family again, proudly read out the number to me over the phone. I remember thinking as I memorised it (it's still there, burned in my brain for ever) that my father could be disappointed but I said nothing, hoping

I might be wrong.

My sister's continuing to hate my father after my volte face didn't hinder my relationship with her, that was her right, but it did hinder her relationship with me. I had, after all, hated my father more than she had at various times in the past and I didn't need her endorsement to be happy with my change of mind. I was also aware that my seeing things either as black, white or not seeing them at all, with near instantaneous transmogrifications from any one state to any other, often confuses, often annoys, innocent bystanders. But I was surprised to find the lengths to which my sister went to try to prevent my change of mind, how angry and resentful she was about it and how it coloured her relationship with me from then on, as if, in forgiving my father, I had let my sister down.

My sister met my father just once after I re-found him, she came to my home to meet him, but she came only to cut my father dead while her husband quietly disappeared to the pub on his own, returning a few hours later in time to take my sister back to Margate.

I was disappointed but made no comment to my sister, avoiding the subject with my father when she had gone. My father was philosophical about it and continued to call my sister, he didn't take hints – I must get that from him.

During my mother's last visit to my home we had a very distressing row about my sister. The next, and last, time I saw my mother a month later in hospital, she'd had a stroke and was unable to ever speak again.

I don't know if that row contributed to my mother's death but I believe it did and I wish I had been bigger about it, but I wasn't, and as time goes by I'm getting smaller and smaller about it.

Just days before my mother died, I promised her faithfully I would keep in touch with and look after my sister.

Most unusually, my sister rang me seventeen years and a few months after I made the promise to my mother (I can never recall the dates when my mother or my father died). After we had talked for an hour and a half I told my sister never to ring or contact me again and then I put the phone down.

I have rarely put the phone down on anyone, maybe five times in forty years, two of those times it was my sister on the other end of

the line. The other time when I had put the phone down on my sister was nine years earlier, she had rung at midnight one Saturday, getting me out of bed to complain angrily about my having set up and paid for a small tax covenant for my mother.

My sister was hysterical, I was speechless, well, not quite speechless, I did ask her if she knew what an asshole was before I cradled the phone.

There was a third occasion when I would have put the phone down on my sister had we been talking on the phone, the time when she said, "How dare you just turn up and buy mum a bed and a quilt!"

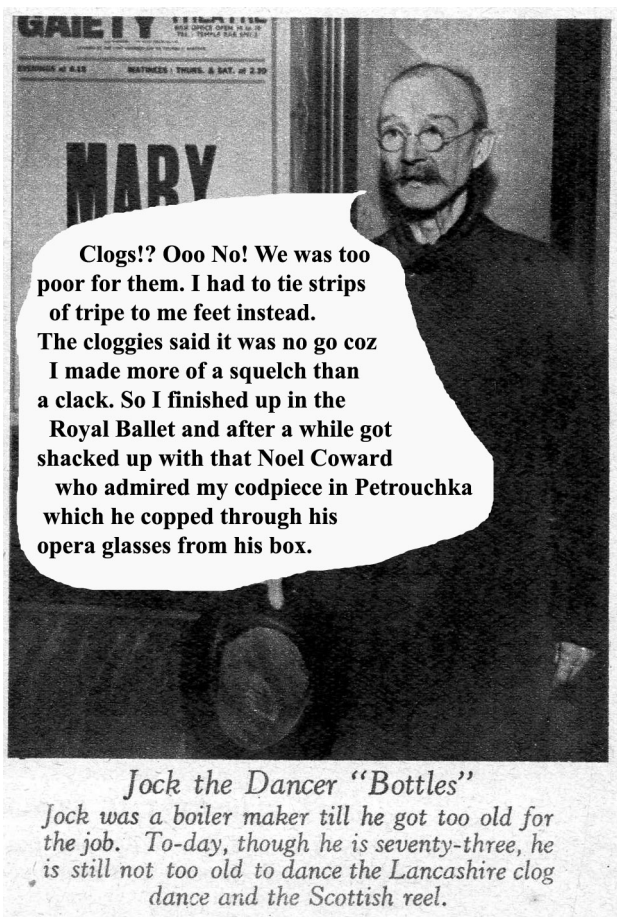
Perhaps if I had been bigger I would have been able to keep my promise to my mother, except my sister's problem is ME, so if I had been bigger it would have made my sister's problem bigger and I would have had to have been even bigger to keep my promise, but then, if I had been even bigger then my sister's problem would have been even bigger and I would have had to be even more big than even bigger etc etc.

Perhaps if I had been smaller my sister's problem would have been smaller and then I could have kept my promise, but if I had been smaller then I would have had a bigger problem with my sister.

Bottom line?

I broke my promise to my dying mother.





### *Jock the Dancer "Bottles"*

*Jock was a boiler maker till he got too old for the job. To-day, though he is seventy-three, he is still not too old to dance the Lancashire clog dance and the Scottish reel.*

*Picture Post 1939*

## EIGHT OIKUS ON QUACKERY

David Birtwistle

### The Doctor: Heavy Metal

The doctor suspected he was being taken for a ride. His patient was stringing him along with vague symptoms suggesting one of these new illnesses which no-one could properly diagnose. A slight giddiness, a loss of appetite, restless nights. There was nothing he could really give him but because of the patients' charter, healthcare rights and possible litigation he had to sign the man off work yet again. On the form, in the space reserved for *Suffering from*..... he carefully wrote 'plumbus oscillans.' Even the patient's hawk-eyed boss failed to recognise the neatly written Latin words for *swinging the lead*.

### The Doctor: Malingering Again.

His kids were going through that difficult stage, his wife was going through the change, his wife's mother had just moved in and they were a doctor short in the practice. It had started to get to him. He increasingly doubted his patients' claims to illness. More and more of them appeared disingenuous. The man came in for the third time in three months. "I've no energy, I'm exhausted and I've this high-pitched whistling in my ear." On the form he wrote 'simulatio maximus.' The chemist thought the handwriting unnaturally clear and his boss thought it sounded very serious indeed.

### The Doctor:

He couldn't believe it! The next one, same again. Was his home situation getting to him? Was he going mad? Was the whole world against him? "Would you give me another sick note, Doc? I can't sleep. First I try my right side, then the left, then on my back. When I get up I'm exhausted." "Have you tried a new mattress?" "I'm on my fourth one this month." He felt like Herbert Lom in *Inspector Clouseau*. He signed the note 'homo mendax est' when he realised that sharpening up his Latin skills was bringing back a bit of normality.

**The Doctor: he's enjoying himself now.**

He'd just signed another malingerer off for a month with a beautifully calligraphed hand: *Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. His boss would think he'd had an accident on the way to work. Single words were all right but the richer expressions were what fascinated him. What was the Latin for 'Shenanigans' and 'Hanky Panky' or 'My eye and Betty Martin?' He had an overwhelming urge to fill in these official forms with neat, ironic, telling colloquialisms and far from being dejected he was having the time of his life. Over his door he put the sign: '*Omnes Dramatis Personae sumus*.'

**The Doctor: that dead language and those scrawly signatures.**

Things at home might be topsy-turvy but at work he was on a roll. He was whizzing through *Teach Yourself Latin* and reading Catullus for pleasure! He signed sick-notes with abandon and with greater creativity and wondered how many of his patients were actually in work. He became increasingly playful and likened what he was doing to the cryptic crossword – giving a real clue that many people were feigning illness. Up there and clear to see, next to his eye-chart and policy statement on teenage mothers with twins, he conjugated the present indicative: 'Quis, Quid, Quim, Quintis, Quintis, Qunt.'

**The Doctor: In Vino Veritas.**

The pressure from home had subsided somewhat and they'd managed to find a locum so this week at least was more relaxed. And his next patient wasn't malingering! He'd advised him to take plenty of liquid. He'd done two pints at lunch and four in the evening and still felt rough. He'd advised three at lunch and five at early doors. That hadn't worked either. "I now do four at lunchtime and six in the evening as part of my Ten-a-day. Thanks, Doc, it works." "Don't go. Stick around. You're a perfect fit. We need you in the Group Practice!"

**The Doctor: Gift of the Gab.**

He began to feel that he'd overdone the malingering bit. He'd written 'swinging the lead' sixteen or seventeen times in different Latin versions and enough was enough. What piqued his interest now were the two patients complaining about people they'd met with the new rampant and related social diseases 'Compulsive Talking Disorder' and 'Competitive Blathering Syndrome'. They were both news to him. He was about to phone the General Medical Council for detailed updates and downloads when he spotted Shamus the Shirker, the well-known bone-idle, work-shy layabout. He grabbed his Latin book of colloquial idioms searching for 'hogwash' and 'bunkum'.

**The Doctor: You never know when those language skills will come in.**

He'd come across two new social diseases and had christened them himself – 'Compulsive Talking Disorder' and 'Competitive Blathering Syndrome.' He was signing people off right left and centre so he could get down to some research and make a name for himself. *The Lancet* or *Nature* would want some Latin in there for that certain ring of scientific veracity. Filling in *Statutory Statements of Fitness for Work* was a prime indicator of the new English working class condition. He hoped that *Perturbio loquacitor competitum* would do the same for the chattering classes before they got the old heave-ho from work!

## FACEWORK

*Tom Kilcourse*

Nothing that I experienced on the training face adequately prepared me for the Roger seam. The contrasts could hardly have been starker. It took me little time to appreciate that the training face had been a playground, a well lit, cool, spacious area where we could pretend to be miners. There, under the scornful, watchful eyes of Big Les we heaved stones into the wall of the pack, set props, and learned to handle a spade without overloading it. When the deputy's great bulk waddled off to some other part of the face, we 'packers' rested, joking about Les's weight and his loud, foul mouth. The banter, and rest, would be disturbed within minutes by roars of contempt for our idleness emanating from the deputy's tobacco stained gorge. Between gasps for air, the fat deputy would express his derisive estimate of our 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". Before graduating from the training face I took some satisfaction from sorting big Les out, using a lesson learned at Elenar Motors when Josh apologised for calling me a name. Les habitually referred to all the trainees in the same way, but when I challenged his right to call me an X he too muttered an apology.

I would have thought it bizarre then if told that I would shortly wish myself back in Les's care. Yet, such were my thoughts before the end of the first shift on face number five, the deepest in England at about 1,600 yards. The day began well enough. Eager to lay claim to the collier label I climbed into the top deck of the four deck cage, to be dropped with seventy-nine others down the thousand yard shaft. Having worked down the pit for two years as a haulage hand, this was no new experience for me. Nor was the mile long walk to the brow, the training face having been roughly the same distance from the shaft bottom. Only upon reaching the brow did novelty intrude. There, with the collier to whom I was assigned for a short apprenticeship I climbed aboard the trams, a line of low four-seat bogies attached to a steel rope. By this we were lowered down the brow, a thousand-yard long tunnel with a one-in-three slope.

Dismounting from the trams the men walked in line for another half

mile before reaching the top of the face, stooping in places where the roof was low. By the end of the walk I was dripping with sweat, my shirt and jeans wringing wet. The draught coming up the face was like a desert wind, warm and heavy. I followed my collier's example and shed shirt and jeans. I stood for a moment, feeling ridiculous, my relatively underdeveloped body appearing frailer than usual with the broad leather belt strapped round the waist and the heavy battery resting on my 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". I took the offering and tucked it under my belt to protect the threatened cheeks. Then, stooping, I followed the collier onto the oven of the face, descending the steep slope for forty yards to reach his stint.

