

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

AGM

23rd May 2005

Poetry Workshop Weekend

29th – 31st July 2005

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

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Editorial

I regret that I must begin this editorial with the sad news that our long serving and much esteemed President, Charles Nielson Gattey died peacefully in his sleep on December 14th. I have included some of the contributions in his memory that were offered by members.

I hope this is being read by a large number of members, meaning that most have renewed their membership and we can look forward to a bright future. I certainly can, as I completed laying of floors, wiring and innumerable muscle-straining house renovation activities at 6-15pm on 10th January. I refuse to think of the consequences of the “For Sale” notice planted on our front lawn 3 days later!

I am pleased to say that my latest attempt to be controversial on the subject of English abuse has provoked some responses (See letters). I have been accused of speaking with a plum in my mouth, but no longer. As you will notice I now speak with my tongue in my cheek.

One day I may relate my experience as a School Governor. For now I will just mention that I disposed of the Ministry of Education, Local Council and training course papers in preparation for the end of my tenure, as I am not seeking re-appointment. Being an advocate of recycling, I have almost filled the paper-recycling container with said papers. Such is the consequential burden of regulation, that bane of our modern politically correct society.

Dates for the Diary

Contributions for Summer Author by 17th April 2005.

Annual General Meeting at Civil Service Club 23rd May 2005.

Letters

Sorry, but I disagree. One should write in the vernacular of the day. Words change their meaning, and a writer needs to be understood. No reader wants to keep checking up on out of date expressions.

An extreme example is Shakespeare. The words CLOWN and FOOL, have a different interpretation today.

I write Victorian Melodrama, but some of the Victorian expressions would be incomprehensible today. So I write in today’s common speech, but make it a little stilted to convey an archaic time scale.

However, it can't be working too well, as I haven't got a publisher yet, but live in hope.

Minnie R Rockall

(My perpetual packing and unpacking has resulted in my losing at least one letter. I recall that it supported my views on the plague of "ups" and added that some of the odd expressions that have crept into our language in recent years are making it very difficult for those for whom English is a second language. My apologies to the writer of this letter and my thanks for his support.

A native of Newcastle has advised me that "Here you go" was in common use in this region some 40 years ago, as "At the minute" instead of, "At the moment" continues to be.

However, if we all use regional expressions of the current TV personality there will be nothing to identify the region of the speaker. I think we would lose something if this were so.

In reality I think old reactionaries like me will continue to resist and our obsolete speech will continue to be understood by all.

A football supporter might think result means success, but I think most people still regard it as an outcome, i.e. it is also a result for the team that loses. Rather than a change of meaning, perhaps we should consider such an alternative meaning, relating to the context in which it is used. I would be surprised if a reader of Victorian Melodrama had difficulty in understanding words of that period used in a Victorian context, though I could be wrong. I also suspect that a stilted style is more likely to be read as belonging to the writer than reflecting an earlier era. I have also heard Shakespeare translated into modern English and found that for me it had lost a great deal in translation. Keep the letters coming – Ed)

Writers' Fair – 4th December 2004

Joan Lewis

The Fair was held at St. Vincent's Centre, Carlisle Place, near Victoria Station. Our indefatigable Meetings Secretary, Ethel Corduff, struggled on the train from South Norwood with a case full of goodies – sandwiches and savouries and even some squishy desserts. Juice was on offer and we were able to make tea and coffee. It was all yummy and an easy venue. Only nine of us attended (although more had promised) and

we had an interesting session. The cost was only five pounds. So where was everyone?

Beryl Jones brought along the history of the Society, which sadly can't be produced due to shortage of cash. Gordon Gompers and Joan Lewis displayed magazines in which they had had articles published. Ethel's contribution was a heap of publications, which sported short stories and articles she had written over the years. Val Whitmarsh showed us extracts from the Review of Historical Novels that she edits and Roger de Boerr and Terry Rickson brought along poetry collections. Roger also displayed his books on Russia and transport. This diverse collection proved fascinating.

After our lunch and perusal of members' work we gathered round the big table for a workshop. Again the items on offer were varied. Beryl kicked off with the first chapter of her murder mystery novel and Brian Lockett followed with an entertaining short story about relationships. Gordon shamed us by his recitation of one of his poems, an excellent feat of memory. Ethel read a short story and Joan an article, Roger gave us a poem and Terry read his Mummies' Tale. Val gave us the benefit of her extensive know-how and Betty Goodwin wound up proceedings with an account of her family history quest, which had taken her on many interesting treks. We tried to be constructive in our comments and I think we found the afternoon useful.

Report on the SCPSW Annual Lunch 2004

Ethel Corduff

Although our efforts to minimise cost this year resulted in restricting numbers, it did not compromise the quality of the occasion. The guests, the speakers and the food were all excellent. We were fortunate that House of Commons researcher Ruth Winstone, Editor of Tony's Benn's Diaries was invited as guest speaker by Alan Watts. She brought along Tony Benn as her guest and he very kindly agreed to speak to us.

Ruth was charming and gave us an interesting insight into her research and her role as editor of the diaries. This was followed by Tony Benn's witty stories, which had us all enthralled, amid much laughter.

The food was plentiful and excellent and the surroundings more intimate.

Members came from London, Birmingham, Kent, Essex, Liverpool, Lincolnshire, Devon, Hertfordshire and Middlesex.

Report on the funeral of Charles Neilson Gattey.

Ethel Corduff

Sadly, our President Charles Neilson Gattey aged ninety, died at home on 14th December, with his faithful nurse Pat by his bedside. He was also cared for by his housekeeper of 35 years Mrs Tobin.

The funeral which took place at St. Thomas More Church, Eastcote on the 22nd December was attended by 5 of our members and 2 of their spouses.

The church was nearly full for the Requiem Mass, fellow parishioners, literary and musical friends attended, including leading members of the Portsmouth Players who staged the premiere of Charles's musical Miss Courtney's Bloomer a few years ago.

The priest spoke about Charles's career in Customs and Excise, his long literary career with many published books, some on humour, on the monarchy and opera, his help to charities and his commitment to the Roman Catholic Faith.

Afterwards the cars were able to follow the hearse through quiet roads to Ruislip Crematorium After the cremation we gathered at the Tudor Lodge Hotel for reminiscing and refreshments.

In memory of our late President, Charles Neilson Gattey.

I probably knew Charles better than anyone else at present in the Society. I first met him in 1967, when I came to work in London. He was then Chairman and held in high regard. He had already made his mark as a writer of biographies and plays. His play 'The White Falcon' had been a notable success on television and the comedy film of which he was the co-author had its world premiere before HM the Queen. He was adept at collecting anecdotes and forging them into hugely enjoyable books. For example, he produced 'Great Dining Disasters' and the hilarious 'In Bed with an Elephant', but these were light-hearted by-products as his main interest was music and opera 'Peacocks on the Podium' was just one of his books on this subject, but he had wider interests. His interest in the occult was revealed in They saw Tomorrow, Seers and Sorcerers from Delphi till Today, while his Farmer George's Black Sheep is a straightforward history of George 111's siblings.

Charles Gattey will be remembered for his versatility, his ready humour and his encouragement to all members of the Society, especially those at

the start of their writing careers. The society leant on him to a tremendous extent. He attracted excellent speakers to our luncheons. He generously sponsored competitions and he was always ready to do whatever he felt possible for the Society's welfare. He will be greatly missed

Alan S Watts

* * * *

Alas Charles Neilson Gattey has joined the great majority. It is not often that I am in accord with everyone else in the Society. However, in my sense of personal loss and in appreciation of his talent I am. He stood out among a long line of distinguished Presidents. Not only as the writer of some outstanding books, but as an administrator. Even his gaffes had a positive side to them. How often have I thought, "That is not the right thing to say (or do), but it is better!"

