

I imagine myself as you see me and it's embarrassing: an ungainly person displacing a sizeable amount of thin air, manifestly failing to be similar to other people. When you first catch sight of me I'm probably tacking warily along Rye Lane, Peckham, in the latter part of an ordinary spring afternoon in the early nineties.

Do you know Peckham? It is a rainbow world of disadvantage. Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, Mixed Races, Greeks, Turkish, Irish and Plain Whites all live together here - badly. (I hope I haven't left anybody out.) Rye Lane is its main shopping thoroughfare. A few down market chain stores still persevere at one end. Marks and Spencer went long ago. The cheap clothing shops close down and re-open constantly, changing only their names. McDonald's and the video shops thrive. At the top end are second hand furniture stores fronting onto the Rye itself, a large and beautiful expanse of parkland colonised by dogs, joggers and children. (It was here that William Blake is said to have seen a tree full of angels. It was here, according to rumour, that Boudicca, having ransacked Londinium, took poison and died after the Romans swept down from One Tree Hill at the southern end of the Rye driving the Iceni onto their own chariots. No angels have been observed in Peckham in recent times, but the Boudicca story has left a few echoes.)

I can't claim to be noticing the weather except insofar as it's causing my overtight shirt to adhere to me in places. Spring days seem to be getting hotter every year. The young people of Peckham are out on the pocked and broken pavements in their multicoloured tracksuits, their slashed jeans, their glowing trainers, wearing their music on their heads, shouting their greetings and insults. Others are picking over the merchandise billowing from metal racks outside the shops, poking about for bargains in the ephemeral emporia opening onto the street, chattering above squalling infants in pushchairs, yanking little boys away from cut-price computer games.

I'll be wearing my work suit, slightly short in the leg and the jacket lacking a button or two. I'm carrying my shopping. Seeing a crowd of youths littering the doorway of the Duchess I change sides for a distance and veer across again by Ron's Ancient and Modern (Antiques). I come to a tentative halt by the bus stop in front of the Old Cathay Chinese Chip Shop and Takeaway, glancing apprehensively back down the street.

'What's he up to?' You wonder without much interest. 'Why does he drift from side to side like that? Why isn't he with someone?'

Well, I'm Brian and there's a barrier between me and the rest of the world. That's normal, you'll say, but most people are able to scratch a hole in it somewhere, get through to someone. I know I don't really try, but how do you try? Go to evening classes, answer ads in lonely hearts columns, join a singles club, get a dog?

The fact is, I'm not overwhelmed by friends and certainly not by lovers.

There's Loma of course. I know her from university. She sympathises with my situation but she's careful not to get in too deep. I'm not in love with her, I understand the concept of love neither in theory nor practice. Like

heaven it might possibly exist but I can't imagine it. Lorna's a comma on my solitary sentence that's all - long sentences need commas.

As you'll have noticed, I'm not especially thin. I do a lot of eating. Eating is like aspirin to me. When I'm working I go to Jacks in Peckham High Street for breakfast between buses and I have lunch in a dark little sandwich place round the back of Cannon Street. After work I hang about in The Bigger Bite or Mario's till it's safe to go home. Sometimes I get some fish and chips at the Cathay on the way.

Yes, I feel a bit sweaty today. I don't know why I don't bath more or change my clothes. Maybe it seems like a sort of vanity I'm not entitled to. I don't excessively enjoy contemplating my bare body; and then things in the flat are becoming a disincentive to cleanliness. Newspapers are piling in the doorways and the bath is coming to resemble the underside of a discarded frying pan. I can't face the launderette after a certain volume of ragged grey underwear has accumulated in the corner of the living room along with the chip papers. There are women sitting on those benches opposite the machines, one eye on the Sun and one, incredulously, on my laundry. The more intrepid ones sometimes offer to 'put it through' for me, 'love'. Ultimate toe-cavorting shame.

Of women as sexual subjects I dare not think.

Course I ain't supposed to be here down the Duchess, but they take your money innit and they ain't said nothing about it. Just let em say something. Liberty. Name's Jet. I don't go school no more. What's the point? Been chucked out if you must know. They don't have suspended no more; excluded it is now. I've been permanently excluded. Don't matter. I hit some kid in the playground for looking at my sister, next day I got the Jays together and he got his mates out and I got done for it. I'll get him round the flats. Teachers are nutters. Try to make you talk it over. They don't realise you can't go on like that round here, that's how thick they are. Fists or feet - ain't nothing else round here.

The Jays is me, a black geezer called Junior and this white kid, John - the three Jays. We ain't racist. A boot's a boot, don't matter what colour the foot is in it, innit. We live down Peckham. I'm supposed to go Tuition Centre now I don't go school. Yeah - well. You don't see us of a morning; afternoons we meet down the car park behind the flats borrowing motors. We drive em about, bang em up a bit and dump em. Only been nicked once and being under age they only give me a caution. Magistrates are divs. John nearly got done for rape, drop of bother he got into with some slag. He said she let him she said she ain't, know what I mean. He's only fourteen and he looks like a poppet so he's got off ain't he, like I said magistrates are divs. He's out of order sometimes, John.

I think Brian mentioned me. I'm Lorna and I'm in my house where I feel safe. I used to be more than half a couple, but now I'm on my own. More than half - that sounds a bit off, but I'm not trying to put Tony down or anything. I just mean I was the one who earned most of the money, made most of the decisions, understood his problems, tried to make him shine in

the crowd. I thought it would make him feel better about himself, actually I made him feel inferior so he left.

Today I've managed to actually finish a poem - I hope. I tend to wake up in the middle of the night and think of some new word, some other angle. So I get up, make a cup of tea and sit there in the kitchen with the absurd spindly thing in front of me, scribbling ideas all over it. And it's three in the morning, the heating's gone off and I know I'm going to be late for work tomorrow. It takes a lot of practice looking after yourself by yourself, if you see what I mean. I used to be able to do it but I've become rusty. I'm working at it, exercising the dormant muscles, digging my way out.

'Don't put your feet on that chair,' he goes, Mum's bloke.

He's new. Some geezer off of the estate and he don't like me much. I ain't that nutty about him as it goes. She ain't washed my 501's for three days. All the burgers is gone out of the freezer. Go in the kitchen for a lager and he's sat there, going, 'Ain't you at school Jet?' Liberty.