This man probably found me more of a hindrance than a help, but he did not complain or chivvy me when I made a mistake. Old enough to be my father he probably had children of his own, or so his patient manner suggested. He made few demands, other than asking me to help lift a bar or set a prop. Only once did he ask me to hammer home a wedge, but then took the tool from me when it became apparent that my scrawny 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, I was already exhausted. I sat on the ground beside the stationary pans and opened the lunch tin my 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 I laid the food aside, finding the warm cheese inedible, and far too much in quantity. I decided that I must ask my mother for a smaller pack the next day, and not cheese. When I lay back on the rough stone floor, loose pieces of coal that had spilled from the pans dug into my naked back. Despite the discomfort, I drifted into sleep and failed to waken even when the pans again screeched and clanged into raucous motion. What returned me to consciousness was an insistent tapping close to my head. It was the deputy's stick, and I woke to see the supervisors scowling face. "Come on lad, this isn't a fucking dormitory." As the deputy continued on his rounds I jumped to my feet, banging my helmeted head against a bar. Picking up my spade, I joined the collier in shovelling coal onto the pans. The man patted my shoulder. "Sorry about that son. I left you to sleep for a bit and didn't see George coming."

## FACEWORK

During the next couple of weeks I became accustomed to the heat of the face and learned much from watching the collier. I realised quickly that sandwiches were not recommended fare in such conditions, and copied others in confining snap to an apple or orange. I learned also to conserve my water. On the first day I emptied my eight pint, metal canteen a good two hours before the end of the shift, gulping great drafts of the tepid water at each quenching. The collier showed me the wisdom of taking just a mouthful and swilling it round the gums before swallowing. I also learned the value of chewing tobacco, which kept the mouth moist. I had often chewed when working on the haulage, but more from vanity than utility.

Having learned what I could about working a stint, I was placed on the night shift to work under the supervision of one of the packers. Ivor was 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. He took little interest in me 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 large pieces of 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 five yards long, with pack and gob alternating the length of the face.

Packers were supposed to scavenge stone from the gob using a long handled rake, but most left the tool aside and went under the unsupported roof to pick up suitable material. That was a risky practice, and I remember the night when one man became trapped by the leg by a piece of stone the size of a dressing table. Despite other pieces still falling from the roof men went in to rescue him, one suffering a broken shoulder in the process. A stretcher was sent for

and the men got busy throwing props into the gob. When the overman arrived with the stretcher everyone swore that the roof had been secured before Arnie went in. The overman looked sceptical, but didn't argue the point. Insisting that the injured man should be disciplined would not have won him many friends.

At the end of my period on packs, I found myself 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, I did not argue when, on my first day at the rip, I was sent into the sump for the whole shift. It was a cruel joke. I learned this the next day when after an hour in the sump a ripper who had been absent the day before came in to relieve me. When he discovered that I had spent a whole shift in the sump he became angry and tackled the ganger about the 'joke on the kid'. The same man also insisted that my name go on the ticket, the system on which the gang earned their piecework. I had been left off the day before so that the ticket was shared by the others while I received only the basic day-rate.

A shift in the sump was a picnic though when contrasted with a later situation in which I was placed. My training officially completed, I continued working on the face while waiting to be given my own stint or pack. One week I 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 our 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 that of the removed coal. 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.



I knew little of this as we took to the trams and descended the brow. At the bottom we split up, the deputy and I taking the upper tunnel to obtain tools, while the other three men went to the lower tunnel where they were to work. At the tool-tub the deputy told me what tools to bring, and carried on to inspect the face. When I followed him a few minutes later there was no sign of the deputy. I could see metal props bending under the increasing pressure, and here and there were piles of fallen rock. Fearing that the deputy was trapped, I continued onto the face and started a crouching descent, calling out as I did so. After scrambling a few yards down the slope I could see that just ahead the roof had come down almost to the level of the pans. I stopped, squatting on my 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 I raced back up the face to the safety of the tunnel. That breaking prop probably saved my life. When I eventually rejoined the group, having walked the long way round along the two tunnels, I learned that the deputy had descended the face safely.

Through such incidents I learned to look after myself down the pit, shedding my naïveté. Experience hardened me physically and mentally, so that eventually I not only endured the cruelty that can exist in pit humour, but was able to dish it out. By 1961 I had worked for six years down the pit, and was a married man with a small daughter. I decided to seek alternative employment. Later, when earning a crust in the physically undemanding role of bus driver I heard it said that the closure of pits was a good thing as men should not have to work in such conditions. I understand the sentiment, yet remain touched with nostalgia for the years of working with men whom I trusted and respected, cruel humour or not.



A footman in the palace claims he was regularly bugged by the Prince of Wales who had a tiny penis. These assaults were discontinued when he met that Yank trollop who had other methods to satisfy him. The footman took pictures with a hidden camera and recorded his conjunctions on a new fangled gadget. We also have pictures of Chamberlain at Chequers in congress with a goat. I say we run a special issue. Circulation will rocket.

Good God Lorant! This is England - the press will never stoop to that kind of gutter journalism. Besides there's my knighthood to consider. How long exactly was the Prince's todger? And the goat? Was it a looker?

*Publisher and Editor Talk Over Next Week's Paper*

*Edward Hulton, who founded PICTURE POST, is a young man of 32. His father and grandfather were famous publishers before him. He talks over with Lorant the plans for the next issue, before working on his own article—on which he expects to spend at least one day.*

***Picture Post 1939***

## CLASS AND BOOKISHNESS: A RANT ON THE USES OF LITERACY

*Rhian E Jones*

Probably the last useful thing that the now semi-tragic stopped clock Julie Burchill ever wrote, in respect of her working-class provincial origins, was this:

*If you don't read books, you really have been fucked over in a major way... To read, voluntarily, is the first step to asserting the fact that you know there is somewhere else.*

*Read, or you'll get fucked over.* Growing up, I read like fuck. I read out of boredom, I read to escape my surroundings and to understand my surroundings, through history and politics and music and literature and whatever there was left over. I also read because I wanted to write. And a thread that ran throughout my reading was, indeed, the sense that not to read was to, somehow, allow yourself to get fucked over.

Furthermore, once I began to read, finding stuff to read wasn't a struggle. I read at school, on and off the curriculum – 'comprehensive' might mean cash-strapped and struggling, but it needn't mean incapable of giving you a good education in spite of your circumstances, and it needn't mean not having books. My town had a single bookshop, but it also had a library. I went on expeditions to larger towns further afield and, along with music, I brought back books. A huge amount of secondhand books, old books, books that no one other than me was likely to read in the twentieth century, okay – but new books, too, weren't beyond my purchasing power. I read books, I read newspapers, I read journals, I read samizdat *Riot Grrl* and *Manicsfan* zines. I just read. Reading is, in no small measure, how I got to where and who and what I am today. I read in order to combat alienation, boredom and despair; in order to learn what existed beyond my horizons and what I might be capable of; in order to succeed academically; in order to live and study in places beyond my socioeconomic imaginings; and, ultimately, I read in order to construct an independent life for myself virtually from scratch. I read voraciously, avidly and eclectically, which is why I now know so many big words – a fact not unrelated to my subsequent social mobility, but a cause of it, not an effect.

So you'll imagine how aggrieved I was to read the following:

*"The bookshelfie and shelfie alike are ways not just to geek out with fellow book fiends, but also to send a signal about your cultural, social, and class position. Owning large quantities of books, being familiar with them, frequently referring to them, working in an industry where books are valued, these are all markers of upper middle class status, reflecting education, purchasing power, and social privilege."*

Now the publication 'xoJane', as far as I can tell, is what would happen if Nathan Barley edited *Jezebel*. So I'm sure the writer of that piece is well aware of what they're doing – ie, churning out deliberately controversial, easily contradicted, falsely absolutist, neat shiny parcels of clickbait bullshit in which, as the esteemed James Ivens remarked, the tone manages to be both superior and anti-intellectual at the same time. I'm sure they don't actually believe what they write.

Not that it matters. What S E Smith has written in that piece reflects and reinforces a damaging discourse whereby education, intellectual capacity, wit, thought, learning or finer feelings are held to be the preserve of the better-off, while what used to be called the working class are held to be mired in mental ignorance and incapacity. I'm aware of differing ideas and definitions of class in the US and UK, but this idea – certainly not new, in fact yet another neo-Victorian reanimation of old spectres – is cropping up everywhere, in left and right-wing perspectives, like a particularly unedifying game of Whack-a-Mole. At its most egregious and asinine, it fuels Boris Johnson's pronouncement in which the poor are held accountable for their own misfortune because they aren't clever enough to be rich.

As actual representatives of the non-elite have vanished from politics, media and the arts, so representations of the non-elite have grown increasingly lurid and grotesque, with observers nevertheless meant to be fawningly grateful for whatever unlikely examples we manage to get. This is why Caitlin Moran's recent caprice *Raised By Wolves* could be hailed as 'a genuine first' – as though 'council-estate intellectuals' were a novelty previously wholly unheard-of. (Oh, *Rab C Nesbitt* – not to mention Working Mens' Institutes and Miners' Libraries and Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams – we hardly knew you!) Like Russell Brand's *Newsnight* intervention,

*Raised By Wolves* is a perfectly acceptable and obvious offering that looks more revolutionary than it is because everything surrounding it is so dull and disingenuous and uninspired.

To be boringly political about things: what has taken place over the past decade or so – in the vanishing of the tradition of working-class autodidacticism; in the enforced closure of libraries and adult education classes; in the narrowing of access to the arts, media, politics and journalism to those able to afford internships; in the privatisation and pricing-up of higher education; in the continued neglect of areas economically devastated in the 1980s and the ignoring or denial of the after-effects of this – is the rolling back of social, cultural and political gains made by the post-war working class. This development has been given the dodgy and diverting gloss that we are somehow a post-class society, that working-class status in particular no longer holds currency – and then, with the continued existence of socio-economic division becoming impossible to deny, the idea that there is still no actual working class but only ‘the poor’, a lumpen rump distinguished by their supposed lack of fitness for anything better or greater than their current lot.

Similarly, that xoJane article’s fundamental crime is to crassly conflate ‘education’ – which to me has always indicated general learning, consciousness and enlightenment – with the institutional process of ‘getting an education’. And while tuition fees, loans, and the rising cost of living may be making the latter an increasingly distant prospect for ‘the poor’, it does not automatically follow that the former is also beyond their intellectual reach. (And if students become defined as all middle-class, of course, then their concerns – whether over heavy-handed policing of demos, or the private outsourcing of university facilities, or the closing of ‘non-economically viable’ Humanities departments – can be dismissed as elitist and bourgeois issues, self-indulgent and out of touch with the real world, with the material concerns of ‘ordinary people’. And so can the very idea of pursuing education for its own, horizon-expanding but non-economic sake, as opposed to for the sake of ‘adding value’ to yourself as a future economic unit.)