His will be a hard act to follow.

Gordon E Gompers

* * * *

At an annual luncheon, I once remarked to Charles that no one seemed to get any older at these yearly events. His reply was, 'That's because you don't see the ones who have died in between.'

Brian Scott

Stop Press

Sadly I have to report another loss. Marjorie Watts, wife of our Chairman died from a heart attack on 1st February. Members who attended London meetings will know that Marjorie was always there, attending to our refreshments, helping Alan in any way she could, with tolerance and a ready smile. Strictly speaking she was not a member, merely a member's spouse, but those who knew and met her will surely agree that she was to all intents and purposes a valued member of our Society.

In my yet unpublished novel I created "an ancient" religion called Guardians of the Soul, in which members were said to survive death as long as they were remembered by those who lived after them, where Marjorie would clearly survive for many years.

I am sure all members will join me in offering our thoughts and sympathy to Alan.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Joyce Thornton

The Last of the Sonnets a cinquain
by Terry Rickson
to the memory of Barbara Dickinson

Her voice
stilled; the lady
of the sonnets passes
through the gold bright, ripened fields of
harvest.

Barbara Dickinson 1922 – 2005

With Barbara's sad death in the New Year, the Society has lost one of its foremost poets. A founder member of the Poetry Workshop which she organised for ten years, she became known to many poet members through her editing of the Workshop's postal folios. Her help and encouragement was greatly valued and she demonstrated her educational skill in the seminars she conducted at the annual Poetry Workshop Weekends, which she pioneered with the late Bill Barnes. Her reputation as a poet extended nationally; her poems were published in many poetry magazines and broadcast by the BBC and she was one of Envoi's assistant editors.

'Gaze an Eagle Blind' was the title of her first collection, published by Guilford poets press in 1977, followed by 'Merry Days of Desolation' in 1984 and 'Rags of Time' in 1991, both published by the Poetry Workshop of the Society. 'Rags of Time' was dedicated to her husband Joe to whom she was married for twenty-five years and who died in 1984. The simplicity of her inscription in haiku form illustrates her ability to combine imagery with sentiment:

To Joe

The beauty of snow
fails to delight my senses,
lacking your footprints.

The collection concludes with 'The Always Now', which was read at her funeral service.

The Always Now

(Nobody ever lived in the past; when they were alive it was always 'now'.) B.D.

Browsing about the church
I discover words on the floor
where a man is buried who died
in seventeen twenty-four;
and as I read the words
my mind id pondering how
he didn't live in the past,
he lived in the Always Now;
and I think how his life was spent,
how he lived it day by day,
as the earth turned round the sun
and whittled his years away.

And I lived in the Always Now
as year succeeds to year,
a life of working and loving,
worry and hope and fear,
as the earth spins round the sun
till the day will come at last
when my sands are all outrun
and I belong to the past.

And you who are not yet born,
while the earth winds round the sun
will live in the Always Now
till the toll of your days is done.

Barbara excelled in the sonnet form too. 'The Innkeeper' is one example

I am the one who said, "Sorry, no room."
Ever since then men have been cursing me;
me and Judas – on us the weight of doom.
I turned him away and he turned him in, you see.
But how could I throw out customers who'd paid,
for strangers, poor, no luggage, they hadn't booked?
I gave them a quiet stable; Mary laid
her baby in clean hay. I know. I looked.
Of course, when I saw the poor girl was with child
I did what I could; where the ass and oxen trod,
they sheltered warm and safe. But what makes me wild
is, how should I know she was the mother of God?
It's all very well to blame me; in God's name,
if you'd been in my shoes, you'd have done the same.
(From 'Rags of Time')

However, Barbara often advocated breaking away from traditional form, sometimes suggesting writing unrhymed sonnets, to bring poetry into a modern idiom. In an article she wrote recently for Poetry Workshop's Magazine 'Wavelengths' entitled 'Why I Love the Haiku' she challenges us to develop the haiku verse form of three lines with 5, 7 and 5 syllables into a form which is not only imagist but which reflects our way of thought. She sums up with:-

'We poets, we are dreamers, thinkers, innovators, rule-breakers, inventors. Rules can be a guidance, a help, a starting point, an inspiration, but should never be a restriction.'

A fine inheritance for Barbara's fellow poets.

Joyce Thornton
January 2005.

Yesterday.....and Tomorrow

Margaret Chisman

I dreamed of a garden
As familiar to me
As my right hand
Yet when I awoke
I could not picture it in my life.
It was by no means grand
But a place of simple delight
And quiet meditation.
I knew every leaf,
Each flower was as distinct
To me as if only
Yesterday I had tended it
With my trowel.

Where, oh where is it?
Did I, in some former life,
In some quite other setting
Care for and love this garden?
Were there other children,
Other parents, another dear husband?
Will there be different flowers
Waiting for me in some, as yet,
Unknown bower of quiet thought?

Result of W F & F G Froud Memorial Competition.

First Prize (£100) “The Queen of Bronze”, Geoffrey Gardener, Whimple, Devon.

Second Prize (£30) “A Night to Remember”, Rex Andrews, Voiteur, Jura, France.

Third Prize (£20) “Incident at Naseby 1645”, Don Nixon, Wolverhampton.

It is intended that all these entertaining entries will be included in future issue of Author, together with the comments of Val Whitmarsh, who so generously spared us her time and effort in judging the entries for this competition. We also thank Roy Froud for providing the prizes.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

Waves 2005

The deadline for submissions to **Waves**, the Poetry Workshop's annual collection of members' work, is 31 March, so you still have time to get your poems to **Liz Rowlands** (address at top of page). This year, to facilitate the typesetting, Liz is asking for poems that are no longer than 30 lines including stanza breaks. Other than that, there are no restrictions of form, rhymed or unrhymed. As usual, to assist with marketing costs, contributors of published poems will be asked to purchase 6 copies of the anthology at £2 per copy.

Bill Barnes Competition

The results of the 2004 Bill Barnes Competition were:

- 1st Prize: **Andrew Millican** (Lottery)
- 2nd Prize: **Norman Bissett** (Nightfall, Rannoch Moor)
- 3rd Prize: **Marjorie Bradley** (Investment)

The rules for the 2005 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition, which is open exclusively to members of the Poetry Workshop, will appear in the Spring issue (No. 3) of **wavelengths**, the magazine of the Poetry Workshop. Deadline for entries to the Competition is 30th September 2005.

2005 Poetry Workshop Weekend

This year's PW Weekend is set for 29th-31st July 2005 at The Manor House, University of Birmingham. A booking form was enclosed with the Winter 2004 issue of **wavelengths**. If you have mislaid your form, are a new member interested in joining us or would like some further information about the Weekend, please write to me, Mike Boland (address at the top of the page), and I will send you a copy.

Subscriptions 2005

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1st January 2005. The cost of membership remains unchanged for yet another year, being £3 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers, and £5 for associate members. Cheques/postal orders should be sent to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears on the back cover of this magazine. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- three issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year, plus a fourth, Competition Special issue
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the address at the head of the page.

Dates to Remember:

31 March 2005	“Waves” deadline
1 April 2005	Deadline for “wavelengths” No 3
1 May 2005	“wavelengths” No 3 published
29 - 31 July 2005	Poetry Workshop Weekend
31 July 2005	Deadline for “wavelengths” No 4
1 September 2005	“wavelengths” No 4 publishing date
30 September 2005	Deadline for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition
1 November 2005	Deadline for “wavelengths” No 5
1 December 2005	“wavelengths” No 5 publishing date

Market Information

Don't Knock the Littles

Gordon E Gompers

Many folk say that I am not very bright. That is probably very true but I have flogged a lot of my rubbish so what am I doing right? After much soul searching I have probably come up with an answer. I pay attention to those who have proven themselves better than I am.