My dad come round Tuesday and goes to mum. 'Why don't you see that layabout Jet gets up of a morning, does something useful?' His own flesh and blood he's on about - great innit!

'Who's talking?' she goes, but she give him a coffee.

We ain't seen him for untold weeks. Word gets round quick in these flats don't it. Elton pretended to be the new neighbour. Mum give me a look. I ain't said a word. I got out quick and me and the Jays went round the walkway and waited for that nutty geezer. He always has carrier bags and he don't dress good. We waited till about eight o'clock, but he's never come so we've gone down the Duchess and got some puff off of Junior's brother and smoked it round John's house 'cos his mum's out of a night time.

Brian, Brian Walters, orphan. Being an orphan shouldn't have been that unpleasant. My parents were an uninspiring couple as far as I remember. Being with them might have made me more house-trained that's all. At the children's home they were cautiously kind and unscrupulously fair, it wasn't any worse than that. I got out of the habit of a cuddle early in life. The superintendent was a traditional man. 'Cuddling's for girls. Boys mustn't do that sort of thing. I don't want to hear about any of my boys getting familiar with one another.' Well there weren't any girls, consequently I have no concept of the touch of flesh; it could be like an electric shock after so long and I'd get glued to someone forever.

Incidentally, I was compelled to drop in on Lorna unexpectedly last night. After four days of cafe creeping to miss the mugging hour on the walkway I was bloated and unkempt to say the least. Mornings on the Millfield Estate are almost civilised with the younger set sleeping off the outrages of the night before. Nevertheless, it is with relief that I shut my front door and go to work. For at least nine hours the plywood panel closes off the view of my kitchen sink with its cargo of sauce-encrusted platters and leaning towers of coffee mugs. I hasten down the piss-scented flights to the

open street. There among the cute plastic McDonald's cartons, the rolling Budweiser cans, I await the bus, sniffing the dust-laden Peckham mistral and knowing I'll soon be at my desk surrounded by relatively personable human beings and having some figures to play with, mathematical figures that is...

but evenings in the flats are sub-stygian this week. By Friday night I was gasping for a comma, desperate to punctuate my sentence.

I'm on foot. Huffing up the hill from the roundabout at the bottom of Lorna's road. I get the impression she's ... not exactly lonely but somewhat upset since Tony left but being an involuntary celibate I don't really understand these things. I always felt uneasy about coming round when he was there as if one day he might turn on me and say, 'Two's company Brian ...you know how it is kid', having distilled this reassuring phrase from constant and determined study of soap-speak. But it is Lorna's house and I suppose he didn't quite dare.

But I can tell Lorna's unhappy by the way she walks with her head held self-consciously high, by the way she's redecorated the sitting room and bought new clothes and had her hair cut and coloured. Oh yes, I notice these things in others. But I must admit my visit is mostly selfish. I'm desperate to get an evening off from my neighbourhood tormentors, three precociously unintelligent youths known in these parts as the Jays. By midnight they've usually made off on some other mischief (I gather they've been seen touring Peckham in a decrepit old van in the small hours) but in the evenings they prowl the walkways till I get back from work to, as they say, put the boot in. They enjoy that sort of activity enormously it would seem.

I was in the bath last night when Brian called without warning. I've become a soak. For at least an hour every day I soak, propping my head up on a sponge, reciting my verses to the steaming tiles or swearing at Tony, trying to keep it up for at least three minutes without repeating myself. I have a glass of Fleurie perched on the edge of the bath, coming up to room temperature, the same stuff we had that last Christmas together - Tony was too mean to agree to it any other time. Why did I let him decide things like that when I was paying? That thought brings on another three minutes swearing then I lie back holding my delicately scented glass above the waterline and try to revel in my solitude.

I replenished the hot water with my right toes and took a long sip of Fleurie. I've got my bathroom more or less perfect; neat white tiles threequarters up the wall with bands of plain blue tiling. The towels are large and soft and bright red. On the wide tiled bath surround rests a beautiful old china soap dish with a design of pink roses. It's got a crack across it; I like that - junk shop, not antique.

The bell went again and again until I couldn't stand it. Cursing some more I gulped down the rest of the wine, wrapped my hot, foam dipping body in a towel, footprinted down and peered through the misting spy hole. Bri was there, blinking like a pardoned lifer, holding two Tesco's plastic bags and looking even grubbier than usual.

'Loma, I'm sorry, I ... could I, er, come in for a while...just for a breather?'

He collapsed into my white armchair dropping his carrierbags one on either side of him, a beached urban whale overflowing my carefully minimal sitting room with his bags and his bulk and the scent of his rarely bathed body filtering through his rarely washed clothes.

I made him a cup of tea one-handedly, hitching my bath towel up with the other, then went and put on my tracksuit. Evenings being my low point, I was almost pleased to see Brian.

He puffed and slurped, dripping tea - stain over stain - oh God, that pullover!

'Jet again?'

'The lag-in-waiting hisself, plus sidewinders.'

I adore the way Brian maintains his humour, even in extremity.

'What can I say? It's awful. You must get a transfer, make them see how urgent it is.' I wished I could say, Confront them Brian. You're big, able, adult. For God's sake, stand up for yourself !

But I live in a nice house, two miles away from the action. I don't feel I can say that kind of thing, so I say, 'I was going to get a bit of salad, some bread and cheese together.'

We ate in the kitchen. Brian sat blinking behind his specs, looking at his plate, fiddling with the pepper grinder, taking the top off and screwing it on again, managing to spill half a dozen peppercorns into the brown sugar. The schoolteacher in me wanted to growl, Put that down and stop fidgeting !

I edged a few details out of him, before patting him at last into the half dark of Longfield Lane, leant my back against the front door and let out my breath.

The thing is I know Jet - from the Tuition Centre where I teach. I even sort of like him. How can you like someone who does that sort of thing ? Because they don't do it to you ?

The geezer come back on time last night so we nuzzled him up a bit. We've stood round the corner of the walkway and he's come up humping his bags and breathing heavy. John says:

'Where you been then, down Oxfam, get a new suit for the office ?' and we give a laugh. The geezer don't look at us, he starts fishing in his pockets for his keys, all the time trying to stick to the bags.

'Here I'm talking to you,' goes John, 'ain't you got no manners ?'

The geezer's dropped his keys on the ground and John's picked em up and dropped em over the side of the walkway. The geezer still ain't said nothing but he went chalky didn't he. He's give John a look and walked down three floors to get his keys back. We was watching him over the walkway, clumping down the stairs with his crappy plastic bags.