My more personal response to the xoJane article, in particular the line: ‘... working in an industry where books are valued [is a marker] of upper middle class status’, was to question when the writer last stepped inside a bookshop. If their idea of the model for book retail

is Amazon-centric, then I guess I can understand their perception of an industry split between literate cash-frittering shelfie-taking consumers sitting detached behind an ordering screen, and warehouse-bound overworked drones whose preoccupation – presumably – is with shifting the merchandise rather than entertaining any finer feelings towards it. This bizarre kind of Morlock/Eloi conception of society isn't far from the absolutist idea which paints the modern working class as ignorant and education-hostile 'chavs', an underclass unable to be conceptualised as readers or thinkers, whose lot of worsening deprivation can therefore be presented as entirely expected and logical for ones so wretched and with so little capacity for improvement.

Outside Amazon's fastness – and very probably inside it – things are rather more shades of grey. I have spent most of the past decade working either part-time or full-time in high-street book retail, and in this environment I have never felt my background and my no-man's-land class identity to be inexplicable or unique to me. I have worked with other similar products of post-industrial small towns and comprehensive schools which nonetheless granted us a good enough education to get us into higher education. (From which point, our paths led us to London and into precarious just-about-bill-paying jobs through which we currently fund our artistic, creative, academic, political and other pursuits – because, in the absence of independent wealth or access to internships, that's what you do. The same is true, in my experience, of a whole host of low-paid workers – but that's a whole other, if not unrelated, rant.)

Such escapist, often class-transcending trajectories are almost always fuelled, in part or in whole, by a love of learning, words and language, and by books and the possible worlds contained in them. To disingenuously reduce centuries of self-improvement, aspiration, and just basic comfort, entertainment and enjoyment, to the narrow and solipsistic horizons of the studied and curated 'shelfie' is smug and unhelpful enough. To further suggest that the ability *to access and appreciate books* is automatically beyond the intellectual grasp of an entire socioeconomic sector, and to do this in a way that contributes to pernicious and damaging ideas of class on both sides of the Atlantic? Let me stress, with the full weight of my book-learnt and comprehensive-schooled vocabulary, how much I fucking hate that shit.

## PALE HADES

*Tanner*

‘Right then! What’s *good* about bein on the dole?’

The room looks at him like dogs that have just been shown a card trick.

‘Come on! There’s no right or wrong answer, am serious, whatcha *like* about bein on the dole?’

‘Well ... yer get ter do nothin, don’t yer?’ someone shrugs.

‘Yeah!’ the others pipe up.

‘Be yer own boss, innit!’

‘Ok,’ he nods. ‘Though tha ain’t *true*, is it? A mean yer’ve all bin made ter come *ere* now, aven’t yer?’

Silence.

A wet *fart* trombones from the back.

They all snicker.

‘Yer get ter ave a lie in though!’ a bum-fluff beard twitches.

‘Ok. Wha else?’ that silence again. But no one farted. ‘Not-in else, eh?’ he *smiles*. Well, this was constructive. ‘So ...’ he pauses for dramatic effect. ‘Wha *don’t* yer like about the dole?’

‘Not enough fuckin money is it?’ a twenty-stone gerbil choruses, shoulder meat flapping around her bra straps.

‘Yeah, good one love!’ he points at her. ‘Yer know, the dole terday, in comparison with inflation an what ave yer, is EXACTLY the same as it was when I was your age?’

The Eighties never left.

‘S’fuckin borin,’ someone sniffs.

‘Aye!’ he spins his finger round at him, ‘it *is* borin, innit? Wha else?’

‘Me mates ooh’ve *got* jobs, right,’ this kind of newt grimaces as he tries to sit upright, ‘all dee ever ask when I see em is GOT A JOB YET?’

‘You fink that’s bad, lad,’ some salty stubble under a bobble hat

tells him, 'you wanna try avin a *bird* on yer case.'

'Ah AVE got a bird, she's on the dole an all, innit?'

'MY ex's tryna stop me from seein me lil boy!' the bloke opposite me erupts, 'sez am a alkie, but it only looks like I am cos am not werkin, yer know? SHE'S allowed ter drink, but AM not, just cos dere's no fuckin jobs goin!' he punches the table with his fist, people's cups and cans *rattle*.

'Arrey, watch wha yer *doin* psycho!' the ferret next to him with stitches in his temple shoves him.

'YOU watch it!' the guy snarls, standing up. 'Fuck DIS! Fuck the lotter YERS!' and he stomps out

SLAMS the door behind him – a brown panel *dangles* from the ceiling.

'Fuckin *ell* like!' Ferret chuckles, and the others join in.

'Ok, everyone relax,' the guy running the show pats the air with his hands calmly, 'obviously tha man has *issues*, but ee's gone now, so let's get on with discussin –'

'Ay mate,' the one in the handed-down footie top with faded *Candy* lettering leans over, 'wonna go after im?'

'No, come *on* now!' the tutor dude shakes his head, 'don't be startin any –'

'Fink ah WILL actually!' Ferret jumps up, 'AM not bein spoken to like tha!' he runs out with Candy

They SLAM the door – the ceiling panel sways ...

'Everyone, please? We were talkin about ow people treat yer when yer on the dole?'

'Dee look DOWN on yer!'

'Dee do. An it's shamin innit, yer feel *ashamed*, don't yer?'

... We just look at him ...

'We get da hint, tosspot,' a voice of gravel sneers.

'Ay am just *sayin*,' he sticks his arms up, 'we're ere ter talk about yer problems an elp you get back on the job ladder ...'



‘Ow?’ that Jupiter with a mutilated thong sticking out the back of her seat wails. ‘Ow you gonner do tha, dere *is* no fuckin jobs!’

‘See, right there,’ he points at her, ‘that’s your low self-esteem talkin dere, girl!’

Her pouch of a face swells crimson. ‘Arr, yeah ...’ she looks away, now in love with this Shining Knight of the Square Council.

‘Ay, ah’ve got *tha* an all ...’ a hoodie gasps from in his hoodie-cast shadow. ‘Sometimes I get dead anxious bout goin out, an I can’t be *dealin* with people ...’

‘YEAH!’ our Hero cries joyously, ‘cos yer see yer not USED to people are yer?’ He’s made up he’s unearthed some prole angst – it makes him *relevant*, maybe.

‘Nah, I just stay in by meself most a the time ... got no fuckin dough anyway ... an I get bit worried bout gettin interviews anyway ...’

‘That’s WHY were doin this, yer see?’ he goes over, pats the hood on his hood. This is turning into a proper love-in. ‘So’s yer can be confident enough to ACE tha interview!’

‘*Wha* interviews, there’s fuck all about,’ a guy scratches his balls.

‘Not true! Ninety percent a jobs *aren’t* advertised, that’s why it’s important ter always be sendin out coverin letters and a CV. That’s why we’ll be teachin yer how ter write a letter this afly!’

‘Nice one mate, ah need elp writin me letters, me!’ they fawn.

‘Laughin, tha, mate!’

‘Swot we’re ere for,’ he gushes. ‘See deese?’ he taps a great stack of local phonebooks on the desk, ‘we’re gonner go through deese, an yer gonner send letters off ter EVERY SINGLE place you come across tha you can possibly werk at! We can do this, boys an girls!’ he concludes, waiting for applause ...

Last year it was newspapers.

This year, it’s phonebooks.

This is how far The Great Jobsearch Scheme has progressed.

‘Scuse me?’ I decide to speak.

‘Yeah?’ he wonders, like everything’s peachy and there couldn’t possibly be anything else to cover.

‘Isn’t it pointless fer us ALL ter send CV’s ter the same places? Aren’t we gonna saturate the already saturated market with ourselves even further? An therefore, isn’t all this BOLLOCKS just a DISTRACTION from the fact tha you lot ave NO IDEA what ter do with us?’

Silence.

The *fart* has an en core, wetter and deeper

Everyone laughs and that brown ceiling panel, it *finally* dropped onto the browner floor

I’m too broke to *buy* fags ... I go round the town, picking up a few fag ends ... I empty what backy’s left in them into a skin and make a rollie ... borrow a light off an old bloke sat on a concrete bollard, his club foot sticking out in front of him, picking at an *open* yellow sore on the bridge of his nose ... We watch the wet town bustling about ...

‘Tell yer wha lad,’ he guffaws, ‘no matter ow fuckin *freezin* it is, yer can always see the pussy goin round in skirts round ere. Ah love Birkenhead, don’t you?’

My throat tastes of asphalt and piss. I rattle the copper in my pocket. A *few* quid left ... I clock the off-license on the corner. *Don’t do it*, I implore me, *Be proud* but soon enough I’m slouched against the railings of the river front, supping cider against the wind ... the Mersey *gargling* on itself at my feet ... I can see the Liver Birds over there, like two smug fingers coming out the fog, a big FUCK YOU from that o so cultured, employment-ridden city that lies across the bog ... At me: on this forgotten peninsula. This turd clinging to Toffeeland’s sphincter. WE ARE HERE AND NOW aren’t we? I stand there with my collar up in my grimace, feeling poignantly *half-Scouse*, *half-anything*, anything you like

‘This is SHIT!’ one lad’s got his nose in a phone book. ‘NONE a deese places are gonner take ME on!’

‘Deese companies are all over the water anyway!’ says another. They’re right.

‘Me dad’s bin on the dole *ferever*, just way it is. Doesn’t claim

incapacity or nottin though, got some pride like.'

'Dere's never any jobs round ere, yer go round the shops with a CV an dee all say the same thing, *we'll take it but there's nottin available right now* ... anyone ooh's gotta job is keepin OLD of it now.'

'Am thinking a pissin off down south.'

'WHY?'

'Cos, yer can walk into a restaurant or hotel an be a dishwasher, innit?'

'Arr, ad ATE bein a fuckin dishwasher, ad go MAD, me.'

'Yer not goin mad on the dole now, then, are yer?'

'Sallright fer you, you ain't got a FAMILY.'

'Yeah, am STUCK ere an all, me, got me little girl ter think about aven't I? If he didn't follow the local formula of knocking some tart up after school like sheep around him, he might be FREER now ... could've painted a picture, composed a song ... written the Great Novel of Truth, or *something* ... but nah cos his parents didn't want him. Just another dole baby. So he's spurting out the *next* lot with disdain. On the same street his old man did. Far as he knows, that's how it *is*. Now he's stuck here forever, looking for a soulless menial job to feed his seed mutations. So they can do the same. And so on. The Destiny of the Modern Dead.

We fought hate with hate.

Now all we've got is a bunch of people who don't know how to love or be loved.

'Yer don't wanna go down *there* lad, southerners aren't decent folk. An bein a *scouser* dee'll turn their nose up at yer ...'

'Dee think we're still stuck in the fifties up ere, yer know! Tha we all just go about in flat caps around mills an shit!'

'Yeah, fuckin Arry Enfield! Dee think we're all just afroheads in trackies!' I look around: it's a *sea* of faded Nike gear around stubbled noggins. Besides the three orange bints, everyone bar me's in trackies and shaved curls I'm there with my arms folded, Jimmy Dean quiff jutting as I wrestle with my cider burps ...

‘Sept we ain’t really *scouse* are we?’

‘Yeah, dee call us placky scousers over there!’ a runt points out the window, at the Mersey, ever yonder. ‘Fuckin city slickers! Fuck em, ay?’

‘WIRRAL TIL AH DIE!’ a couple chant, beating their webbed fists at the sky so now they EMBRACE what they know is a futureless North West corner?