Henry Miller once stated that he wrote for any publication that would carry him. So I took a leaf from his book and asked myself each time I wrote for publication: "where can this be placed?"

I remember in a writers' class the "top pupil" was always sending his stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* "in case that is the sort of thing they'll like". One nice lady even asked me why I bothered with *Hobbies Magazine* and *The Competitors' Journal*. There could be only one answer: that was where I got published. I doubt whether *The Saturday Evening Post* man ever hit his target.

There are many bridges for the littles leading to the big time. After writing regularly for *Morley Magazine* I was made the college's accredited music critic. This led to my being accredited by *The Recorder Magazine* to the Dolmetsch Festival at Haslemere; and articles about the recorder renaissance in *The Lady* and *The Christian Herald*.

Remember this: if you send your piece to *The Saturday Evening Post* and it is rejected you have aspired highly but you have achieved nothing. If you send it to *The Author* and it is published you might not have aspired too much (sorry Adrian!) but you have achieved a little.

What's that? If you don't aim at the top you'll never hit it. I agree, go aim high and aim low and cast your net wide. However, no unpublished writer should think that he/she is too good for the littles. One does not usually climb a ladder by stepping on the top rung first.

Surviving the Tsunami

Stephen Bibby

For the first time in over 30 years my wife and I decided to spend Christmas away from home. Our son David is a teacher in Bangkok. His contract due to end in March 2005, Christmas 2004 seemed an ideal time to visit him and his fiancée. We arrived in Bangkok on Christmas Eve and had a most enjoyable Christmas Day. It was good fun to pull crackers and partake of a superb buffet lunch outside in sweltering temperatures by the Chao Phraya River at a well appointed Bangkok hotel.

We had decided that on Boxing Day we would travel to the sea for a week of relaxation before we all had to resume work on 4th January. At David's recommendation our destination was Krabi on the Indian Ocean coast. We flew down from Bangkok and arrived at the Krabi Resort at about 10.45a.m.

We had selected this establishment because it was close to the sea and had bungalow type accommodation in fairly extensive grounds. Having checked in, unpacked our bags and changed into clothes more suitable for temperatures in the 30s Celsius, we wandered off to explore.

As we walked through an archway leading to the front, we became conscious that the ground underfoot was very wet. We wondered if a water main had burst. Then we saw that the sea appeared to be at very high water level. It was a dirty brown colour, lashing up against a sea wall whose height we could not judge. Looking out to sea we saw waves, masses of debris and an even more discoloured patch of water apparently pouring into the ocean from a river mouth. We were incredulous. Had there had been a flash flood or were we simply witnessing an abnormally high tide?

A large number of staff were standing around gazing at the sea. However as all their conversation was in Thai it was difficult to make out what was happening. Then a British couple appeared. They explained that they had heard on the World Service that there had been an earthquake in Indonesia and as a result tsunamis had swept across the Andaman Sea. They told us that they had been sitting on the beach – a beach we had yet to see – and had noticed a wall of water approaching. They had simply run for their lives leaving any possessions they had

with them. Still shocked, they were looking in vain for goods they had lost.

After this conversation we noticed that the high tide seemed to recede in a matter of minutes. It was then we discovered that the seawall in front of the hotel was about 10 ft. high. A small garden then rose another 3 ft. We were standing on what we later found was a paved area but at this point it was freshly covered with sand and shingle. Venturing down some steps on to the beach, a scene of utter devastation met our eyes. Not a grain of sand remained. Instead the beach was a mud bank covered with stones, bricks, smashed wooden planks and the mangled remains of blue awnings that shelter passengers on the ubiquitous long tail boats. Suddenly the water seemed to recede even further and we heeded warnings to retreat. Within a couple of minutes more waves came charging in from the sea. They crashed against the seawall in cascades of spray, resembling breaking winter seas at British seaside resorts. After two or three inundations we noticed a much more spectacular wave approaching. It must have been about 20 ft. high and looked exactly like the pictures of the huge Pacific rollers that pound Bondi Beach. As it approached spume flew from its angry crest. It was awesome in its ferocity. Even though we were well back from the seawall we turned and ran. However this was far easier said than done as the escape route was impeded by small hedges and trailing wires from the Christmas lights that were draped over the shrubs. Fortunately we managed to hurry back to dry ground, very wet but uninjured.

Gradually the sea subsided once again. We were then able to see the extent of the damage to our resort. About 20 yards from the seafront the hotel's restaurant was in a sorry state. Its large plate glass windows were shattered, huge jagged pieces of glass hanging from the ceiling, the interior damp, the furniture pushed onto an end wall with all the detritus of flooding over the parquet floor. The bungalows immediately facing the sea were also wrecked; their doors and windows smashed, the furniture and bedding sodden with seawater.

We retreated to our bungalow to try to find out what had occurred from the TV News. However there was a power cut. No one at Reception seemed to have any information and on reflection I think it likely that all the staff were in total shock. We still had no idea whether what we had experienced was localised to Krabi. We were certainly unaware that not only was the whole of the Andaman Coast affected but

also that other areas of Thailand and other countries had suffered far worse damage and thousands of casualties.

We decided that we would walk to nearby Ao Nang to try to find out more. Here the main road runs above a sea wall that is about 20 ft. high. Even so we found the highway was covered in sand and mud. Shop fronts were smashed, their interiors flooded. Crowds of people were gazing numbly out to sea. We eventually made our way into a small café on the road leading uphill and out of the resort. However no sooner had we ordered our drinks than a police loudspeaker van came down the road blaring something unintelligible. We were hustled out of the bar with indecent haste as the proprietor rapidly closed up. People raced up the street to higher ground as the police were apparently yelling that more tsunamis were on the way. This frightening episode turned out to be a false alarm but it was deeply unsettling.

It was only when power was restored that evening that we began to appreciate the full extent of what had occurred. Fortunately our mobile phones intermittently picked up signals and we were able to contact our daughter in the UK. However we were in no position to decide whether we should pack up and return to Bangkok.

The following morning the resort provided breakfast at a nearby restaurant. The management clearly had no intention of closing down. Most of the bungalows were unaffected; water and power were satisfactory. By now the scale of the catastrophe was known to us but we realised that the best we could do was to remain where we were. Not only would we have had difficulty in changing our tickets but also it was preferable to keep away from the airport when obviously it was likely to be in demand by the emergency services. Furthermore we were not certain of whether we could obtain alternative accommodation in Bangkok.

That evening there was another tsunami scare. We were standing near the seafront when all of a sudden the street vendors began hurriedly packing up their stalls. A lady having a Thai massage leapt from her bed grabbing her daughter's hand and running screaming up the street. Word had gone round again that another big wave was imminent and mass hysteria gripped everyone who was abroad.

Our decision to stay meant that we had firsthand experience of the devastation. We visited the small inlet where the wooden long tail boats are moored. Boat after boat was piled up in an unimaginable jumble of

wreckage. After about two days some cranes arrived and spent hours lifting and separating the smashed craft, retrieving the heavy engines with their propellers attached on long metal rods.

Along the seafront at Ao Nang boats lay smashed against the seawall or stuck in the muddy sand. Later in the week a crane arrived to pull one small cruiser from the sand but it was so battered that it broke into pieces during the attempt.

For the first two days we saw numerous boatloads of people - both Thais and tourists -being brought in from the outlying islands. On another occasion two army dinghies came into the shore and a body was unloaded. Understandably, but harrowingly, members of the waiting crowds surged forward to try to identify the corpse apparently in an appalling state of putrefaction.