'Think he's got a bird ?' I goes, and we had to laugh.

'I can stand gits like him,' goes John, 'why don't he clean hisself up ?'

Junior stands there with this dumb look on his face. He don't say much, June, but he ain't that dumb.

'He might have an heart attack,' he goes, 'he ain't that thin.'

'So ?' John don't mess about.

The geezer's walked back up real slow, with his bags, and gone in his flat. He ain't said a word. That's what I can't stand about the div, he ain't once stood up for hisself.

TWO

Every era has its victims and I, Lorna, am a victim of the sixties: smoking the hash, dropping the acid, toting the guitar, children at my feet. Lady Madonna. These days I feel like the volunteer when the rest of the platoon steps back and leaves you out there on your own. They knew it was only a game.

I thought it was real.

What are they doing now, that lot, in this second canto of Mr Major's uninspiring reign? Wearing fawn shoes with sensible heels, that's what; running schools; lecturing in business studies at so-called universities; being serious about social work; being minor novelists or TV producers or restaurant owners or psycho-therapists. Inventing politically correct jargon, that's what. Living their sensible family lives in pleasant provincial towns. Mildly successful. Indistinguishable from everybody else. Their children are well-mannered graduates in computer programming who have already bought their own homes and invite their parents to lunch on Sundays.

It was just a fashion, a phase, that freedom, and I took it for a fundamental truth, a step forward.

Talking of steps, I'm half way round the duck pond, not very puffed at all. I really should start running the full circuit, round the edge of the park by the rhododendrons. I slow, do a few knee bends and walk back to the house stopping off at the post office for the Guardian and a pint of milk.

The old ladies up at the post office look exactly like the old ladies I saw in post offices when I was a child. They are wearing the same clothes. They still have reddish white hair crimped up into implausible chipolata curls. What were they doing in sixty-eight, these old ladies at the post office with bobble hats clamped over their crispy sausages? Were they wearing flares and mini-skirts and hot pants, those old ladies; back in sixty-eight?

Sorry. I didn't intend to subject you to these early morning rantings. No, actually I intended to show you round my house, my beautiful house.

It's large, built of handsome grey London bricks, white inside. All white. The downstairs rooms have fireplaces of white marble; the bedrooms, and there are five of them, have those ornate ironwork jobs the Victorians were so fond of with bunches of grapes and ribbons and flowers cast into them. It was given to me, this house, by a friend of mine. I swapped it with him for a song I wrote once (more about that later). We're a couple my house and I, People couldn't imagine us without each other. We have had a lot of people living in us, children, lodgers, lovers, friends, but for the last year I have lived in this house alone, sleeping in first one bedroom then another.

At the front I hear the rattle, thwack and whine of the traffic and the dustmen wheeling the bins to their slow moving churning trucks, but at the moment I'm sleeping in the back of the house which looks across my unkempt walled garden with its shrubs and vines, to the railway line beyond. If I manage to sleep through the night, which isn't often, I am woken by the birds in the gangling eucalyptus tree which Tony planted soon after he arrived.

When he first came, fifteen years or so ago, the house was shabby and multi-coloured with no heating except the fireplaces, a botch-up as Tony

put it. Paper upon paper, paint upon paint. Together we did it up, Tony and I, he with his skills as a carpenter and plasterer, and me labouring and supplying the money and the ideas. Always paint on your clothes. Always dust. It's elegant now, but it's on a busy, noisy, dirty South London highway - Longfield Lane. Nobody in their right mind buys houses on Longfield Lane, but then I didn't buy it, I got it for a song.

I extruded some lines this week, sitting in the Bigger Bite. I wouldn't want to use the word poem at present. There's a popular Japanese form known as Haiku where you try to express the essence of something in seventeen syllables. You might call my attempt compacted Haiku. I'm struggling to express the essence of Peckham - not an enticing project and you may well wonder what has led me to this unpromising literary enterprise. Lorna says there's a middle of the road, polite language that oils the world and kids like Jet Robinson can't speak it, and that's their worst problem. I don't really accept that explanation of his behaviour, nevertheless I sense some sort of literary challenge in her argument. I'm trying to work out what manner of poem could mean anything to someone in these flats. It would have to explode like a punch but wittier. That's what I'm experimenting with at present.

On Thursdays I buy Time Out, take it into the Bigger Bite and read avidly through the listings. Sitting at the rickety melamine table, bacon and egg sandwich in hand, I check everything you could do if you weren't me: classical concerts, rock clubs, discos, lesbian rambles, womanisers anonymous, as well as all the lonely hearts of course. Then I go cautiously back to the flat, step over the piles of clothes, edge round the sink, avoid the bathroom and pace up and down for a while in the few size eleven spaces that are still available before settling down to the television, a long, fat Updike, or, when desperate, one of those thick, silver embossed, splayed volumes that I occasionally find on one of the launderette benches, or in the charity shop in Rye Lane.

But this week I've been reading and re-reading poetry books and thinking about what Lorna said on the subject of Jet Robinson. (Apparently she knows him from the tuition centre where she works - she's never let on about that before.) I've been reflecting on the uncompanionable, nervous silence at the centre of my being. How long can it continue without breaking open into a frantic scream? The most worrying response to that question is: forever.

This Thursday I combed through the poetry section. About ten events were listed, ranging from workshops in people's houses to publishing events where well-known poets read and sign their books. Neither of these could be contemplated. I scanned the middle range options and by a process of elimination decided upon Penge Poets Open Night at the Peregrine Arms.

You would not automatically alliterate Penge with poetry. In that respect it should be adjacent to Peckham but in fact it is a few miles further south just before London begins to unravel into DIY hangars, the concrete towers of Croydon, or the impermeable respectability of Bromley.

Penge is the perimeter fence, the last outpost of the pre-Thatcher world, sub-suburban London, life before the big bang. It has a bakery and several of those shops where buckets, mops, plastic canisters of all shapes and sizes, East European saucepans, Chinese notebooks, and other sweat-made bargains in laundry baskets flow across the pavements between the hours of nine-thirty and five -thirty. Penge still has a department store, a co-op and a haberdasher's. Penge is the natural opposite of Camden Lock, Hampstead, Nice, the Seychelles and Monsoon. Penge probably doesn't take credit cards. Famous people never admit to going to, being in, or coming from Penge. Penge is too insignificant to be developed. Nothing in Penge costs more than two ninety-nine.