They love it.

They NEED it.

They look at an abyss and see a safety net. Can’t STAND OUT. That, folks, is Sin Uno.

‘Am stayin *this* side, me. Proud a where I come from!’

‘Wha *are* we then?’

‘We’re Wirralians over ere, innit?’

‘Birkenheaders, la!’

‘Yeah, innit mate! Birkenheader til ah die!’

‘TRANMERE F.C.! TRANMERE F.C.!’ someone with hair for lips chants, fists in the air waving a metaphysical scarf.

‘Fuckin faggots over the water mate am *tellin* yer, fuckin – *fuckin* –’ this one refluxes head to toe in creepy excitement, ‘*fuckin* –’ he swallows the urge to explode, ploughs on with his croak, ‘think they’re tough over dere do dee? *Fuckin* – where I live right, someone pops a fuckin crisp packet an we all duck, cos we EXPECT it ter be a shoot-out!’ Nods, pleased. ‘*Fuckin*, yeah!’ note the accent they affect, that exaggerated drawl, to ADVERTISE how uneducated and low in the food chain they are. As they BOAST of local community despair. Lousy fear spreaders. It’s like being trapped in the House of Commons with a load of volunteer politicians.

‘Me neighbour ad er BABY robbed,’ someone smiles.

‘That’s why I dough’n ave no fuckin job; scared ter leave dee ouse, innit!’

‘My mate’s gotter job, an ee drinks more than me!’

‘Probably COS ee’s gotter job!’

‘Yeah, that’s wha am sayin!’

‘Better off on dole mate, *hacky hacky hack hack!*’

Cue *hacky* cackles all round. They’re contorting.

‘*Hacky hack*, innit! Long as yer get yer beer money, ooh gives a fuck, ay? *Hack!*’

‘Whatja call a scouser in a suit?’ another goes on. ‘Dee ACCUSED!’

‘Come on lads, let’s be gettin on with it, ay?’ the Leader insists ... The phonebooks are littered across the tables, and bits of paper everywhere like leaves, appropriately, in the autumn of the West – so says Spengler and maybe I.

‘Give us me pen back!’

‘Dis is MY pen!’

‘I chewed tha pen, just so’s yer know ...’

‘Yeah, an yer don’t know where *ee*’s bin, do yer lad? Ay? Ay? *Hur heh hur!*’ much scabby elbow nudging and stubbled nodding ...

‘I shoved DIS pen up me ass, ere, yer can AVE IT!’ one pokes it at the mouth of another, ‘yer’d like tha, wouldn’t yer? Ay? AY? HAHA go on, TASTE ME ASS!’

‘Arrey, FUCK OFF SOFT LAD!’ he snatches the pen, throws it out the window.

‘Fer god’s sake!’ the Leader runs over, looks out. ‘Could’ve hit one of our cars, tha!’

‘Least you’ve GOT a car, boss,’ one sneers ... *now* they’re getting it. Stop fighting each other, go for the Big Fat Cheese!

‘Come on you lot, am tryna *help* you ere ...’ the Leader, he rolls his eyes. His job description contracts him to *say* such things, not necessarily put them into effect. But it does the trick and we proles all start scribbling away again ...

‘Mine’s gonner be shit! Ah’ve GOT no experience!’ one chuckles, hands in the air in mock despair.

‘I werked in ONE shop an tha wus FREE YEARS AGO!’ another damned shrugs.

‘I did do a month in a D.I.Y. shop,’ some slug drones, ‘but tha was fer werk experience back in school ...’

‘So?’ Leader says. ‘It’s still experience, innit lad?’

‘Suppose ...’ he bows his head.

‘Never mind suppose, suppose nothin, yer’ve AD experience, so you put tha down lad!’

‘OK!’ Hang Dog nods excitedly, and he starts scrawling ... he’s gone into the zone, tongue working out the corner of his flappy mouth in concentration.

‘That’s not gonner elp,’ I dare to enlighten them. ‘Look, ee’s good at givin you hope, I’ll give im tha – but hope’s not gonner bag you a job when some fat cat’s got a choice of your CV, an someone ooh’s bin workin since they left school ...’

Hang Dog looks up at me with dough eyes.

‘Oi! You!’ our Leader comes over. ‘Don’t be puttin im down, yer bully! Don’t listen to im mate, you put tha werk experience!’ he gives him the thumbs up.

‘*Listen,*’ I lean towards the poor gormless pawn. ‘Unless HIM an the fuckin local council fiends tha ave packed us all in ere like sheep can actually *make jobs* fer us to apply for, they can’t elp us, an this is all just a waste a time ...’

‘This is exactly the kind a negative, lazy thinkin yer don’t need,’ our Leader warns them, presenting me like the villan of the piece. ‘He’s got his *own* confidence issues about returnin ter werk, an ee’s lashin out, but if you can just rise –’

‘See, wha ee’s doin *now*,’ I carry on over his desperate yapping, ‘is a classic politician’s trick, ee’s tryna paint me as holdin you back in some way, when really I see this fer what it IS.’

‘An wha is *tha*, then?’ a pyramid of a bloke *snorts*.

A drab office mare sticks her head in the door:

‘*Job centre* on da phone!’ she hisses in panic.

‘Oh, right,’ our Leader scurries out, ‘erm yeah, so yer know wha yer doin, ah’ll be back in a bit!’

They wait until the door *croons* shut ...

‘Ay, you’re a smart-arse, wha *you* put on yer CV?’ a hunched monkey with his trackie jacket tucked into his jeans bobs over.

‘Yeah, can yer do *mine*, la?’ someone insists.

‘Yeah, ere yer are,’ I got some papers lobbed at me, ‘you better make *me* look good!’

Piles of paper are being dumped before me

‘Um ... you aven’t quite grasped me *point* ere, ave yer people?’

It’s dark when we get out. I go fumbling round the back of the building, I’d left the rest of my cider behind the bins ... I reach my arm into the shadow of the clever little alcove between the skip and the wall ... it’s gone.

Shit – some dreg who spent the day chewing and texting at the back, she sits next to me on the bus ... she won’t stop humming ... something drab and *now* ... then she breaks into a shrilling few words: ‘*Keep bleedin, keep bleedin in love!*’ shuffling her face in this horrid mash of MTV emotion. ‘Reckon a can sing?’ ... Christ, here we go ... ‘I was thinkin a goin on *X-Factor*, but I probably wouldn’t get through though, would I like?’ gagging for a compliment. ‘It’s ok,’ she shrugs, ‘you can say if yer think am not good enough, *heh heh* ...’ bowing in unendearing pitty. Question is, are you bland enough? What’s with all this investing your dreams in The System? They weren’t *your* dreams anyway, you were falling in line with specific dreams The System TOLD you to have. You’re in The System even when it rejects you. ‘Suit yerself,’ she looks away, *brimming* with dense sorrow ...

‘Nah, yer know wha? You should *go* for it love!’

‘Aww, *really?*’ she shuffles closer, plonks her thigh on mine. ‘Do yer *really* reckon babe?’

‘Arr yeah, deffo worth a try!’ I almost laugh. This is too easy. Self-worth is at an all-time low in these parts.

‘*Ohmyfuckingod* that’s so sweet,’ she nuzzles into my neck ... her straw hair gives off this unmistakeable whiff of local failure ...

You'd think the dole queue would wise these dense bitches up! Not a bit of it. They *want* to audition to companies. They *want* to be made company property. They *want* to jump through hoops for other's profit. Something like *X-Factor* is still blatantly employment. As precarious, stifling and repressive as stacking shelves. Something to be hired and fired from. If these walking V...O...I...DS need to scramble from one institution to another, let 'em. *And plus, that's one less competitor in the job market ...* My god, listen to me. Making moves, making business moves, making political moves It's Da Man! He's *infected* me!

I throw her off me and lunge a knuckle at the STOP button.

The driver shoots me a look in the mirror, pulling over ...

'Wha yer *doin* babe?' she wails.

The shame, the sharp shame of it!

I scramble to the front of the bus, 'Out me way!' crushing through the throng, 'Scuse immediately!' elbowing the zombies away ... Da Man's backed me into his corner, surrounded me so tightly that I've inhaled his political/social bacteria, I need boho air ... the doors swing open, I jump off and then I'm *punching* at myself on the pavement, 'Out!' I cry, digging at my chest and belly, whacking the sides of my remorseful head ...

As the bus pulls away with my fellow doomed Jobseeker gorging bewildered, the rain kicks in and I stand cleansing in it ... exorcised, alone.



## ACHILLES' HEEL

*Tom Kilcourse*

I became infected with the writing bug under unusual circumstances, when I was twenty-two years old and working down the pit. In Lancashire, the National Union of Miners passed a resolution forbidding any miner from standing in parliamentary elections against an official Labour Party candidate. In 1959, a Communist named Mick Weaver, someone unknown to me, disobeyed that ruling and was threatened with expulsion from the union. In those days mining was a closed shop, so expulsion would lead to Weaver losing his livelihood. Although I had no political affiliation I was outraged by the denial of this man's rights as a citizen and wrote a piece attacking the union's decision and appealing for Weaver to keep his job. That appeal was published in 'The Miner' and was successful, but it did not inspire me to write further

To say I caught the bug is a little misleading. I had always expressed my views in writing, but in no way considered myself a writer, nor did I have any great urge to see my words in print. I left the mines in 1961 and took a job on Stockport buses, where I became active in the Transport & General Workers' Union, and through that, the Labour Party. My writing then was confined to letters to the local newspapers attacking the Conservative Council. They were always published. The most significant thing I wrote in those days was an essay required for acceptance to Ruskin College, Oxford. That was the most important turning point in my life.

By 1975 I was working as an Assistant Director of Management Studies at the Roffey Park Institute in Sussex, where I developed a training programme on Assessment Centres, a management tool that I had used in a previous job. I introduced some innovations into the basic technique and wrote a piece describing these. It was published in 'Industrial Training International' in January 1976. Thereafter, I continued to write two or three articles a year, some by request, which were invariably published un-amended in various management and academic journals. Throughout, I considered my writing as a means to further my career in management development, never as offering a possible alternative career.

However, through reading over the years works like 'Room at the

Top' and such writers as Alan Sillitoe, particularly Sillitoe, I came to realise that writing fiction was not out of bounds to the manual working class. I wrote my first fiction in, I think, 1978, a short story called 'The Winner', which I offered to 'The London Magazine'. It was accepted, but being totally green on such matters, I telephoned the editor, and founder, to ask how much he would pay. The line went dead. My next effort was equally unsuccessful, an allegorical tale called 'The Adventures of Cheryl the Chicken', intended as a social commentary. Cheryl escapes from the pen and meets a group of pheasants, with whom she lives. She returns to the pen to tell other hens the good news, but is cast out for associating with 'them'. I thought the parallel with certain human situations was evident, but the editor of the magazine I sent it to rejected the story because they did not publish children's stories.

I cannot recall which of my stories were published over the years, or by which magazines, though I do remember 'Cornflake' being accepted by 'The Interpreters House'. Then, a few years ago I submitted four stories to a magazine called 'Penniless Press' and all four were accepted. However, that magazine published one only, and that on-line. By now, I had retired and was living in France. Greatly to my surprise I received a letter from a chap who had just set up a new magazine called 'The Crazy Oik'. He was somehow involved with Penniless Press and had seen my submissions. He asked if I would agree to him using them in his publication. I did. I believe I have had something published in every subsequent edition.