However I was impressed by the diligence with which the army and the local populace rallied round to effect the mass clear up. By New Year's Eve repairs were well under way. The sand had been cleared from the roads and pathways. Much of the debris on the beach had been collected into piles and burnt. One or two long tail boats were beginning to ply their trade again and the sea began to appear less cloudy so that it was possible to snorkel.

This was certainly not the pleasant midwinter holiday that we had anticipated. However I am glad that we stayed as we had a chance both to witness the destructive power of nature and admire the resilience of the local population determined to get things back to normal. We were extremely fortunate that we had not arrived any earlier at our resort and that we had selected an establishment that was not exactly at sea level. I just hope that we did not get in the way and were able to contribute a little to the recovering local economy.

Krabi is a beautiful area. It is framed by huge limestone cliffs resembling petrified waterfalls where stalactites spill down to a sea rich in marine life. The beaches are golden and unspoilt; the seaside restaurants and bars friendly but not garish; the people relaxed and friendly. They have suffered grievously but the application and industry we saw makes me certain they will recover. But this is one small area, by no means the worst affected. Our experience counts for nothing alongside the terrible havoc caused in less developed and less accessible areas in Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and , above all, in Indonesia.

A Butterfly Emerges

Maureen Mills

(Prose Mini-competition Winning entry)

There it was in black and white, printed in the local newspaper. All her personal details condensed into a column alongside a picture of someone she hardly recognised. How has she let things come to this?

“Alison,” her mother called out, “Have you seen the Courier? You should feel proud.”

Alison didn’t answer. She wasn’t proud, she’d been happy with her life before, in the background looking on, never the centre of attention, content in the knowledge that one day she would do something about her problem, if indeed it was a problem, without feeling under pressure.

When she did decide the time was right, her world changed, she was forced to think about her lifestyle. She had to talk about her weaknesses and her life became competitive.

The persistent ring of the telephone interrupted her thoughts. She hoped it wasn’t for her.

“Alison, it’s the paper, they want to take more photographs.”

“Oh no Mum. I can’t.” Alison protested.

“Yes, she’ll be there,” she heard her mother say.

* * *

The following day Alison was taken to a store in town, where she was persuaded to try on a trendy outfit which did full justice to her shapely figure.

It was a while before she realised this was to be given to her by the newspaper for being the best achiever in her class. She was expected to be overjoyed as well as grateful – but all this wasn’t her, not Alison, it was happening to someone else.

When the photo session was over, she changed into her baggy old jeans, trainers and tee shirt.

“I’m off to meet Kim and the others,” she called to her mother.

“That’s nice dear, you haven’t seen Kim for ages,” came the response, her mother’s eyes remaining glued to the latest episode of her favourite soap opera.

As Alison entered the wine bar where the girls usually met, she felt strangely nervous, wondering how they would react. She pulled her oversized tee shirt over her hips and smiled, convincing herself she looked like she always did.

“Hi Alison,” said Kim. “Wow! You kept that quiet. Fancy you being in the paper. Well done. The others will soon be here soon. We’ll have to celebrate.”

“I feel very self conscious about it all,” Alison responded.

“Why?” Kim asked, puzzled.

“Well, in case people think I’m trying to be someone I’m not. That photo looks nothing like me.”

“Don’t be a silly goose” laughed Kim, putting her arm round her. “That photo is just a black and white image, it’s the real person that counts. My baby sister has grown up at last and she looks great, even if she’ll always be a pain in the neck to me!”

Alison thought for a few seconds, then said, “I’ve just got to go back home and put some other gear on, because suddenly the ‘Slimmer of the Year’ feels great.”

Silence!

Adrian Danson 1986

Hush said the doors of the underground train
As it clattered and banged to a halt
Hush said the brakes of the number nine bus
As it crashed in a shower of glass
Hush said the giant who stood hard on my foot
And perforce interrupted my scream

Cat Woman

Joanna Lilley

Three weeks after their wedding day Cathy asked Mark an important question.

“Do you think,” she said, cutting up the last of the steak on her plate to disguise how intently she was waiting for the answer. “Do you think we could get a couple of kittens?”

Mark didn't reply straight away. “Well,” he said. “As long as you're the one changing the litter tray and carting them off to the vet, I suppose we could.”

“Oh, thank you,” she smiled. “It just feels so odd not having cats around.”

“Just don't expect me to feed them or anything,” said Mark. “You know how I feel about cats and dogs and things. I'm just not into them.”

Cathy stood up to clear the table. Actually, he had never told her how he felt about cats and dogs and things as he called them. He had never said anything if she veered away from him when they were walking along a street, hand outstretched towards a cat on a garden wall or in a driveway.

They almost always came to her too, daintily sniffing her diamond ring. She had a knack with them, he had at least commented on that.

Still, it had been what was called a whirlwind romance. They'd met when he came into the lighting shop where she worked. He was looking, he said, for a couple of lamps because he thought his new house - the house they now both lived in - could do with being a bit cosier. She had helped him and it was the only time she could remember actually being interested in the goods it was her job to sell.

Three months later they married and flew to Greece for their honeymoon. No doubt there were plenty of things they had yet to learn about each other. She had to admit she hadn't told him everything about herself either.

When Mark came home from work the next day, two black and white kittens with upright tails rushed to his feet like dodgem cars at a fairground.

“You didn't hang about, did you?” Mark said as he lifted a leg to step over them.

“They're saying hello,” Cathy laughed.

“Right,” said Mark as he kissed her.

“Aren’t you even going to say hello back?” she asked him.

“I don’t think they understand English too well, Cathy.”

He didn’t even ask her where she had got them. No man in the world was absolutely perfect she supposed as she heated up his meal in the microwave. When she, Catherine Anne Morgan, had found out Mark’s surname was Thompson, she knew it was a sign that she should marry him. She certainly wasn’t going to make a feminist fuss and keep her own surname.

Even before she left her parents’ home to marry Mark, Cathy knew she would need to get her own cats. It was horrible having to say goodbye to the family pets. All her life, her parents had had two cats. If one was run over or died some other way - one cat expired after eating slug pellets put down in the garden next door - they would get another one immediately to keep the remaining one company. It was a pity, Cathy frequently thought, her parents had never shown the same consideration for their only child.

A week later, Mark broke off from cooking dinner to put his head round the door of the sitting room. Cathy was sitting watching television, the two kittens keeping her lap warm as effectively as a hot water bottle.

“Mike rang me at work,” he said. “He invited us over at the weekend.”

“We can’t go if we have to stay the night like we did before. I can’t leave Pickle and Tangle on their own that long.”

“Well, we’re not driving back home in the same night. It’s two hours each way.”

“You go and I’ll stay here.” It was the obvious solution.

“Christ, they’ll be fine on their own for one night. We’ll get home early the next morning.”

But Cathy was adamant and Mark went alone. He set off after breakfast on Saturday - without kissing her goodbye she noted - and didn’t return until late on Sunday afternoon.

“You could have at least done the washing up,” was all he said when he got home. “This place is a mess. Mike and Jill have got kids and their place doesn’t look anywhere near as bad as this.”

“We’ve been playing,” she giggled. She hoped her husband wasn’t always going to be this grumpy.

“And another thing,” said Mark. “You often get home from work before me. Doesn’t it ever occur to you to get some dinner on the go for us?”

“Oh dear,” said Cathy, bending down to scoop up Pickle. “Daddy’s very grumpy.” Pickle raised his head and pressed his tiny pink nose against her mouth.

“That’s revolting,” said Mark.

“It’s their way of telling me they love me.”

“It’s unhygienic. You might as well stick your tongue in the litter tray. I’m not kissing you if you do that.”

“Don’t be silly,” she giggled as Pickles did it again.

“I’m going to clean up,” he said.