I feel almost comfortable in Penge.

The Peregrine Arms sits behind a clock tower on a slip road where the single-decker buses turn around and I got off one of these, pitching forwards slightly in my usual way, at about ten to eight on a Friday night. I was reassured by the notice on the ornate double doors reading HOT FOOD AT ALL TIMES. This turned out to be ready made pizzas, baked potatoes, and sausages arranged artistically in front of a microwave at the end of the bar.

The interior of the Peregrine is last century's mahogany and brass bleached and blared over by this century's leisure technology. There's a grubbiness about it, despite the polished glasses, the artificial leather button and pleat benches. The grubbiness is mostly provided by the custom which at this hour seemed to be a few paint-grimed workmen standing at the bar with their fags and pints, and youths in ripped jeans playing video games. The saloon and public bars have been combined and the place is cavernous and dimly lit.

A hand made sign by the stairs with an arrow pointing obliquely upwards said PENGE POETS. I tried to reach the first floor without being noticed but the cheerfully grating voice of the curly headed blonde behind the bar called out:

'Looking for the poetry love?'

I saluted in what I hoped was a silencing gesture of assent and made it up the staircase without further intervention, hot and confused after the near confrontation and my relatively rapid ascent.

'Are you a concession?' enquired a young woman behind a small table by the door.

'To whom?' I said, a hiccup of wit struggling for air.

She smiled. 'No, I mean are you, you know, on SS or anything?'

'N...not really.' The wit bubbled under again.

'That's two pounds then.'

I fished in my pocket, retrieved a note from the floor, hastily damped my oversized foot on a ten p. coin that fell out and began to roll as I bent down, paid my two pounds, retrieved the ten pence, straightened again and grimaced apologetically at the young woman. She appeared to be biting back a giggle. I felt sure that double bending in public had improved neither my complexion, nor the laissez faire styling of my mid-brown to grey hair. I shoved my glasses back from the brink and nervously essayed a smile.

'Reader?' she enquired encouragingly.

'What? Oh no, not this time.'

I lurched mildly into the room, continuing to smile pacifyingly in case I was noticed and found a seat towards the back of a few rows of canvas chairs arranged round a small platform. The room held the patina and perfume of last night's beer. Ten or fifteen people of mixed age, looking for the most part comfortingly ordinary, stood or sat around, several of them shuffling typed sheets of paper or scribbling onto bits of paper. From below rose the clatter of the pub proper beginning to fill up. I studied my all too obvious trainers on the pitted brown lino under the chair in front of me for some time.

A stocky fortyish man in an unfashionable suit, who had been walking around writing things in a notebook and chatting to one or two people, climbed onto the platform and coughed for silence. 'We got Humphrey kicking off tonight,' he announced, in a chirpy, Croydonesque cockney, 'he's going to do three poems,' he looked over to my left and winked. 'Just three Humph, cos we've got a lot to get through if you don't mind.' His eyes scanned the rest of the room, 'But if...if anybody else wants to read, I can fit you in for a spot later, yeah? See me in the interval, yeah? In the bar, yeah?' He laughed. 'Well that's enough of that, let's give a welcome to our old friend,' his voice rose a few decibels and he moved an arm, 'Humphrey!'

The merest tatter of a clap.

Humphrey turned out to be the smallish grey-haired man, also fortyish, (so many of us are fortyish) in clean jeans and a rolltop sweater, whom I had noticed by the door talking (somewhat affectedly, I'd thought) to a knot of people as I came in. Now he was seated near the end of my row between two girls, not unattractive girls, I permitted myself to notice. He got up resting a hand briefly on a female wrist, stepped up to the platform, smiled sadly, trustingly at us, ran an index finger inside his rollneck and let one knee droop in to meet the other. He opened an efficient looking folder and held it in front of him.

'This ones...er...well you know my situation, most of you...it's about a woman I used to love,' his sad smile deepened, 'who used to love me... It's called, er, For Always.'

Somebody behind me blew a nose loudly. Humphrey waited for silence to resume.

'She was everything to me, my all...'

I coaxed a Soft Centre Fruitee out of its wrapper and slid it into my mouth. Inside this timid, charity clothed, jumbo exterior, is a stem, not to say sarcastic critic (self-criticism isn't my only forte). As soon as Humphrey's first line limped stickily along his baritone tongue, an abling sense of superiority lightened my sympathetic embarrassment. I won't burden you with much of Humphrey's oeuvre. Imagine for yourself what rhymes with 'all', subtracting anything unusual you may come up with (Heptonstall, caterwaul...). By the time he closes with, '...her feet echo through the empty hall...' you have Humphrey's muse, in essence, sussed.

He turned to the next page, 'This is called, 'She Who Was my Wife...'' (strife, life, knife -in the heart, twisted). I kept my eyes firmly on my trainers, and chewed behind closed lips.

The MC glanced openly at his watch during Humphrey's third piece, stepping on stage smartly as the last adjective lunged predictably out of Humphrey's full pink pout.

'Thanks Humphrey,' he was dapping, not quite solo.

Humphrey resumed his seat between the two beauties, looking preoccupied.

'We have a new boy now,' the MC continued, sweeping his arm down in an introductory gesture. 'Give a hand for Ranting Reggie from Lewisham !'

'I'll take it from here mate, all right?' We craned our necks, all except Humphrey who was murmuring to one of the girls. The noseblower had jerked to his feet, with a wheezing laugh. 'I like to stand with the people at all times.' He spoke penetratingly, incorporating the wheeze. The shoulders formed a sort of hanger, from which the concavity that was his body suspended itself. He flexed these shoulders now, the body rocked dangerously and juddered back into the anchorage of his boots. The hairless head bobbed over the hanger, puppet-like.

'I'm, like, I'm like...like I'm a new leveller performance poet, er, like, you know, a ranter, as in rapper, raver, like, people's poetry, that's what I do.'

Reggie did nothing to subdue my growing confidence but he gave a spirited performance, stamping his iron clad foot in time to his lines, jabbing an extended arm, finger pointing upwards. Declaimed sibilants fizzed into space, a light shower descended about my head.

'Serial killers, serious shysters
say what you like, they've got to go
killing old ladies, maiming babies
taking jobs and cutting wages...'