What at the time appeared to be a stroke of luck was eventually to reveal my Achilles heel, lack of driving ambition as a writer. It was so easy to send stories to this magazine that I ceased sending them anywhere else. I also confess to being flattered by the editor likening my work to that of some well known writers.

Unfortunately, the same characteristic kicked in when I turned to writing novels. I had written two, 'The Great Collapse' and 'Who Killed Clarissa?'. I began submitting these to publishers and received the usual polite rejections. Then, I received some encouragement. A London publisher agreed that the novel, I think it was 'The Great Collapse' should be published, but as an unknown I would be expected to contribute to 'production costs'. I agreed in principle, and was sent a contract. I gulped on seeing the amount demanded, but what stopped me going ahead was exposure to a writers' website

on which the publisher was named and criticised for producing poor quality and doing little marketing. It was suggested that they were really in the business of exploiting writers' desire to see their work in print.

A little later, I had a similar experience with a different publisher to whom I sent 'Who Killed Clarissa? Again, the book was praised, with the same demand. The contract offered was identical in wording to the first, and the amount suggested differed by a small sum. I said no thanks, and tried a third publisher with exactly the same outcome. It was at that point that I turned to Lulu and Create Space, both POD (print on demand) publishers. This was so easy that my Achilles heel again came into play and I automatically sent subsequent books to be printed by them.

So, the bug stirred me to write, but did not instil any ambition to fame and fortune. I write this now in the hope that some budding writer who is ambitious will be warned against taking the line of least resistance, as I did. It can be very seductive, but ultimately unrewarding. I can dream that one day in the future someone will chance upon my writing, and recognise it as the work of an unknown genius. As I am now in my late seventies I am unlikely to know much about it.



In Edgware Road Mr. Chamberlain is Pulled to Pieces

*Picture Post 1939*

## INLAND BEACH HUT 8

*David Birtwistle*

Just before the blackbird's first murmur, there came the faintest click, a high hollow note like a quick flick on a xylophone. Then a group of three. Over again and a pause. Then the birdsong began in full. And that is how Jim came into the day and this acute awareness of his environment and his place within it stayed with him throughout. It was utterly different to everything he had known in his cocooned and privileged existence down south. The first thing he did was take his cup of tea down to his polytunnel. Although the cloud was low and the early mist abounded, inside his curved structure the temperature was already a good ten degrees higher than it was outside. He'd come to love the rain up here in the north. Rather than flinching from it he delighted in being sodden wet through. For him the newly discovered pleasure lay in drying out in the splendour of his plastic solar sanctuary watching his tomatoes and chillies thrutch up out of the rich earth till they almost burst with plump goodness.

Today's job was to unearth and cook the first new potatoes. Darren and his mum were coming up and Mr. Hughes said he'd call in to see how things were faring. Taking his time and allowing his senses to tune in to all around him he laid out his stall for the task ahead. Two garden forks with stainless steel prongs gleaming, a big plastic bucket, the weed basket and a separate bucket of water. He was digging the first fork in at an angle of 90° as the first two arrived.

"What I'm trying to do is go down and under the potatoes without slicing through them." With effort he lifted a forkful of rich earth. There among the crumbs of brown fecundity were solid ovals of creamy whiteness, like large duck eggs. A second and third careful forking and a whole nest of spuds came up to the surface. The three of them knelt and tested the feel of them in their hands and smelled their sweet earthiness. "Into the water and wash them."

"Can we have a dig?"

"Of course. That's what we're here for."

"Can I join in as well? This is what I've been waiting for." Mr. Hughes was standing there just to one side. He was wearing a set of green moccasins and a Cherokee shawl.

"The Great Peace comes at oneness with the universe and its centre

is within each of us!” Grey Cloud thought he must have been reading that book of Harry’s he’d lent him. As they washed the soil off the potatoes and placed them on the grass to dry Darren was first to speak.

“Do you like potatoes, Mr Hughes?”

“When you grow them yourself I do. They’re perfection. Our ancestors weren’t just *near* to nature, they were part of it. That’s the key. I’d like you to teach us about the eco-system surrounding your inland beach hut.”

“Us? Who’s ‘us’? I thought you were a secluse, one and one and all alone and evermore shall be it so”

“Ah, *He Who Carries Rod for Fish* is perceptive. He takes after his mother and *Chief Grey Cloud*, I hasten to add. Let me tell you this. I do indeed live alone. That is why I admire this inland beach hut so much. It fits the bill ideally. And I admire your skills in overcoming a hostile environment and creating this fertile micro-climate where you can become almost self-sufficient. But there’s more than just me out there. Spread out across the moor are a dozen individual secluses, living alone but who meet up and work in tandem for the good of all. We were *The Lost Brotherhood of the Northern Hills*. Then we became *Raiders of the Desolate Waste*. Then we discovered Brother Wilf who was already up here. He called himself *Knight of the Boggy Swamp*. So as more and more join in we change our appellation accordingly. We’re now up to *Marauders of the Mist Clad Moor*. We too, each of us, found 65million people crammed together on a small island squawking and panic-buying just that bit too much to take. Nowadays a human being is a punter, a customer, a loyalty card, a bar code. Too much for me indeed. History has taught people nothing. We had to get away from the madness. Why, even the Russian Mafia have moved into your old road in Dorset, Chief Grey Cloud. No doubt they’re blathering and squawking in Cyrillic!”

They sat round quietly, relishing the chips they’d made from the new potatoes. Darren’s mother, who was the Chief’s long-lost sister, spoke first.

“Where *exactly* do you live then, Mr Hughes?”

“Ah.Well. I thought no-one would see my recycling bin bag when I hid it behind your wall. It was for Beetroot Bob to collect in his clapped-out pick up truck when he did his weekly trip to Aldi for us.

Just over there is a large ditch. It was part of a small quarry when they built the farm houses and the dry-stone walls out of local stone. I've a Nissen hut hidden by brambles down on the left. Under it is a small limestone outcrop and a cave. But here's the real point. Brother Wilf discovered an old sixties Civil Defense bunker out on the moor, half a mile east. No-one else has ever found it. It's built to withstand nuclear attack. We're clearing the tunnels. It's dry, has water filtration and quite a few could live in there and still have their own space." This was the stuff of adventure for Darren.

"Can we have a look please, Mr Hughes?"

"Let me just say this. We're so impressed with what you're doing that, if you swear allegiance to the brotherhood, we think we can help you and you can help us. You've created an oasis in bleak, acidic land. Out there, over the moor, all they've got is sphagnum moss and cotton grass. Imagine it dotted with.....Is that a deal you three?"

Veronica, Darren's mum, or '*Butterfly of the Moor*' as Mr Hughes referred to her, was thinking things through. The other two were earthing up the potato rows and extending the solid footing pathways so that they could access all areas even in the bleakest weather. From discovering this wonderful, secret hideaway where her son seemed to come into his own and blossom, to meeting this strange hermit-like, educated granddad figure, to discovering that the moor had a scattered population of eccentric anchorites was almost too much for her to take in. Almost. She realised that the key to living here anonymously, the glue that held it all together was the go-between, the intermediary, this bloke called Beetroot Bob. Without him, sooner or later they'd be cut off, or, if they acquired their own transport, they'd be exposed. She'd seen him offload supplies with Mr Hughes a couple of days ago. Enough for three to four weeks. He lived in the tumbledown cottage further up the hill and his whole appearance seemed to direct attention away from himself. Old baggy trousers, woolly pullover with holes and darned bits, round-toed leather boots with worn down heels and a skew-whiff rating cap aged with grease, he seemed like a chameleon against a dry-stone wall or a barn door. His vehicle was a clapped out rust bucket which no-one would look at twice up here. The whole camouflage was perfect. None of the three of them had ever seen him previously and her son in particular with antennae like Jodrell Bank couldn't fathom

it. She wondered whether, if you were born round here, you might possess a special form of genetic mutation.

Even after Mr. Hughes excused himself and left, Veronica, or 'Butterfly' as she now enjoyed being called, was thinking about the enduring mystery of Beetroot Bob, the intermediary, the vital link up here. He got the 'Beetroot' from his purple face. There was something about him that made you feel he might be slightly bonkers. When you caught sight of him the thought entered your mind that he might want to hold you in conversation and bore you to death so you turned away from him. Ignoring him was how he managed to go without really being seen. There was more to Beetroot Bob than met the eye, she thought. Or less!

Gardening in early summer sent the Chief into raptures. The scents, the sounds, the space – the air was almost tangible and as it filled his lungs he could feel it revitalising him. The first tomatoes had set, the cucumbers were coming on, peppers were beginning to flower, the sweat peas were up their poles.....he was living in a world of his own and as he walked down the path his feet tripped the light steps of a dance. He knew now, in his bones that the closer you got to the earth the easier it was to see the stars. 'Butterfly' and her son had been to see Mr. Hughes and he'd shown them his hut and his small cave. Then he'd taken them blindfold, to the entrance of the bunker and shown them the first few passageways. Darren found this secret, underground den exciting but in truth not much to write home about because it was almost uniformly grey and drab and empty. There must be a lot more to it than this. It was only when he re-emerged that he realised they hadn't met another soul.

"You realise that beach huts are fetching top prices in Fleetwood? And they're still packed together, cheek by jowl. Sooner or later they'll cotton on and start moving inland and spread out." Mr Hughes looked grim as he said it. "But I think that the winters, the mud, the wind turbines and the mention of the old fracking trials will put people off coming round here for a bit yet. By the way, not only JD Salinger and St Simeon were famous secluses but Berthold Albrecht, the founder of Aldi !!"

"What about the Men from the Mist Clad Moor?" asked Darren. "Don't they ever get cabin fever in their hidey-holes? Don't they ever want a bit of a get-together. You know, let their hair down once in a while?"



“Ah, so they do, dear boy. So they do. But only every now and again. That’s where Bob comes in again. He gives everyone a lift down to the club, you know, where Eileen measured you up at the Country and Western Night. Everyone was in fancy dress. I was Buffalo Bill and Bob was Geronimo. Even his wife was there – Your pal Pete’s Auntie Sybil’s eldest Doreen. Sybil has no clack, you know and proud of it. Every third Thursday they have a music night and raffle.”

“Music night and raffle?”

“You’d think you were on a Mississippi riverboat down there. It’s just like walking onto the stage of The Black and White Minstrel Show.”

“How do you mean, Mr Hughes?”

“Our lads have formed the *Cotton Grass Dixieland Stompers!*”

When he got his breath back, Darren then asked him the key question, the thing he’d discussed with his mother who had almost, but not quite, hit the nail on the head.

“It strikes me that the nub of all this is Beetroot Bob himself, Mr Hughes. With all that coming and going and wheeler dealing and that camouflage, how’s he manage it? What makes him tick?”

“Ethno-methodology, young man.”

“What’s that when it’s at home?”

“He’s doing his Phd - ‘High Density Urban Population and the Socio-Neurological Origins of ‘Compulsive Talking Disorder.’ It’s ground breaking stuff!”