When Cathy heard him opening the door to the cupboard under the stairs where they kept the vacuum cleaner she shouted out:

“No, you can’t Hoover. It scares the kittens to death.”

Mark didn’t reply, at least not in her earshot. Instead, she could hear him fitting the plug into the hall socket.

“Come on, you two,” she said to the kittens, scooping them up as the Hoover started its roar. “I’ll keep you safe from the horrible-worrible Hoover. Let’s go up to the spare bedroom. I don’t think you’ve been in there yet.”

While Mark lay beside her that night Cathy decided she would call in sick the next morning and do some cleaning and cooking to surprise him. It was true she hadn’t done her bit since she’d got the kittens; they’d been her priority. But by the time he left for work she had changed her mind. After a lie in, with a kitten curled up either side of her head on the pillow like furry earphones, she played with Pickle and Tangle instead and in the afternoon drove to the supermarket to stock up on cat food and milk.

Of course all Mark could say when he got home from work was that she could have got some human food too, but she had honestly forgotten. After a late meeting the last thing he wanted to do was come home and find nothing in the cupboards, he told her. He’d given up expecting Cathy to have got anything ready for him. He was even grumpy with the delivery firm when he rang to order a large pizza with extra topping.

“You’re obsessed with those kittens,” he told her after he put the receiver down.

Cathy looked at him and smiled. He didn't understand. "They need looking after. They're kittens."

"Cathy, you need to sort yourself out. We're married. We're supposed to look after each other. Share the cooking, the shopping, the cleaning. That sort of thing. You never lift a finger unless it's to do with those bloody cats. If you don't get a grip of yourself I'm going to have to take them to the Cats' Protection League."

She stared at him. She could feel her skin begin to burn. "If you ever touch Pickle or Tangle," she told him, "I'll kill you."

Mark looked as if he believed her; his face had paled. "You eat the bloody pizza," he said and left the room. Several minutes later she heard the front door open and slam shut.

After collecting the pizza from the delivery boy at the front door, Cathy put it on the sofa beside her and tore off a slice, flicking channels on the television while she ate. She didn't mind the kittens walking across it, licking tomato off their pink paw pads. They must get bored with cat food.

Cathy was in the middle of brushing Tangle when the telephone rang. She tutted then put her down and went over to the receiver.

"Hi Cathy, it's Jim. Is Mark there?" Jim was one of his squash-playing friends.

"No, he's not here," Cathy told him.

"Any idea when he'll be in? I can ring back."

"No, sorry." Cathy replaced the receiver and picked up Tangle again. She hadn't seen Mark for a few days. He'd been so grumpy when he had been here she preferred it without him anyway. Perhaps - if he didn't come back - she could get another kitten. There were plenty that needed homes.

When the doorbell chimed Cathy opened the door to see Mark standing on the doorstep with a cat basket in one hand and a large bag in the other. She quickly bolted the door before he could use his key. At least he had rung the bell rather than barge in.

"Cathy, come on. Let me in. I need some clothes." He shouted through the door.

"What the hell's that cat basket for then?" She yelled back.

“I thought we could take them with us. To my parents’ place. They can help you look after them and we could talk and sort things out. I want to help you. Come on, Cathy.”

“Go away.”

“Cathy, the house stinks like a public toilet. I can smell it from here. You need some fresh air. I know you haven’t been at work for at least a fortnight. They’re worried about you. We all are.”

That was how she knew he was lying. Her workmates couldn’t care less about her. At least he didn’t pretend her parents were worried about her as well, because that would be too obvious a lie. She peered through the bottle glass panels in the door and realised he had gone. He must be going round to the back door. She ran through the house as quickly as she could, careful to avoid the kittens. She had to beat him there and make sure it was locked. It was, but she could see Mark approaching through the clear glass, still holding the cat basket.

“Cathy, this is ridiculous,” he said, sounding calmer now. “Let me collect some clothes at least. What have I got to do, break the door down?” He was trying to joke.

“Go away. I don’t trust you,” she shouted.

“Right.” said Mark. He started to take off his jacket and wind it round his fist as if he was going to smash the glass. “I’m going to break this window and unlock the door if you don’t let me in. This is my house.” He moved right up to the glass and looked at her, then at her feet.

“Jesus Christ.” She heard him say as he stepped backwards, looking horrified. She looked at him and smiled while dozens of kittens swarmed at her feet. Making soothing noises, she bent down to pick up two of the smallest, hugging them to her chest with relief as Mark backed away. The glass would have shattered all over them. She could never have got them all out of the way in time.

“How many...?” Mark’s voice seemed to tail off, unless he was speaking so quietly she couldn’t hear him through the glass.

As she watched, he walked away slowly. Silly boy, she thought, fancy being afraid of kittens. Still, that had got rid of him. What was the point of having a husband if he didn’t like cats?

The School Reunion

By Elvira Bridges

Lauren You probably don't remember me. A few years have gone by since we were at school together. No, I shouldn't think you will remember me. I was tall, thin and ginger haired. You were small and attractive.

It took a long time to make up my mind to go to the school reunion. The first since we left. I didn't think I could bear to see you again after what you did. I saw you but you didn't see me. I stayed at the back during the speeches. Not that you would have noticed me if I had sat next to you.

Lauren Powers, the most popular girl in the class, in the school, in the town. Everyone seemed to like you, boys, girls even parents. I didn't like you at all. Are you asking why? No, I don't suppose you are in the least interested. It didn't affect you, did it? Perhaps I should just leave it, leave you wondering.

No! I will tell you what you caused through your selfish uncaring attitude. Do you remember Timothy, Timmy Causton. We were all in the same class. Tim idolised you. He confided in me in the gym, told me you were the love of his life. Do you remember him?

Sensitive and very shy. He didn't say a lot. Not one of the sporty ones. He was so quiet, barely spoke to anyone. Yet he became besotted with you.

Tim was quiet and studious, nothing out of the ordinary. You didn't go for that type did you? You were the darling of the rugby team.

I have a particular memory of Timmy, shortly before we left school. He told me he was going to ask you out. I begged him not to as I knew you would hurt him. Not only did you do that, Lauren but you humiliated him in front of the whole class.

There was a lot of noise when Mr Foster left the room, so Tim, thinking no one would hear him, whispered to you that he would like you to go to the pictures with him. Just at that moment when Mr Foster returned and silence fell, you were heard to laugh. "ME. Go out with YOU!"

Poor Timothy blushed and mumbled "Sorry."

Mr Foster, you won't forget our English teacher, will you? He said, "What's up? Have we got a joke going then?"

Tim looked at the floor. I knew he wished it would swallow him up. And what did you do Lauren? You stared into Mr Foster's face and said, "Can you believe it, sir? HE wants to go out, with me!"

You faced the class, walked up to Greg Clarkson, the head boy and said, "I'd rather go with you, darling." You had so much cheek. You just turned to the teacher and whispered, loud enough for all to hear, "What do you think of that, Mr Foster?" Everyone knew he fancied you too.

The whole class laughed as the red faced teacher hit the desk with his ruler and told everyone to sit down.

Timothy went outside and was sick. He was off for a couple of weeks. I wonder if you remember that he was even more withdrawn after that.

Tim and I left school early and I worked in an office as a bit of a dogsbody. I heard that Greg Clarkson did well in business, went into his father's firm. You didn't know that I'd seen you together. That was after he was married, wasn't it? You were good at that, weren't you? A wedding ring didn't stop you.

Have you ever asked yourself what happened to Timothy Causton? I bet you haven't. You never had any feelings for anyone but yourself. He never got over it, you know?

I'll tell you what happened to him? He drifted from one job to another, got in trouble with the police. He lived on the streets for a while. He never got over that day when you made a fool of him.