I slid along to the next seat (quite unobtrusively for me) before the anticipated cluster of esses spat forth at the beginning of the next stanza. Reggie concluded his poem with vertical take off, raising both arms in the air as he gabbed, at maximum height, an obscure mantra,

'Lewisham Levellers, every Monday in the Creek!' before crashing, onto his canvas chair as if the hanger had snapped.

Humphrey, who had continued his recitative into his neighbour's ear throughout Reggie's performance, now generously led the applause, his dainty white hands held high in front of him. We craned back to the stage, where the MC himself was riffling his pages, ready.

In a loosely structured work he described how he and his wife, Brenda, had moved a wardrobe from one room to another. Its categorisation as poetry may have been due to a final, er...rhyming couplet:

'We had to drive to IKEA
And get ourselves a new one, there.'

Then we had the day the dog got lost. At the point where the dog, after many adventures (described in detail) had found its way onto a train and was speeding towards Folkestone Harbour, Henry mislaid a couple of pages and had to stop and look through his dutched pile of sheets. Someone at the front called out, 'Give us lawnmowers, Henry !'

'Yeah, lawnmowers, come on Henry, lawnmowers,' echoed a few others opting for a devil they knew. Henry had found his place. He retrieved his dog from the arms of a heavily accented French customs officer and back home to its basket before launching obligingly into a description of his neighbour's Sunday morning grass cutting activities. This saga had an intermittent chorus, a breathless, wordless buzzing sound which some of the regulars took up, while Henry, buzzing too, needing no script for this one,

began a deliberate heavy plod up and down the stage, arms stretched ahead of him, hands clutching downwards at an imaginary handle. At each turn the buzz descended an octave or so and rose again as he recommenced his plod. The mowers sputtered around me. I openly stripped another Fruitie and popped it, mentally constructing my own dignified reading.

Henry wiped his lips with a handkerchief and swallowed. 'We have something very special tonight,' he puffed, feet apart, thumbs together, 'we have... a published poet' He paused for us to savour our impending contact with divinity. 'Just published,' he conceded, 'by a new poetry label, 'Boneshard'. There'll be copies of her collection by the door in the interval, yeah ?' He cross-stepped towards the edge of the platform opening both arms and cocking his head, 'A big hand for Lobelia ... Washington !' To my surprise, one of the girls beside Humphrey extricated her ear and walked confidently onto the platform.

There had thus far been a clarity, even a liquid clarity, to the recitations. Not so Lobelia's verses:

'Crepuscular wakes of Dravidian solitude....'

She looked pleasant enough - easy well bred elegance in a dirndl skirt and Arran sweater, smiling, friendly under natural blonde curls, she stood relaxed, peeling her conceits off a green pad and ringing them proudly above our heads. She flicked the page over briskly.

'Dactyline cuneiform parabolas serrate my locomotion..'

We applauded her warmly - for her prettiness, her smile, her confidence, her opacity; and to show that we understood. Henry called the interval. Lobelia quickly moved over next to her slim volume 'Pools of Serendipity', and began selling and signing copies.

Most people clattered down the metal edged stairs to the bar. Finding myself alarmingly conspicuous in the almost empty room, I too edged politely past Lobelia, went downstairs, stationed myself by the microwave and ordered a sausage. The pub had filled up; a group of men with football scarves were playing darts at the uncarpeted end; some ladies in purple tracksuits bearing the legend 'Over Fifties Aerobics' across their aubergine bosoms had taken over two tables and pushed them together and were laughing and chattering loudly. Humphrey, sitting at the bar with his other neighbour, a girl with straight hair and a serious face, was protecting a spare stool, which I felt sure must be intended for Lobelia. She appeared now, on the stairs with Henry behind. Humphrey deftly reclaimed her.

'Darling, I've got a drink ready for you, over here, you must be dying for a drink,' he armed her over to the bar, 'a brilliant reading...so...so...grounded darling...so...profound.'

Rampant between the two women, he directed his pitch at the eminent Lobelia. The straight-haired girl sipped her wine silently, looking self-conscious. Humphrey's head was quizzed sideways in attention to his listener, who, I noted without pleasure, seemed to be hanging onto his every cliché. After the compliments came a stream of perceived affinity:

'... of course ... you're a Pisces too ... no ! We always find each other somehow...don't you think so darling ...it is extraordinary...don't you think...'

'Are you sure you wouldn't like to read something ?' a voice tweetered in my ear. The MC was standing next to me with his notebook.

I swallowed my sausage. 'Next week', I responded huskily.

'I'll put you down then. What's your name?' He continued his rounds, bustling people upstairs for the second half. Ranting Reggie remained standing at the bar, a pint of Guinness at his skeletal elbow, looking across at the darts match.

The ambience upstairs, lubricated by the interval, had loosened. Polite, slightly embarrassed attention had given way to jollity. People who had sat on the edge of chairs at the back, now spread their legs, glass in hand, in the front row. Passive drinking, spiked sausage - who knows, even I felt relatively relaxed and appreciative. I glanced around me during Henry's opener. Almost all of them were, I guessed, would-be readers polishing their verses on the way to work, eventually plucking up courage to offer their names to Henry as he trotted fussily about the bar. Not so different from me, I admitted to myself, with some relief. An elderly man a few seats from me got up nervously and in a quavering voice performed some iambic pentameters about death. We applauded loudly. The girl on the door got a cheer for her uninspired lyrics about the Kent countryside. There was a sense of solidarity with the act of versifying in and for itself. The audience were awarding A's for effort, for the act of courage required in getting up onto the platform holding your quivering piece of paper and delivering its personal and possibly crazed message. The rest of us could feel admiration for that courage and at the same time feel sure that our own untested poems were, would be, superior.

A pleasant little fantasy was taking me over: how I would stand, which of my pieces I would start with, the hoots of spontaneous laughter, the unstinted applause, how Lobelia would come up to me, offer to mention my name to her publisher... I was shocked back to reality by the sound of the name I had given Henry being enthusiastically proclaimed from the platform. He was announcing the following week's programme. I was, it seemed, a rising new poet, an interesting addition to the usual attractions. People were turning to look at me as Henry gestured in my direction. I broke into a sweat of embarrassment, forced my eyes level and stretched my lips over the dissolving flavour of strawberry syrup, trying to assemble on the spot an air of wry confidence and modesty.

And now it was Lobelia again. We gave her an encouraging cheer as she strode onto the platform. Not a syllable muffed, she built up to a crescendo of resonant obscurity, smiling, triumphant, head up at her audience, who sat, word-glutted, hypnotised.