THE END

Really Noel! You shouldn't be phoning me at work! Picture Post has spies everywhere. Besides I'll be seeing the queen any minute...no, not A queen – THE Queen, you jealous old thing. And anyway I refuse to come over to your flat as long as you are cohabiting with that disgusting oik clog dancer.



*The Queen's Dressmaker Takes An Important Order*  
*Half Norman Hartnell's day is spent in telephone conferences; with his most important clients about their dresses; with manufacturers about materials; with his own workrooms about the making-up of models.*

### DANNY AND BENNY (3)

*Bob Wild*

Later, Angie had met the “prot woman” on the stairs and she’d called her a “fucking kill joy” and a “crazy old cow”. In retaliation the woman had cut down all the shrubs Angie had planted in the small square of garden in front of the house to which all the tenants of the six bedsits had access. Angie had called the police. They came but said it was a “domestic” and left it at that. “Totally useless!” Angie said.

Next day the protestant woman, incensed by the police episode, shouted up the stairs:

“Ye’re gonna end up fucking dead with a bag over yer head yous are!”. Angie claimed that this was a serious threat to murder her and she would be going to the police again. The only thing holding her back was the landlord might think her a troublemaker and turf her out on the street. I gave her the unremarkable but sensible advice that it was unlikely to be a serious threat, that the woman was angry and upset, and that maybe Angie should find another venue for late night band practice, and that maybe her friends should wear women’s clothes behind closed doors.

“Things’ll settle down I’m sure”, I said. She didn’t seem happy to let matters rest there, saying:

“I’ll get back at that fucking “ejit” old cow somehow”.

Angie’s other problem was to do with fighting the Council, with help from the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, for housing benefit. She’d won. They were now paying her £120 per week but as a consequence the Revenue was going to take half her tax credit away. She wanted me to write a supporting statement and to give her a general Reference to use if she ever needed one. Reluctantly I agreed to write one but when she started boasting as to how, since her operation, she had been enjoying not inconsiderable support from the benefits system, and saying, jokingly: “I’ll be able to move to Didsbury soon.” I was infuriated by this. I told her she wouldn’t get a reference from me. Instead I gave her a lecture on what I thought about benefits cheats who gave the bloody Coalition ammunition to dismantle everyone’s much needed Social Security. Actually what I said was:

“What the fuck are you doing: trying to get yourself on the front page of The Daily Mail in the benefit scrounger slot? You fucking feckless, greedy self indulgent bastard!” We got cut off at this point. I guess she must have realised I was totally unsympathetic and had put the phone down. She didn’t phone back, and I didn’t hear from her but was told she’d been in a convalescent hostel for weeks, as a guest of the Hospital Saturday Fund, recuperating from a throat cancer operation so a little remorsefully I sent her an unfunny Get Well card.

I was on the bus, using my bus pass instead of my gas guzzling car like a good citizen ought to do and reflecting on the fact that the Coalition want to take it off me despite the fact that my tax and social security contributions, half a million over an average working life I read somewhere. In an idle moment picked up one of the free local newspapers littering the bus aisle.

I don’t usually read the local papers: as a matter of fact I have an aversion to them. They’re full of titillating triviality: accounts of petty crime, sensationalised sex or heart wrenching personal predicaments; sob stories about some one’s little princess and her miracle cure or the “Cash Blow” that’s ruining the life of another IVF couple; “City councillor’s expenses scandal”; “Footballers accused of gang rape”; “Big Brother Girl Sharon and X-Factor Star in Three in a Bed Romp”: people famous for being famous. The names change but it’s the same story every week. Perhaps not quite as sensational as the Red Top Nationals, and no page three nude displaying her tits, but running them a close second with their lurid adjectives and graphic descriptions of what should be done with this or that “sex fiend” or “cannibalistic monster” who accidentally bit someone’s ear in a drunken melee. I looked at the paper again.

There on the front page, clutching her pathetic opaque-eyed poodle, was Danny. Bespectacled and sporting a new set of dazzlingly white teeth. Not looking as glamorous as the photo she’d shown me that time in the shop when she looked like a model advertising Botox or Cosmetic Improvement but passably attractive in an older-woman sort of way. The headline, in 72 point bold, black type read: “HEARTBREAK OF BLIND PET POODLE IN A MILLION” and in 18 point type at the side, enclosed in a circle: “See page three”. She had obviously taken my advice.

I turned to page three. Another large headline greeted me: "PLEASE HELP BENNY TO SEE" together with another photograph of Angie looking like an advertisement for teeth-whitening. Three ropes of pearls were wrapped round her neck, presumably to hide a scar from her operation. The dog was looking a little less pathetic, more appealing - anyone would want to save him. The caption read: "Cash Plea Angela with her blind pet dog Benny who needs an expensive eye operation to restore his sight".

From the adjoining text you would have thought the dog was also a sex therapist and a cancer specialist who had helped his owner through tough times, the emotional trauma of the sex change and her throat operation. Readers learned how Benny was there for her during those gruelling days after the gender reassignment surgery and a pile of sob stuff about how the dog was her rock when family and friends had disowned her. "My grandchildren deserted me, every last one of them. Benny is my best friend, my sweetheart, my baby. Benny is all I have", she said. I couldn't help remembering that Angie, when Danny, had confided in me that he hadn't the faintest clue how many grandchildren he actually had!

Amongst the little dog's other qualities were that he was a fitness coach and an essential ingredient in Angie's rehabilitation. Benny takes Angie for walkies down the Mersey day in day out. He was twelve years old when kindly Angie took him in as a stray and she has calculated that this little dog has walked 4,500 miles to help her get over her operation, but now the poor dog can't go for walkies any more: "It breaks my heart to see him crashing into things all the time. I've put padding round the legs of my chairs and tables at home so he doesn't hurt himself" she told the reporter.

Angie needed another £800 to add to the £1,000 savings she has accumulated by sacrificing all life's little pleasures for Benny to have the operation. No mention that she'd paid back to the brewers nearly all of the £3,500 he had claimed from the brewery in compensation for his shameful loss of human rights a while back, no mention of her squandering money buying bottled beer to entertain her dissolute friends from the band. The righteous Angie will pray for you if "you can help her give back Bobby the quality of life he deserves" by making a donation by phoning the following number. . . an Evening News Special help-line. Not exactly the Mother Theresa of Manchester, but a not dissimilar narcissus, self-promoting,

solipsist charlatan.

Next week's instalment headlined: "READER'S GIFT OF HOPE FOR BLIND PET". There was grinning Angie with the doggy Danny held tightly to her bosom with one hand, the other clutching a sheaf of letters, cards and cheques from the "big hearted readers of the Evening News" - "the great British public," who had "pulled all the stops out" and "despite the recession, dug deep into their pockets" and "inundated the paper with donations". I could almost hear the clapping, and the national anthem playing. I was surprised not to hear that zero hours contract workers had been called in to help clear the office which was "flooded" with cheques, cards and letters from well-wishers or that little bobby's blindness had not turned round the economy.

Mrs. Sharron Maudlin of Reddish wrote to say how the story had touched the strings of her heart and brought back memories of: "my darling pets over the years." Mrs. Olive Overtop of Tarporley wrote with her donation that "Benny is totally enchanting. He will be so glad to see Angela again".

I was surprised that no vet had stepped up to the plate with the gift of a free operation. It's such a caring profession. I recalled my own pet vet tale. I'd recently seen on TV just how generous and caring some vets really are. Some reporters took a dog declared perfectly healthy to three different private vets, telling them the dog had toothache, which it hadn't. Each vet examined the dog. Each said it needed a tooth extracting. One vet offered to take out the tooth causing the trouble for £70; another wanted £120 for cleaning and taking a very bad tooth out and the third, who was clearly more interested in the dog's welfare than the other two vets, or the money, ha ha!, didn't want to take any chances. He said he would take out the offending tooth but the dog would need to stay overnight, and probably a second night. Cost: £320 please.

The piece concluded that following the appeal Angie wanted to send her sincere thanks and prayers to those who had responded but most of all "to the magnificent Evening News people" to whom she would be forever grateful. If that much can be raised for a dog just think how much would have been raised from the great British public had Benny been one of those begging derelicts with mental illness or drug problems, or one of those sick, unemployed, or unemployable people. No need to tax hard working families or attack bankers'

bonuses or root out unpaid tax from tax havens. Scrap Cameron's big society, just let the newspapers deal with it: that should do the trick.

Imagine the Headlines: "READERS GIFT OF HOPE FOR: DRUG ADDICT; MENTALLY ILL PENSIONER; SUICIDAL WORKLESS TEENAGER" or: "HEARTBREAK OF BENEFIT SCROUNGER IN A MILLION". United Utilities would have to be called in to help cope with the floods of tears. The papers could run one of these appeals every week: think of the tax savings it would make! Just ignore those whingers who won't get on their bikes but keep complaining that they'd paid Tax and National Insurance when working on the understanding that they would get entitlements in hard times and who are always objecting to being called "scroungers". They should be made to attend compulsory classes to make them understand that getting on your bike and looking for a job is not about work: it's about the improving exercise.

With the generosity displayed for that little blind dog we should cut those debilitating benefits to zero and stop all overseas aid as well. No need to tax the rich or hard working families to provide for our undeserving poor. As for the billions overseas who live on less than \$1 a day whose wealth Johnny Foreigner supporters say we've plundered over the centuries - just cut all that expensive foreign aid nonsense: set up a couple of newspapers in each poor country and send them a sick dog or two. They'll be quids in! No probs!

I came back to earth thinking Angie's thanks were an end to the matter. Benny would have his sight restored; Angie would get her beloved sweetheart back; the vet would be able to have another weekend break in Paris or Amsterdam; the Evening News readers would throw street parties where the blokes could eat, drink, have a punch up and vomit while the women had a good cry over Benny. Angie and Benny would attend the parties when not too busy opening outdoor events for Animal Rescue and countless photos would be taken by teenagers on their smart phones; the Evening News would get lots of headlines and double page photo spreads: sales and profits of the paper would soar through the roof.

Three weeks later my eye caught another headline on a newsagent's Evening News stand: "OP HEARTBREAK FOR BLIND BENNY" I thought the dog must have died during the operation so I bought a paper. But no, Benny was still alive, still there for Angie. Still,

presumably, taking Angie for walkies down the Mersey and still, presumably, bumping into the padded legs of furniture back in the bedsit. Angie was reeling on finding that her blind pet must stay blind. The vet would have to forego his weekend away; the street parties would have to be cancelled and the Evening News would have to search for another little princess who had gone to join the angels. Preferably after being hit while playing in the road by a car driven by an illegal immigrant and where the child wouldn't have been but for her benefits cheat, single, teenage mother, luxuriating in her brand new council flat. All the more tragic, from a hard working families point of view that the young mum had queue-jumped the Council Housing list by having a baby at fifteen.

Apparently when Angie took Benny to The Animal Medical Centre, as recommended by her vet, who reluctantly admitted he was out of his depth when it finally came to operating on the cataracts, and who was presumably as sick as a parrot at having to forego the opportunity to give Benny the joy of sight to say nothing of the £2,000 quid fee, Angie was told by the veterinary ophthalmologist the operation could not be done: the dog was too old, the condition too severe, and to do with the retinas not the cataracts.