If you have read this through I expect you are curious to know why I am writing to you. I've just got back from hospital, visiting Tim. He is in a bad way, he's wrecked his body with drugs.

He was asking for you. I told him you weren't worth it. I said I loved him, always had and that I would look after him. He closed his eyes, said, "Lauren."

The nurse told me to come home, there was nothing more to do for him.

I told you I hated you didn't I? Now you will know why. Tim meant everything to me. I loved him so much. I know he didn't care for me in the same way but I was prepared to spend my life with him but you ruined that.

I wonder if you remember me. Tall, with a permanently spotty face and ginger hair. You wouldn't give me a second look. Remember me, Anthony O'Connor? You put me off women for life.

Partners

Brian Lockett

Raymond was sitting in an old wickerwork armchair on his tiny balcony staring at his cat. The cat had known no life other than that in Raymond's fourth floor flat. If she ventured out on to the landing she tended to panic and crouch on the doormat terrified of this strange, new world. Raymond felt very sleepy. He couldn't understand why, since he had not got out of bed until ten o'clock and it was now only eleven-thirty. He had thought many times of going to see his doctor but Tom had persuaded him not to waste her time. He was waiting for Tom now. They were in the habit of leaving the block together at midday.

He became aware of a disturbance below and leant forward to peer into the courtyard. A much younger man was waving his arms and shouting something which Raymond couldn't quite catch. He fished in the pocket of his ex-army khaki shirt for his glasses. It was Tom. What on earth was he doing down there? Raymond leant over the balcony rail and gestured for Tom to go round to the front and let himself in.

He wandered through his flat, opened the front door and waited. The entry phone buzzed.

"Yes?"

A quiet, patient voice answered.

"Would you let me in, please?"

"Where's your key?"

"If you remember, Raymond, we had a row yesterday and you demanded your keys back."

"What about?"

"Look, does that matter? Just let me in and then we'll stroll along to The Robin Hood."

Raymond paused a moment with the handset in his hand. A piercing whistle came through the speaker.

"All right, all right, Tom. There's no need to get cross with me."

He pressed a button and sat down on a stiff-backed chair by the door.

When Tom came into the flat, Raymond's head had dropped on to his chest and he was paying no attention to the cat that was rubbing herself against his legs.

Tom, a tall, gangling man in his forties, looked down at him and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. Raymond started, placed a hand on Tom's forearm and started to get to his feet.

"Are you sure we had a row? D'you know, I can't remember a thing. If I was rude to you, I'm very sorry. Sometimes I don't feel very well and I think I say things that I don't really mean. Nothing personal, you know."

Tom peered into his face.

"You look like shit, Ray. Are you sure you're up to going out?"

"The Robin Hood is scarcely 'out', Tom. It's just round the corner. And they'll be expecting me as usual. I'm all right. Just a bit weary, that's all. I'll buck up once I'm there."

"OK. Start making your way down the stairs. I'll just check that everything's all right and catch you up. Take your time."

Raymond nodded, steadied himself against the door and stepped out on to the landing. Tom scooped up the cat and made for the kitchen. He caught up with Raymond as he was stepping into the street.

"Everything all right, Tom?"

"You left the hot tap on again. And where the hell have you put the soap?"

"Soap? What soap?"

"OK. Don't worry about that. We'll pick some up on the way back. And some toilet paper as well."

Full glasses were placed in front of them as they sat down in The Robin Hood. Tom responded to greetings on behalf of both of them.

Raymond took a long draught.

"What were we arguing about?"

"The usual thing."

"The usual thing?"

Tom looked at him with worried eyes.

“You’re getting worse, Ray. You should think about moving out before it’s too late.”

“You should have thought about that before you moved out, shouldn’t you? It’s a bit late to start showing remorse now, don’t you think?”

“Ah, this is more like the Ray I know. Back to the usual thing.”

“You didn’t have to go.”

“If you may remember, Ray, I did. I left to get married.”

Raymond snorted. His glass was empty. It was quickly replaced.

“You have never given me a satisfactory explanation, you know. And you owe me one. After all, we were happy. I had just retired. We had no financial problems. Then, suddenly, out of the blue, you just waltz in ...”

“Cut out the *waltzing in* bit, Ray. I had warned you over a period of weeks that I was going to branch out in another direction. I had introduced you to Louise. You said you quite liked her.”

“I did like her. I still do. Well, I’ve got nothing against her. But I thought she was just another lady friend. You’ve had lots of them and I never thought of any of them as a threat. Marriage on the other hand ... I never thought ...”

His voice tailed off. The tears were starting in his eyes.

“Christ, Ray. Can’t you give it a rest? This is all water under the bridge. We’re still friends, aren’t we? Nothing’s changed. We just don’t live together any more.”

“Nothing’s changed? How can you possibly say that? Absolutely everything has changed. Why do you think I had this stroke or heart attack or whatever fancy name they give it now?”

“You got ill because you over-reacted. Just as you over-react to anything that ever happens. You’re not abandoned, Ray. You never will be. How many times a week do I come to check up on you?”

Raymond took hold of his friend’s hand. Embarrassed, John moved the hand to his forearm. No-one seemed to be paying any attention. Tom put his hand over Raymond’s.

“You’ve been good to me in some ways, Tom,” said Raymond. “But it was all a tremendous shock. We were almost inseparable, everybody accepted us, we went everywhere together ...”

“Ray, we’ve been through all this so many times. It gets us nowhere. If I didn’t care for you, would I keep seeing you? Louise understands completely. If we had a bigger place, you could come and live with us.”

Tom stopped. It was too early in the afternoon. Raymond might understand what he was saying and remember it.

“You’re saying that just to salve your conscience.”

Raymond stopped and seemed to be thinking. Tom caught the eye of the barman and Raymond’s glass was quickly replaced. Tom started to speak.

“D’you remember Eric from the ENO? I bumped into him last week. Apparently he’s moved down to Warminster and runs some kind of workshop for ...”

“Did you say something about a bigger place? Are you and Louise moving? You know, that might be a good idea. Suppose I sold up here ...”

“No, no. All I said was that if we had a bigger place. As it is, we’re in this tied house, which is pretty pokey, even for just the two of us. When you’re completely recovered, you know, got your strength back, stopped dropping off unexpectedly ...”

“I don’t drop off unexpectedly, I know when I am likely to feel tired, so I can plan for that.”

“I think,” said Tom quietly, “that you look a bit peaky at the moment.”

He signalled to one of the waiters, who positioned himself alongside Raymond.

“Have a lie down in the back room. You know you appreciate the quiet there. And I’ll just nip out and do the bit of shopping you need.”

Raymond looked up slowly.

“Ah, Ken. It’s lovely to see you. Have you been on holiday? I’ve missed you.”

Ken was helping Raymond to his feet and moving him towards a door leading off the saloon bar. Ken and Tom exchanged looks. Tom mouthed “Give him an hour” and slipped quietly away. Raymond allowed himself to be led away as Ken talked to him quietly and reassuringly.

Playing it by Ear

Arthur Bromley

“Is there a Doctor in the house?”

We have all read these words in story books but this was the first time I had ever been at the ‘sharp end’ of the situation.

The interval had just started at New Brighton’s Floral Pavilion Theatre of the stage presentation by this professional ballet company.

No one moved.

“Is there a Doctor in the house?”

The compare was in earnest and very agitated.

I felt a dig in the ribs from Mavis.

“Go on out,” she said.

“It’s not me they want, it’s a proper GP,” I replied.

“Is there any medical person in the house?” He was not to be beaten.

Another dig in the ribs.

“Go on, go now.”

As every married man knows, it is much easier to do as one’s told to retain a quiet life.