'Diasporas disintegrate, remembered in a palindrome of parentheses,' she paused for breath.

A dissony of voices drifted up from the bar:

'Come on down, come on down, come on...'

'Ephemeral epiphanies fledge the quietude of Aquinas

Febrilating frescoes forage in a renaissance of ...

Xanthocarpian

xanthopathian

xanthospermian...'

'...down to Millwall...'

'deciduousity.'

(I recklessly ripped the paper off the final Fruitie)

Humphrey claqued frantically. Cheers and shouts from above and below coalesced. Lobelia beamed and bowed, bowed and beamed jumped gracefully down and walked towards the door, followed urgently by Humphrey. A well-dressed middle-aged man, newly arrived, stood in the doorway. Lobelia reached up and kissed him. Humphrey skated to a halt.

'Oh, Graham, this is, er...er...'

'Humphrey ... Watson-Smith,' Humphrey gave his sad smile.

'Of course. Humphrey, this is my publisher, Graham White. We must rush, I'm afraid,' Lobelia said kindly.

The publisher scooped up the fan of slender books like a seasoned poker player. Lobelia slipped a hand in his free hand. We heard the quiet squeak of their shoes on the stairs. Humphrey recovered himself rapidly, turned, his eyes searching the room. But the girl with the straight hair had disappeared.

I made my way out through the rumpus of dart players and aerobics ladies who had combined forces. Solid purple arms propped Ronny's swaying stick-like frame as they sang.

I worked on the Peckham poem, sitting in Mario's after work, extending it to eight lines, but I needed an encore. About Wednesday I realised that I hadn't thought about my unsatisfactory lifestyle for several days. Normally the word 'alone', is endemic in me, a dullness between my shoulders, a sub-panicky sensation underneath my throat somewhere, just as some people have chronic indigestion (I have that too come to think of it) or warts or piles. My alone has gone on holiday this week, while I have been cogitating on the choosing and rejecting of words, and why the lines are the right length or not and how to express the forlorn but stubborn essence of Peckham. Some lines have jumped onto the paper as if from nowhere, smiled back at me proud of the page like sudden friends. These lines I have not felt able to change. Rather I have wrapped the other words carefully round them like quiet allies and protectors.

By the time Penge Poets were once again assembling at the Peregrine I had three poems: extended haiku about Peckham, a sonnet on Pit Bull Terriers titled 'Rye Dogs' and an ode to Haagan Daz ice cream.

This week ain't been nothing but aggravation. Elton's been round here all week, so my mum ain't never spoke to me hardly. All she done was tell me not to eat the last bit of chicken Sunday, cos she was saving it for him. It's like I don't live here no more. Oh yeah, my dad was round again. I don't get it, ain't never set eyes on the bloke for months, all of a sudden he's under your feet. He's come in, ain't said nothing, went round opening doors, told me to get up, took some fivers out of mum's purse and shot off down the betting shop. 'You wanna watch yourself', he goes. I wanted to hit him but I don't know him do I. Elton's come out of the wardrobe looking a right div. 'Keep your mouth to yourself', he goes to me. Liberty all of it.

We ain't had no fun with the geezer cos he aint been around. We see him once, late it was, on the walkway. He ain't got no carriers and he walks past like he don't care if we was there or not. Before I could be sure it was him he's gone into his flat and shut the door. John looks at me like I'm

chicken. Junior's standing watching points like who's boss here, know what I mean. John's getting well out of hand.

Oh yeah, this skirt social worker's come round, why ain't I been going for my tuition. 'I'll see he gets there in future,' Elton goes. What a git!

THREE

I met Tony through the folk circuit though he wasn't one of us. I was playing a club in Birmingham and the Lodes, regulars at the club, were putting me up for the night. They were a youngish couple, he a car worker from British Leyland, she a nurse. Tony Lode was a slight, quiet man with thick spectacles that magnified his eyes. Clara Lode was bubbly, with wide, flirtatious eyes.

She invited the other performers, two Scottish guys, and the club organiser, David, back for a drink to their neat little house on the outskirts of Birmingham.

Rory and Alex opened their guitar cases, and filled the small tidy front room with their gear.

'You've got a new axe, man,' David mumbled knowledgeably, 'Gibson. Far out.'

'Yeah, Sunburst, 14 fret.'

'Cool.'

'Got any skins man?'

Rory handed over the papers, and Alex stuck two together side by side and another across the top. Rory began to tune up the Gibson.

'Got any snout man?' Alex asked David.

Tony slid two clean glass ashtrays onto the coffee table, which was cluttered with guitar capos and finger picks. Alex warmed up a small silver twist of dope with a lighted match, crumbled the brown morsels and the contents of two of David's Players onto the large joint paper, and tore a bit off the pack to make a roach.

Rory was picking clawhammer on the Gibson. Clara gazed up at him. Alex twisted the end of the joint and lit it. There was a small plop as the flame caught the paper, he took in a deep draw, hands cupped like a harmonica player and passed it on. Tony watched, mesmerised and respectful. Clara giggled as the joint was passed to her and took a quick puff, coughing slightly. Tony shook his head and passed the joint across. Clara looked at him scornfully, compressed her lips at me and raised her eyes to the ceiling, letting a slight sigh escape.

We put our three guitars in tune and began to play Jansch and Dylan songs.

At midnight Tony announced that he was going to bed, but not to mind him, he had to be up for work next morning. We were on to Woody Guthrie numbers by now, another joint going round, the room hazy with smoke, glasses and bottles spreading across the clean, pale carpet.

David, also suffering from nine to five fatigue, was nodding into a corner. Alex took pity on him.

'Want to split?'

'Yeah, gotta crash.' The three of them collected up their gear.

Clara and I stood by the door as David's mini-van throttled, burst into life and raced off. We started clearing up and washing the glasses.

'I'd leave them, but Tony gets up early and he'd go mad. Doesn't have to dock in till eight but always has to be up at six-thirty.'

'God, why?'

'Ask him. He's a worrier.' She stacked clean glasses efficiently on a shelf. 'It's been great. Just great.'

'Great?'

'Tonight.' Her frustrations gushed out. 'I've had enough. I want to be like you, free.'

I was silent.

'Don't you think he's great?'

'Who?'

'Rory. I'm potty about him.'

'Yeah? I think Tony's much nicer. Sweet, really sweet.'