Angie was inconsolable. She said: "I'm terribly upset about it. I went home and cried for an hour. I was hoping Benny would be able to see me and the new cap and jacket and the bow-tie and little boots I've bought him as a surprise but the chance has gone now: there's no hope."

The report went on that Angie will now return the cheques to the Evening News Office where staff will destroy them. Anonymously donated cash will be sent to the Pets Dispensary for Sick Animals fundraising HQ with some going to Angie for expenses. Probably a few consoling bottles of hootch I thought, though that wasn't mentioned. "Angie will write thank you letters to all those who helped". End of story? Not quite. A week later the poor dog died.

The phone rang at 6.30 am. It woke me up. I reached out for it and knocked it on the floor, as per usual at that time of day: it was dead when I picked it up but it rang again almost immediately. I knew from the voice it was Angie despite the fact that she didn't announce herself. She was snivelling and weeping and could hardly speak. She



managed to get out:

“Can you come round right away. He’s gone. Benny died last night in my arms. What am I going to do? I can’t live without him.”

“I’ll be right over, Angie” I said, against a background of noisy, gulping sobs, “as soon as I can.”

I found the house with some difficulty. Most of the houses were not numbered and there were gaps in the terraces where houses had been demolished. The house that Angie lived in was un-numbered and a bit of arithmetic was required to get the right one. There were four strips of plastic taped to the wall with names on but no bells and no door knocker. I tried flipping the letter box flap but it made only a feeble sound that lost itself in the hallway. I stood outside and looked up to the attic window where I suspected she lived: “Angie”, I yelled but there was no response. I was on the point of rapping on the downstairs windows when I heard the attic sash window being raised. I looked up and saw a key coming down on a string like the thread of a spider. A gruff voice shouted something indecipherable through the two inch space which apparently was all the window would open. I unlocked the door and the key was immediately snatched out of my hand and hoisted back up to the attic.

The hall-way was covered with linoleum. There was no furniture: just a pay phone attached to the wall, and that musty, rank smell that poverty seems to bring to old houses. I climbed the stairs to the final flight which accessed the attic. The banisters of the stairs to the lower levels were well worn but normal but the banister to the attic itself took what was left of my breath away. Attached to the banister at about eighteen inch intervals were Snow White’s seven dwarfs, each about a foot high. Snow White was at the top, mounted on the wall, waiting to greet them. Angie stood next to her, waiting to greet me.

She was wearing baggy red linen trousers and a turquoise top over which was a slack, whitish string-like cardigan. An enormous pendant made from a horse-brass harness decoration hung on her chest. Pendulous earrings with those raindrop shaped pearls dangled down about four or five inches. Her blowsy face with its faded cracked lipstick and flaky white powder was streaked with rivers of mascara running down from her eyes. She looked like a badly turned out circus clown.

“Benny’s dead,” she said flatly. “I’ve been holding him, praying for a miracle, for two days but last night he went stiff. What am I going to do?”

“Where is he?” I asked?

“He’s in a drawer in my room”.

“A drawer!”

“Yes, I’ve lined it with a yard of the finest silk from the Asian shop and laid him inside on a cushion.”

The room was even more bizarre than the stairs. Three life-size figures dangled from the ceiling on strings. I thought at first they were bodies and I’d got myself mixed up with Hannibal Lector or his half-brother and sister but the corpses turned out to be puppets he’d found in a skip somewhere, before his sex change, when he was still Denny. The facing wall had nailed to it a life-size picture of Jesus Christ which he’d painted himself. The settee was piled with boxes, papers, books and assorted rubbish. Two tables had dismantled piano-accordions laid out on them in ordered patterns, ready for reassembly. Everywhere, including the floor, there was a chaos of dresses, skirts, underwear and shoes. Unwashed pots, with residual meals littered the main table. Two large accordions, out of their cases, stood on the floor and an assemblage of tin whistles of various sizes littered the sideboard.

“I’m in a bit of a mess at the moment what with my women’s problems and looking after Benny,” she said.

“Where is Benny, exactly?” I asked nervously.

“He’s in here,” she said, pulling open the top draw of the sideboard. Inside, on a flat cushion was what looked like one of those flaccid still-born lambs you sometimes come across in Wales or Cumbria in Spring.

“Christ Angie, you should get him buried quickly: he’s very dead and starting to pong!”

“No, I can’t do that: that’s why I phoned you” she said.

“You want me to bury him!?”

“No, no, not that; I can’t bear to lose him. I want him stuffed so I can keep him with me. How can I get him stuffed?”

“Well it’s a bit late in the day but you can try to get it done if you’re

serious. You'll have to look up a taxidermist in the Yellow Pages or perhaps the vet will know of one, but you will have to be quick about it. How about taking him to a vet and having him cremated. Then you could keep his ashes in a beautiful urn".

"No, I can't do that to him. I want to feel Benny by my side, hold him in my arms for ever." She started to weep and snuffle into her not too clean and very wet tissue again.

"I know he meant the world to you Angie but you've got to be realistic. The dog's dead. You could get another loving dog."

"You must get him buried and get another one".

"No, no, you don't understand. I don't want another dog: I want Benny". She flopped into a chair.

"You must go to the vet. Let me know how you go on," I said, with as much compassion as I could, and left her to think about it.

I didn't hear from Angie for a couple of days so I phoned the house and left a message for her to phone me. She did. She told me that the vet said it was far too late to have the dog stuffed and mounted. He had offered to cremate the remains and put the ashes in a memorial urn for £100 but she had declined the offer. Not because of the money, not at all, but because she couldn't bear think of her baby burnt to a cinder in the incinerator. I didn't argue with her. She had completely anthropomorphised the dog whilst it was alive: she wasn't going to stop now.

"Is he still in the drawer? You can't leave him there---you'll get flies and bugs of all kinds round the place: he's been dead almost a week!" I said.

"I'll think of something," she replied, and rang off.

I left it a day and phoned again. She'd decided to have him buried in consecrated ground and have a memorial stone inscribed and erected so that she could visit him every day.

"I've had seventy memorial cards printed and I'll be sending them to me friends." Including I presumed, the kind and generous Evening News cataract donors. "I'll send you one" she said, and sure enough she did.

It was a 6" by 9" laminated card the top half of which showed a photograph of Benny. The inscription below read: "My pet poodle

Benny, who passed away peacefully in my arms on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2012 aged 14 years. Angie and Benny loved to walk in the woods. R.I.P. my baby. It was along with the letter I received from Angie's new address in Ireland, saying she'd gone back to the old country, where she had always wanted to die: "to be with Benny." She had taken the remains of the dead dog, Benny, dressed in his new hat, jacket, bootees and bow tie, with her in her luggage.



THE SPIRIT OF THE CHINESE MANDARIN SPEAKS THROUGH THE MOUTH OF HORACE HAMBLING  
Hambling, founder of a movement which he calls "United Sanctuary of the New Day" claims to speak to his followers in "trance lectures". The views he puts forward are not his own, he declares, but represent the wisdom of a Red Indian chief "Moon Trail" and a Chinese Mandarin "Ruan Fo" . Under Ruan Fo's influence Hambling takes on a Mongolian appearance

*Picture Post 1939*

## AT O'DONNELL'S

John Lee

The Spanish police came over and went to O'Donnell's. They had this English bloke with them who said he was working with the Manchester police, but he was talking Spanish when he talked to them. Otherwise it was just a normal morning. I went down there for a coffee to get rid of the hangover, like I've done most everyday since I sold up and came to live here. I was looking for one of the lads, the regulars, to have a fag with and chat about last night's disaster, if any of them could remember it, but no way to touch the hard stuff. Bollocks to that hair of the dog. It just doesn't work .

He shows me this picture and asks me if I'd ever seen him here before. As a matter of fact I had, but I didn't let on, you've got to be careful, there's some very dodgy blokes and I don't just mean the Russians. You get all sorts in these bars; millionaires who've got boats in the marina, dossers even worse than me, and all sorts of crooks and conmen, but most of all you get the holiday makers that they hide amongst, the punters who come on cheap flights and spend a lot of money. There's also the Spanish of course, they're all right but we don't have much to do with them; most of us have picked up a bit of the lingo, enough to get by. They'll get bugger all out of me, I thought, but I wonder what's going on? If I can find out it might be something to relieve the boredom and perhaps it'll be a story to tell the lads. So I said:

"What's this is all about? I might be able to help if. I'm a regular here and I know a lot of the lads."

He talked to these Spanish rozzers a bit. They were the Guarda not the local crap so I knew it might be serious - and then he said to me:

"We are investigating an allegation of police corruption by this man who has just served a sentence for drug trafficking and he says it was all instigated by a character he met in this bar. We don't believe him but there is a legal requirement to investigate his claim."

Bloody hell! I'd seen this geezer with that big bloke with the pony tail who used to knock around here. I first came across Pony one morning when I was finishing up my coffee, sitting at the front as usual and reading one of those free Spanish papers written in

English. I was reading Leapy Lee and he was banging on about immigrants and how they were spoiling England and about how that was a good reason to get out and come to Spain. Funnily enough this character was sitting at the next table reading exactly the same bit. He opened up a casually.

"Figure there's a lot of truth in this - yer know. Last time I was in London I was on the tube and I counted about fifteen foreigners and only about five of us. They weren't all black but you could tell by all the different languages they were speaking."

"Yeah I figure it is like that now, not like it was when we were young, nothing against them personally, but you can have too much. It's not why I came here though. I came here for the sun. I bust up with the wife, and the kids are well grown up, so I'm on my own, a singleton but I've found good mates here and you can watch the football in the bar. You speak Spanish then?"

"Oh yeah - course I do, I've been here twenty years. What you're saying about the immigrants is true enough. Some of them are all right but there's some very dodgy bastards amongst them, yer know, rapists and conmen and the Muslims. You get em here as well. They wouldn't get away with it in their country. They'd string em up or stone em to death."

"Yeah I suppose you're right. What do you do then? You retired?"

Of course I knew you don't really ask questions like that here. I'd been told off for it before but I was keen to change the subject because though what they say may be true some people you meet down here want to talk about the immigrants all the time, sort of an obsession really but anyway he did answer me.

"Oh this and that. I was into a bit of industrial cleaning in England, had a little business so I know how it's done, but too many dodgy characters, so I jacked it in and came over here. Worked in motors, but now I'm into property management. Not a millionaire but I get by. You have a property here do you?"

"Yeah I've got a small apartment."

"Where would that be then?"

As far as I was concerned this question was crossing the line. I didn't know this guy from Adam so I started to lie.

"Oh it's in a secure complex down towards Manilva. I share it with

two other blokes. They've been here a long while - like yourself."

"No I was just asking in case you might have need of property services. I might be able to do you a bit of good. I'm often around here."

This struck me as odd as I'd never seen him before. Once seen you wouldn't forget him - probably in his mid sixties but at least six foot two and built like a tank, wearing blue denim and long grey hair pulled into a pony tail. He continued,

"Obviously then you're fixed up financially with a bank account and things like that?

We were in No-No territory now and I was anxious to end it.

"Absolutely. I've no problems like that. I've got my old age pension and my little army pension. It's not much but it's fixed so no-one's goin to make a packet out of me."

"No I was just wondering if I could put anything your way but if you're all fixed up that's great. So you were in the army were you?"

"Yeah just a short time. Saw a bit of Germany - never saw any real action."