I got up with a sigh and walked around to the rear of the stage. I knew where to go as I knew this theatre like the back of my hand — I should do, I’ve played in the orchestra pit dozens of times with my band *The Ambassadors*.

I was shown into the dressing room of the leading ballerina.

“It’s my ankle, doctor,” said Doreen, “I twisted it on stage, now I can hardly put my foot to the floor.”

I looked at the ankle.

“It looks as though it requires proper treatment, and I am not a GP.”

At this she burst into tears. “I can’t let the company down, I am on stage most of the second half.”

It was obvious I had to ‘show a little willing’ but what could I do?

Just then I noticed a piece of plaster behind the ankle, obviously put there to stop the shoe chafing. This gave me an idea.

“Have you got any more of that plaster, Doreen?”

She rummaged in her bag and produced a roll of one inch adhesive tape.

I tore off about one inch square of plaster, and then I looked behind me at the small crowd of people that had crowded into the small room.

“Has anyone got a match to give me?” I asked.

I noted the peculiar stares I was given at this, as someone got out a box of matches and selected one.

I broke off about a quarter of an inch from the end of the match and placed it into the middle of the plaster. Picking up the plaster I placed it into Doreen’s ear. A murmur went up from the small crowd of people, and so did all the eyebrows.

‘Who is this idiot?’ I could hear them thinking, putting plaster in her ear when it was the ankle that was the culprit. I thought it was time to explain what I had done.

“The treatment I am giving you, Doreen, is called ACUPRESSURE, a branch of Acupuncture which I specialise in.”

I paused to let that sink in.

“In the human ear there are a lot of acupuncture points, each point is linked up to a specific part of the body by a nerve, and I have placed the piece of matchstick on the point that goes directly to the foot area.” I paused. “What I want you to do each time you get a twinge from your ankle is to press the match into your skin, this, hopefully, will alleviate the pain.”

I could tell that the people present thought me a ‘nutcase’ as I went back to my seat.

The curtains opened and Doreen came in dancing from the wings.

I was concentrating my gaze onto her bad ankle and I am sure that I was the *only* person in the theatre to notice a slight hesitation as she put the foot to the floor, plus a quick flick of the hand to the ear.

The show was a success, the applause proved this.

I went around to the dressing room again. Doreen came up to me.

“Thank you, doctor, I hardly felt a thing, and if I did I gave the matchstick a slight press.”

I smiled.

She went on. “You saved the show and, as you know, our motto is: ‘The show must go on’.”

That’s all I wanted to hear.

Baby Sister

Joanna Lilley

“What on earth have you done to yourself?” I say to my sister, staring at her head-full of pink-blue plaits as she hangs her coat and bag on the back of the chair and sits down at the restaurant table.

“What on earth haven’t you done to yourself?” she says back to me. “Isn’t it time you did?”

This is our habitual greeting. It’s supposed to be a joke but, like many jokes, it has an armature of truth. Lorna, my sister, likes experimenting with her hair colour and her clothes while I, Ms Conventional, am always trying to pour my body into the mould given away free with every women’s magazine and Hollywood film.

As I’m supposed to be the sensible one - I am older than her after all – I’m not going to tell my sister that I’m pregnant. Or that my boyfriend David has left me. I don’t think the baby shows too much yet. It perhaps looks as if I’ve got a bit of a tummy from not enough exercise and too many carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are my enemy. I cut my bread so thin that the slices are as diaphanous as the underwear David used to try to get me to wear. I stick pins in potatoes, effigies of the obese.

“So, what’s new? How’s the course?” I ask her, after we’ve both ordered Diet Coke instead of wine because, we say, it’s lunchtime and we’ve got to work and study this afternoon. We haven’t seen each other for months. Lorna is always doing some course or other, then taking courses between courses like a compulsive eater. She’s clever, so I presume she isn’t wasting her time. “Has it finished yet?”

“Not yet. And after I’ve finished this diploma I was thinking of doing a masters but I’m not sure if I will now.”

“You mean it’s finally time to stop being a student and start paying your way instead of piling up debts?” I’m being nasty but she’s always looked down on me because all I have are GCSEs. I left school as soon as I could; I hated it largely, I can admit now, because I didn’t have any close friends and you need good friends at school.

“Be a career woman like you?” I can hear the sneer in her voice.

“At least I’m proof that you don’t have to stuff yourself up to the eyeballs with qualifications in order to do well.” I hate my primness but I still mean what I say.

“You like your job now do you? Last time I saw you, you hated it.”

I shake my head. “I never said I hated my job, I was fed up with my manager. That’s reality. That’s life. There’s always someone telling you what to do, how to be, whether it’s managers, parents, teachers, lecturers.”

“I like my lecturers. Most of them. If you’d stuck it out you’d know that you get treated like an adult once you’re done with school. It doesn’t sound as if your manager treats you like an adult.”

“He’s left now, so it’s academic. Ha, ha, rather like you,” I add, to acknowledge my accidental and rather poor pun.

Lorna gives me a sarcastic smile which she manipulates until it looks more genuine.

“So, work’s better. I’m glad,” she says.

What is this? She’s pleased for me? This is a first. Has my sister fallen out of hate with me?

Halfway through our tagliatelle, which I don’t think I’ve eaten for years but - sod it – I’m eating for two now, I start to wonder whether to tell Lorna about the baby. I’m tempted because I know it will shock her, my unshockable sibling. Not the pregnancy itself but because it’s me and because I’m planning to keep it.

It’s almost too late to have an abortion but the funny thing is I never really doubted that I’d keep it. You’d think giving birth to and rearing a child would be out of the question for a single - as of a week last Tuesday - career woman like me. Yet I want to press soft pink flesh with my lips and cuddle a miniature body that doesn’t care what mould it does or doesn’t or fit. I don’t even mind if it’s disabled or retarded, if that’s a word you’re still allowed to use. I won’t bother with all those tests; I’ll love it whatever. I want to tickle my cheek with wisps of hair and cut tiny nails that have never been cut before.

But no, I won’t tell Lorna about the baby. I may tell her about David but I haven’t decided yet.

I wouldn’t have David back even if he asked me. The night he went, loping out of the door muttering swear words as passionately as he’d once murmured love words, I turned off all the lights and stretched out on the carpet. I tried to rest each vertebra on the floor to give the baby as much room as I could to grow.

I supposed I’ll have to take maternity leave and then go back to work. What a waste, to put a child in a crèche while you sit at a desk all day, nursing a computer.

“You’re quiet. And why d’you keep smiling?” Lorna is asking.

“I’m enjoying my food.” This takes care of both questions.

“How/s David?”

“Fine. How’s your boyfriend? Peter, isn’t it?”

“It was, but it’s all finished.” She sighs and rests her elbows on the table. We were never allowed to do that as children but I can’t tell her off because I realise I’m doing it too. “He was getting more and more into drugs. I can’t stand all that stuff. I’ve seen too many friends lose their edge that way. We kept arguing about it so there didn’t seem any point carrying on. At least that’s how he put it.”

“You mean he left you?”

“Yep. Moved out. A week last Tuesday. So I’m just about starting to get used to it.”

A week last Tuesday.

“You’re probably better off without him,” I say, slipping into sensible mode as I slide off my shoes under the table. “People who take drugs, well...”

“Well, what?” Lorna is grinning. “You know lots of druggies, do you?”

“Everything else all right?” I ask her, ignoring her bait.

“Ticketyboo. Deadlines coming up. They’re keeping me busy.”

“Are those real plaits?” I’m curious. They could be hair extensions, it’s hard to tell. If they are, I want to know how long it took, how much it cost. All I ever do to my hair is get a trim and highlights every two months.

“It’s my own hair but I’ve had coloured threads woven into them. It takes forever but once it’s done it lasts eight weeks. Can’t get my hair wet though.”