'He stifles me. Sometimes I feel I've just got to get away. He's jealous all the time. Won't let me do a thing. Always has to be with me, all the time.'

'I think I'd like it', I said, 'you can get fed up with trying to hustle along on your own. It's not that great.'

We looked at each other uncomprehendingly across the sink.

Clara shrugged. 'You're welcome to him.'

A week later I got a phone call. 'It's Clara. Remember?'

'Yeah, hi Clara.'

'Listen I hope this doesn't sound cheeky. You couldn't do me a big favour could you?'

'What's that?'

'You couldn't put Tony up for the weekend could you?'

'I don't see why not. Sure. How about you?'

'We're going up the wall at the moment. We need a break from each other.'

Tony arrived on his motorbike looking sad and nonplussed. Over the weekend he found himself a role as handyman, did a lot of washing up, put new washers on three dripping taps and mended the doorbell. He worked efficiently, quietly collecting up a pair of pliers, a screwdriver and a hammer previously scattered round the house, walking down to the ironmongers and buying the washers and the bell connections.

On Sunday night he shyly asked if he could take me out for a drink. We sat with our whisky macs in a dark corner of our local.

'I expect Clara told you we weren't getting on too well.'

'She did mention it.'

'She's bored. So am I come to that. She doesn't believe in marriage any more. She wants to be 'free' as she calls it.'

'Free?'

'She thinks you're free.'

'I'm not free. Just on my own, fending for myself and the kids as best I can.'

I bought us another drink, which he seemed to find surprising. We walked back up to the house and sat listening to Bob Marley and drinking coffee.

I stood up touching his cheek, 'I'm going to bed.'

'Couldn't I... join you?'

What could I say? What did I say? Probably nothing. I took him by the hand and led him up the stairs to my room.

When Tony set off to Brum on his motor bike the next morning I was still asleep. I woke up to find a small bunch of wild flowers in a glass by my bed with the dew still on them.

In those days the bathroom was chilly and the hot water limited. A ragged island of old paint showed through the purple ceiling to the left of the naked bulb. It disturbed ones relaxation. So when, some weeks after Tony's visit, the newly restored bell rang, I was already picking my way over the damp lino to my dark blue room overlooking the rough hillocks of grass in the back garden. I dropped my caftan over my head, ran down and opened the door. Tony stood there with his motor cycle helmet in his hand and a pack on his back. He put his arms round me and burst into tears.

'I'm not going back.'

I pulled him into the kitchen and put the kettle on the gas.

I ain't saying she ain't a good mother. I couldn't say that and she keeps the flat maculate, I'll say that for her. It's like, well, she's waiting on Elton hand and foot and I'm like, well, having to do every bleeding thing for myself. I'm well out of favour since she got Elton.

She ain't had a good life, I know that. See she got off with this English bloke, Robinson - my dad - and her family didn't want to know her after that. Her mum and dad said she had to marry a Greek, but she got mixed up with him didn't she. Her sisters, they go holiday Cyprus every year but she ain't been since she was fourteen. She says it's all right, Cyprus, different again from Peckham. She keeps these pictures of Cyprus, my mum, cuts them out of magazines and such. It's got palm trees and bananas growing. I seen the pictures but I ain't never been there innit. Liberty.

My nan and granddad, they have a shop down Camberwell. They sell that bread that ain't cut with spots on top. My mum gets it sometimes but not from there. She don't walk on that side of the road, never.

When she was having me she was fifteen and she ran away cos she knew her dad would kill her. Then they got the flat, her and my dad, then he ran away. She caught him with some slag and she went mad. So did he and he's run off and she ain't seen him for two years. When he come back he's given her my sister and gone off again. Now she's got Elton and he don't want to go off. He thinks he's going to stay on. Just let him stay on!

This morning he's come in my bedroom. Couldn't have been more than eleven o'clock, and goes I've got to go down Centre for my lesson. I goes, 'Get lost!' and he grabs me, nearly dislocating my Walkman, and tells me I've got ten minutes or he's taking me down there hisself. Well I ain't being seen down Peckham with him, so I had to get up didn't I.

As it goes I had some business to attend to with the Jays round the carpark one o'clock, so I thought I might as well look in the Centre, keep 'em sweet. Ain't that bad down there as it goes. You have to spend about quarter of an hour with a tutor doing some crap and then you get a break. Today she give me a pile of bits of cardboard.

'How many triangles can you make with those?' she goes, like you was in infant school.

'That's rubbish', I goes. 'What do I have to do this for, It's boring. Can't we do something proper?'

'It's an investigation. You have to do it for the National Curriculum.'

I go, 'What's a triangle?'

I don't want you to think I'm a dumbo, but that keeps her talking for ten minutes and then she lets me go for a game pool.

They make you call them by their first names, and they're all skirt. My one's called Rachel and she can rabbit. I generally have a game pool with this other tutor, Lorna, who don't rabbit much. She ain't bad - at pool I mean. Not for an oldish skirt like her.

Trouble is you don't see your mates like when you go school. I have to rely on Junior to keep in touch, he's the only Jay who goes school. He has a lot of contacts with the puff circuit. Keeps it in his house the div. No way I'd keep it in my house, mum'd Hoover it up for a start off, that's what she's like. We're getting a new business going, the Jays, through this mate of John's who's got a van. Be honest I ain't too sure about it. See John's getting a bit ...well...fancying hisself cos it's his mate. I have to watch John. I know I ain't no angel, but he goes too far sometimes. He could get us in untold bother. As it goes we ain't doing too bad as we are, the Jays, running the puff and the car stuff. We make about an hundred fifty notes a week, average. We put half in the fund - stash it away, and the rest.well... goes down the boozer, or if we go rave. John spends untold money round the boutiques but my mum buys all my clothes. I have to let her or she'd ask where the money come from. Costs her a packet. Don't know how she'll manage now she's got Elton, she ain't going to let him go round in that gear for much longer. She ain't got a bad job, working down Argos in the packaging department. She's going to have to do more overtime.

Jet was at the Centre today. Haven't seen him for weeks. It's hard to imagine him terrorising Brian like that. Mind you Rachel thinks he's a thickie. She had to spend fifteen minutes trying to explain to him what a triangle was, and then he didn't get it. I think he's putting her on myself. He's good looking Jet, and he knows it. Thick black curls and big brown eyes and those sweet brown skinned temples that shade off into his hairline. He wears a pale red suede jacket that must have cost a fortune, black chinos and black leather trainers. He's got taste, I'll say that for him. I'm going to have to do something about him and the Brian situation and I'm trying to think what.