"Oh I did when I was in Egypt and when we were fighting with the Jews against the fucking wogs. I'll tell you this - though the Jews were dangerous - killed some of our lads just after the war - it was the wogs that we couldn't stand. Some of our lads would go out in a jeep on a Sunday and take pot shots at them in the fields - used em for target practice. They ran like fuck but you've never seen such two-faced bastards, they come on like friends but they'd rob you blind."

I'd had enough of this so I said I'd seen my mate over at the other cafe and had arranged to meet him. He looked suspiciously as though he didn't believe me and went quiet. I walked away guiltily, looking for someone who looked like a mate who I could have had a meeting with. After that I saw him several times, sometimes with that bloke in the police photograph, and though we nodded to each other it was clear enough that we had nothing more to say.

When Pete joined me later at O'Donnell's - he had a rum and Bacardi - said that after last night the hard stuff would hurt his gut - reckons he has an ulcer. I asked him if he remembered that little bloke with the goatee beard who had just come from England.



"What that twat who was waving his plastic bag full of money around and wanted to be friends with everybody?"

"Yeah that's the one. Well I reckon the police have been asking about him. I think it was him. If it was they said he served time for shifting drugs. Only thing is when he was down here - if it's him -he used to have a goatee beard - trying to look sophisticated - but the bloke in the photo was clean shaved. Could have shaved it off though - especially if he was in prison."

"Can't see that it's him - shifting drugs - he was frightened of his own shadow and dead soft - lent Frank thirty euros - first time he met him - took it out of his plastic bag. Frank's been looking for him to pay him back but he's not been around. He told Frank that he'd lost his job for the fifth time and sold his house to buy one here and try his luck down the coast. On all the time about his missus waiting for him to get a house. He said that's why he was carrying money in a bag. He said it was for the deposit. He'd heard about the black money scam - so he could pay that and the rest in cash later."

"Christ that's bloody clueless - not how it works at all."

"No, Frank told him get a bank account and a solicitor who speaks English. And he only goes and says that he's not sure he can trust the Spanish - said he'd heard stories."

"What can you do with dickheads like that? But I'm sure it was him."

"No he wasn't savvy enough to be a dealer. He upset Frank by banging on about his wife - said how much he missed her and that's why he was in a hurry to get a place."

"That wouldn't have impressed Frank - the problem he had with his Mrs."

"No but I don't blame Frank. Fancy finding you wife having it off on the kitchen table with another woman?"

"Some blokes would have got a kick out of that."

"Yeah but not Frank. It was her that got the kick. He gave her a right good kicking. He shouldn't have done it though. It cost him his house and kids and he reckons she's still having it off with that dyke."

"Well I hope she's changed the table-cloth. Anyway better change

the subject here he comes.”

The three of us talked about a lot of things mainly concerning last night and how Ferdy fell in the water. He was all right though, just very wet - swallowed a lot of sea and diesel and maybe few dead fish - made him sick. Well he said it was the water that made him sick though I reckon the six pints of lager might have helped. Eventually the topic turned to corruption and the thirteen coastal mayors now inside for accepting bribes and money laundering.

“Look at it here,” said Frank, “Even the anti-corruption candidate has gone down for it and he’s only been mayor for six months.”

But this reminded me to ask him about the man with the goatee beard who I thought was in the police photograph.

“Not seen him around. Still looking for him. I always pay my debts. Not seen him since he started hanging around with that ex wrestler feller”.

“You mean Pony tail? How do you know he was a wrestler?”

“Well that’s what he told me - couldn’t stand the feller myself - wouldn’t believe a word he said but he was big and ugly enough for it. Now if you’d told me he was dealing in drugs I might believe that - dead dodgy”.

“Did you talk to him then?”

“Yeah once and once only. He seemed all right at first and we got to talking about women and I got to telling him about my troubles. Shouldn’t have done really. But he tells me they’re only for shagging- ‘Shag em and shove off’ he says. Then he tells me he prefers em when they’re fourteen or fifteen and that the reason he’s here at the moment is that he’d shagged this bird - slept the night with her at his place and then she only tells him in the morning that she’s only fourteen. He said that that didn’t bother him but when she told him with a big smile on her face that she was the chief-constable’s daughter he shit his pants and moved out here. Well he said they’d been trying it on with him about his business and ‘the last thing yer want is those bastards framing you.’ Well there’s a limit. It struck me he’d no bloody morals at all, so I just didn’t want to know him. But it was odd that he went around with that little guy - now he may have been daft but he was pretty inoffensive - straight I would have said.

It was while we were sat at O'Donnell's that Pete found this article in the English paper the page after Leapy Lee. It was about someone who'd spent nine months in prison. He had been carrying a large quantity of drugs in the back of his car when he was stopped by the local police. Of course he was convicted for drug trafficking. He came out with a dodgy story of how he'd met this big guy with a pony tail in an Irish bar in this town and this guy had fixed him up with a bank account and had even helped him buy a house. Then according to him he was stopped by the police out of the blue, and they found this cocaine in his car. He says he'd never seen it before in his life. Claims that he was fitted up but was advised by his lawyer to plead guilty because he was bang to rights -the alternative was a much longer sentence. So he did and got twelve months inside. But according to him that wasn't the end of it. He says when he went to his new house after he'd done his time- someone else was living in it. The bloke living there showed him all the papers - bought it through an agency - and his car was gone from the garage. He says that he went to the bank where this friend had helped him set up an account and was told that it had been a joint account that was now closed and the money withdrawn six months earlier."

Frank said that he'd heard some ridiculous stories but this beat them all.

"No one would be as stupid as to let himself get taken like that - it beggars belief".

Pete said there were some pretty stupid people around and if it were true, "Then the silly sod deserves all he gets."

I agreed

"You've got to look after yourself and it's true there are some dodgy blokes around here. I don't know what to think. There was that bloke with the goatee beard hanging around with Ponytail - but best to stay shtum - keep your thoughts to yourself - as Pete says there really are some dodgy blokes round here." At this point in the conversation, when it was my turn to get the round in, a brand new red Ferrari on the side of the marina starts revving up as though it was at the start of a race. None of us, nor the others at O'Donnell's could hear themselves speak.

"What's he doing that for? He'll ruin the engine" I said in a loud voice

“IT’S BECAUSE HE’S GOT NO DICK.” Pete shouted at the top of his voice, and everybody laughed.

“I wonder what he does for a living?” I asked.

“You don’t ask that kind of question around here” said Frank.

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OIKU: FATHER TED - RATHER DEAD by P.J. Fell

'Father Ted', the epic TV show can and must continue. It was cruelly axed after the inconvenient death of actor Dermot Morgan who played Father Ted, but the entire surviving cast can be gainfully reemployed in the sequel show 'Rather Dead' where Craggy Island antics continue around a replica Ted, dead on the sofa. Dougal can talk to Ted as before while Mrs Doyle continues to offer him tea. The only person who realises Ted is dead can be Father Jack, expanding his catchphrase repertoire of "Drink!" & "Girls!" & "Feck!" with "Corpse!" & "Stench!"

## KEITH HOWDEN

### The Rhetorics of Constipation

Birdy's constipated. It's a sign of greatness. And he knows a joke about it too. It's that Thatcher Matron rationing his *Park Drives*, or else those starlings. Once he recovers, she's in the shit, but he can't mount offensives till his ammunition wagons come through. *There was this squaw went to the Doctor. 'Big Chief no shit.' She got a laxative pill.* Luther was constipated. It's the sure sign of greatness. Birdy thinks Gengis Khan must have been stogged-up too. That fat brother-in-law knew an Italian prisoner of war. 'Twice times,' he said, *'il Duce Mussolini* bosses us. First times he damn good mans and do very big goods. But then two time is bloodyfuckingcunt.' Birdy says it's obvious *il Duce* didn't have long-jams in his bum. *That squaw comes back again. 'Big Chief no shit. and gets herself an even bigger laxative pill.* Jim Pilkington's newsagent Uncle suffered from it. Blamed his wife's oatcakes. Six shitless weeks he was groaning and straining in his allotment. Was Julius Caesar constipated? Birdy reckons he was. Do I think Hitler

was like that too? And was that why  
 his Generals gave him that bomb  
 to clear his passages? The bum Doctor  
 gave Jimmy's Uncle only another week  
 before he burst. He vanished into  
 his shed in the allotment and came back  
 trouserless, triumphant, dancing  
 his garden path. 'The Lord be praised.  
 Eureka. Hallelujah. Shifted it!'  
 Something that looked liked a Daschund  
 was lying behind the shed. *That squaw  
 comes back to the Doctor. 'Still Big Chief  
 no shit. She gets an enormous  
 laxative pill.* Was it the same  
 for Alexander the Great? Then that shop  
 of Jimmy's Uncle hit hard times.  
 He blamed it on a flock of starlings  
 fouling his posters. In desperation,  
 started to feed them daily  
 on his wife's oatcakes. If constipation's  
 the sign of greatness, where does it put  
 that woman squawking *Rejoice* and daubing  
 England with shit? And what about  
 Reagan? He might act constipated  
 if his cue-card told him. *When that squaw  
 came back with 'Big Chief no shit' again,  
 she got the bloody bottle.* No more  
 trouble with starlings. Flocks of them  
 lined up on roofs frantically bashing  
 their beaks on chimneys, doing  
 their damndest to crap. It's **Time,**  
**Gentlemen.** That bloody Charge Nurse  
 is such a shit he should be used  
 as a cure for constipation.

**Shift your arse, Birdy.** The loony bus  
is full to bursting and you have to shout  
*Genuine* to get yourself a seat  
in the loony bogs. NO SMOKING notices  
everywhere else. That fascist Matron  
does it on purpose. Come on Birdy -  
*That squaw came back again and said*  
*'Big shit no Chief.'* As soon as he gets  
his ammunition back, that Matron's  
going to be in the shit ....

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### ALSO BY OUR CONTRIBUTORS

**Tom Kilcourse's** published works include *The Human Circus*, *Who Killed Clarissa*, *The Great Collapse*, and *More Short Stories* available on Amazon His autobiography *It's Only Me* has been published this year

**Paul Tanner's** poetry collection *Dole Anthems* was published in May 2011 His latest collection of prose, poetry and cartoons *The Ism Prison* is published by Penniless Press Publications.

Several pages would be needed to list the published works of **Jim Burns** but we mention his poetry collection *Street Singer* (Shoestring Press 2010) and his essays *Beats, Bohemians and Intellectuals* (Trent Books 2000), *Radicals, Beats and Beboppers* (2011) *Brits, Beats and Outsiders* (2012) and *Bohemians, Beats and Blues People* (2013) are published by Penniless Press Publications

**Keith Howden** has published poetry collections *Marches of Familiar Landscapes* (Peterloo 1978) *Onkonkay* (Peterloo 1984) *The Matter of Britain* (2009) and *Barley Top* (2011) both by PRE (Rome). *Jolly Roger* (2012) is published by Smokestack. His prose works include *The Creators* (Non-Side Press 2013) and *Self-Dissolve* (Penniless Press Publications 2013) and most recently a trilogy comprising *Godsman*, *New Found Lands* and *Hornyhorse* (PPP 2013)

**Bob Wild's** short story collection **Dogs of War** was published by PPP (2008)