“You can’t wash your hair at all?”

“Best not to,” Lorna admits. “D’you think that’s unhygienic?”

“Suppose so. Don’t know.” Does hair need to be washed every other day as mine is? “As long as it doesn’t itch. My hair itches when it’s dirty. Drives me mad.”

“It doesn’t itch. You’d think it would, but it doesn’t. Actually, I’m not sure I like it anymore. Might get it all chopped off.”

The waiter, roman-nosed and teak-skinned, removes our empty plates then returns to take our orders for dessert. We both ask for a banana split. Each. Haven’t had one for years, we say. We hope they come sprinkled with hundreds of thousands like they used to. We watch the waiter walk away, even laugh as we realise we’re both admiring him.

“David wouldn’t like that very much,” Lorna raises her eyebrows in mock disapproval.

“David’s not here.”

“Evidently.”

“Actually.” I hesitate. “Actually, he’s left me.”

Lorna’s face looks just like mine did the night he walked out.

“A week last Tuesday as it happens,” I add.

“Shit. How are you coping? You know, you look okay. You don’t look as if you’ve been up every night sobbing.”

“That’s because I haven’t.”

Lorna watches me. “Time for him to go, was it?”

“I think so.”

“Funny he left the same day mine left me,” Lorna says. “You know, we’re always more in tune than we realise. Every time I’ve had exams or started college or some other big event, you’ve had some kind of promotion or change of job or something. Haven’t you seen the parallels?”

I shake my head and screw up my napkin. “That’s just the nature of life. Patterns are always going to occur at some stage because there’s such a multiplicity of events taking place every minute of every day.”

“My pragmatic sister. Always bringing me back down to earth.”

“Is Planet Earth so terrible?”

“Only sometimes.”

“Like when your boyfriend walks out on you.” It’s more of a statement than a question.

“Yes,” Lorna agrees, sadly. “You know what the last thing was that he said, the trivial bastard? He told me he hated my plaits.”

“You know what?” I tell her, meaning it. “I like them.”

We finish our desserts, dabbing up all the hundreds and thousands with licked fingertips, then order coffee. Afterwards, when I’ve persuaded her to let me pay for the bill, Lorna stands up and twists round to pluck her coat and bag from the back of the chair. As her loose sweater clings momentarily to her body I notice that her stomach is more rounded than usual. Yet the rest of her is still slim, her upper arms, her thighs as far as I can tell, all those places where female fat cells like to breed.

In fact, I note, Lorna’s is about the size of my own swelling stomach.

That’s how I know.

That’s the trouble with being a twin; your life isn’t your own.

Edward Lear — Master of Nonsense

By Brian Jones

The Victorian nonsense writer and painter, Edward Lear, is of great interest to collectors for his drawings and paintings of birds, animals and foreign landscapes (now high priced) and for first editions of his nonsense poetry and travel books.

Edward Lear's creative talents covered a very wide range of activities. As an artist he produced humorous drawings all his life, mainly as a diversion, but he began his career as a natural history illustrator. Later he was a prolific landscape painter and draughtsman. Beside writing nonsense he was the author of several travel journals and was a tireless letter writer; sometimes writing as many as thirty-five letters before breakfast.

Edward Lear was born in 1812, the second youngest of twenty-one children. His father was a prosperous stockbroker, living in a large house in Highgate, London. When Edward was thirteen his father's business failed. Edward's older brothers had to emigrate; most of his sisters started work as governesses. Edward's mother went to live in cheap lodgings near to her husband, who was in prison for a while. Anne, the eldest of the family, took charge of Edward, twenty-one years younger than himself.

Because of poor health, Edward, had little regular schooling, he had plenty of leisure time for sketching and was able to sell some of his drawings. At the age of fifteen he was busy colouring prints, painting on screens and fans — and his favourite specialty, drawing and painting pictures of birds. At eighteen he was even taking in pupils. In 1831 Edward was commissioned by the Zoological Society to make coloured drawings of the parrots in London Zoo. This bird book was published in a large folio volume — the first luxury coloured bird book in this format. He then went on to illustrate '*Tortoises, Terrapins and Turtles*', '*British Mammalian*', '*Indian Pheasants*' and '*Birds of Europe and Toucans*' — all beautiful, well produced books.

Edward spent four years at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, as a guest of the Earl of Derby. Here he sketched animals and birds in the private Zoo. While working at Knowsley he wrote many poems for the Lord's children, in the comic form of the limerick.

In 1846 he published anonymously a collection of his verses titled ‘*A Book of Nonsense*’, illustrated by himself. The first verse in the book set the mood of his work:

‘There was an old Man with a beard,
Who said, ‘It is just as I feared! —
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests, in my beard!’

The book was a great success. Also, in this year he was now famous enough to give a series of private drawing lessons to Queen Victoria.

When Edward had lived at Knowsley for years and had completed his drawings of Lord Derby’s menagerie, he decided that, for reasons of health, he would give up detailed sketches and become a landscape painter abroad.

Edward travelled to remote countries in Europe and the East, and producing huge oil-paintings, which have now been forgotten, and a large number of water colours which are very collectable.

He visited palaces and fortresses in remote Albania; he travelled on horseback over rough mountain paths in Greece; he went up the Nile by boat; he saw Jerusalem, and was held up by bandits near ancient Petra. Towards the end of his life he went to India and travelled extensively there, always sketching, drawing and painting.

More than anything else Edward Lear is remembered for his nonsense poems. They are so unique and perfectly composed that they have never been equalled. In his early life he wrote the limericks for which he is remembered. Later, he wrote a number of longer poems, including ‘*The Jumblies*’, ‘*The Owl and the Pussycat*’ and ‘*The Pobble who Had No Toes*’.

In these later poems Edward writes about travelling. In them, creatures sail away, and visit strange lands, and see strange sights. ‘*The Owl the Pussycat*’ sailed away for a year and a day; the Pobble swam across the Bristol Channel; the Jumblies went to sea in a sieve, they did; and the Dong with a luminous nose wanders still by lake and forest, Marsh and Hill. All this reflecting Edward’s wanderings.

Many readers of Lear prefer the more obscure limericks, the more so real the better. For example:-

‘There was an Old Man of Dunrose;
A parrot seized hold of his nose.
When he grew melancholy, they said, ‘His name’s Polly,’
Which soothed that Old Man of Dunrose.’

Or:-

‘There was an Old Person of Ealing,
Who was wholly devoid of good feeling;
He drove a small gig, with three Owls and a Pig,
Which distressed all the people of Ealing.’

There seems to be three phases of development in Lear’s nonsense writings. In the second phase, mostly limericks, the nonsense is happy and trivial, although it sometimes has sinister undertones. In the second phase, the theme of wandering is prominent with occasional sad endings. In the third and final phase, melancholy takes over.

When Lear was growing old he settled at last in a villa at San Remo on the Italian Riviera, with his cat Foss and his faithful Albanian servant, Giorgio.

Edward Lear never married and, although he had many friends in the world of literature and art, he often seems to have been solitary and lonely. He thought himself deeply in love twice but never proposed marriage to the young ladies concerned. His sad poem ‘*The - Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo*’ is well known and reflects a troubled state of mind.

‘I am tired of living singly, —
On this coast so wild and shingly, —
I’m a-weary of my life; —
If you’ll come and be my wife,
Quite serene would be my life!

Apart from his poetry he also published ‘*Views in the Seven Ionian Islands*’ in 1863 and ‘*Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica*’ in 1870. Also, there is ‘*Edward Lear’s Indian Journal*’, published in 1953.

Lear died at San Remo in the year 1888, at the age of seventy-six, leaving behind a legacy of wonderful nonsense and fantasy to delight lovers of humour, young and old.