I have to admit I feel more like a paid-up tenant of myself these days and it seems to be because of the lines. I'm calling them jetlines. You will recall how the MC said 'What's your name?'

To my astonishment a new name sprang to my assistance after his question.

'Oscar Peckham.'

It fell round my shoulders immediately and comfortably like a well-fitted, tailor-made suit, gave me height, elegance, disguised the bumps and bulges of my awkwardness.

'Good name for a poet.'

'I'm lucky in that respect.'

And this week Oscar Peckham offered his first verses to the public and was well received. (I am aware that the competition is none too formidable. 'Follow that!' has a whole different meaning at Penge Poets.) They stamped their feet and called for an encore. They laughed.

Oh the delights of performing! The nuances of timing, the carefully judged lift of the eyebrows, the delicately reduced volume of the voice, the sideways glances at the audience, the brief but disarming introduction. Can it be that Brian Walters, orphan, is in reality Oscar Peckham, performer, declaiming his bitter comic jetlines, basking as the love-waves wash over him from all sides? Or am I getting ahead of myself?

I need at least two more for next week; a few little ideas are niggling. I'm in Mario's again, roughing out a seventeen liner with the title at the end - well maybe poetry, like life, is better understood backwards.

Looking back there's always been a Jet. Jets of disapproval have sprayed over my life, Jet-cats, leaving their pungent odour of fear.

At the children's home there was a jetkid in every other bed: Alan Sharp, blonde hair falling over vacant blue eyes, home footballer of the year.

'Sir, can't we drop Walters from the team. He's no good Sir.'

I began to tiptoe everywhere, quiet on my overgrown feet, so, round corners, I could overhear and take avoiding action.

'I'm in with Walters this year.'

'Hard shit, he pisses the bed.'

Not only Jet-cats, solid ladies in skirts, the undersides of their bosoms obscuring their faces. But they seem to be speaking about me.

'They say worry can be a killer.'

'She had plenty of that.'

'It wasn't easy for her with him around.'

'They are a worry, boys. She didn't need him as well as everything else.'

They move away sipping their sherry among the rarely seen dark clothes of the uncles and neighbours, nibbling thin sandwiches or holding their saucers on the oversides, cups poised above.

A bosom bends down and words tumble tetchily across it.

'Go upstairs Brian, there's some crayons and a book up there, and sandwiches put for you. You don't want to go getting under people's feet do you. Not at a time like this.'

Despite my size, I seemed to belong under people's feet.

These memories sail in front of me over Mario's cluttered counter with its glass stands of sandwiches: a little boy who wet the bed on Wednesdays, the night before football practice; an even smaller boy who ran upstairs, pushed open a door and saw his mother lying sweet and white with closed eyes in an oblong boat. When he touched her she was very cold. He ran next door and sat with his crayons, drawing circle after circle. Auntie came and put her arms round him and he cried and cried. He could cry when *she* put her arms round him. Only then.

I ain't never had a letter before. When it come through the box Elton grabbed it.

'It's for you Sunshine. Nice writing. You got a girl friend? Don't fancy her chances.'

I got it off of him and stuck it in my pocket.

'Ain't you going to open it?'

'Not with you about.'

When I got out the flat I took it out and looked at it. There was some lines of stuff on the envelope and a bit of posh looking paper inside. I had to wait didn't I, till the Jays met down the carpark and get Junior to read it. John stood there grinning like he could read the English dictionary backwards. I'm getting real pissed off of him. Junior reads real good. I made him read it twice.

'Why me?'

'It don't say. Who is Lorna?'

'None of your business.'

'Are you going?'

'Dunno. Maybe, maybe not.'

We was met there to do a bit of blamming, but John's forgot to bring the T-hammer ain't he. Messy. The T makes a nice round hole, quiet and quick in the middle of the window and the glass just, like, falls out easy. But the plum forgot it didn't he. Don't know why I let him look after it - well, round his house, nobody don't bother, nobody don't go in his room or nothing. As it goes we decided to have a ride instead. We had a stroll about, different streets like, looking for a nice motor that's got the speed in it.

We see a beautiful Porsche down Asylum street but you can't get in 'em. Nother thing, in this manor you've got to watch yourself, what you nick. You gotta know who a Porsche belongs to round here innit. You don't mess with the daddies. We settle on a black XR2, wicked looking, down Commercial Way.

I put John on lookout. He didn't like it, but I give him first drive. Junior goes under the front to turn off the hooter, and I'm inside with my little screwy in a couple of seconds. Then Junior rips down the ignition casing, careful like, with the puller. He's good, June, when it come to that stuff.

'Check the petrol,' he goes. It's half full innit, we're in the buckets and she's purring.

We pull out onto the Old Kent Road and cruise off down Lewisham and Deptford steady, and round Greenwich and Blackheath, where we get moving. Over the heath and nearly up the tunnel we're doing sixty. That's where we change over quick, in a side road and I'm behind the wheel.

I see the gavvers just as I coast down Greenwich High Street, catch sight of 'em behind me in the mirror. That's when I get the buzz, seeing them in the mirror. I keep my distance in front of 'em for a bit, not tempting 'em like, and then I speed up, shooting a couple of reds, pulling away from the gavvers easy. We must be doing near on seventy. The gavvers has got their hooters blazing and we're racing down Queen's Road, I'm letting 'em stay level, and now I'm letting 'em pull closer. I see the face of the driver in the

mirror, that Chinese gaffer I see hanging about down Peckham Road. I let 'em pull nearly up to us. John and Junior's shouting at me to get moving, they're nearly up to us, and we're doing fifty, I take a fast corner into St Mary's Road and they shoot straight past. They ain't got the cornering and they ain't got the bottle innit. I driv her through Nunhead back down Peckham and parked round the corner from the Centre. Junior's had the radio out and taken it round Bobbie's, and I've gone Centre. Where John went I ain't got a clue. I don't hardly know John sometimes. .

FOUR

*Low fat sunflower spread
Cumberland pork sausages
Sainsbury's mild mint toothpaste
fibre-enriched sliced bread
re-cycled toilet rolls
electric razors
size 11 men's trainers
girl's cycling shorts, large
dinner jackets
simulated leather leggings
reproduction antique picture frames
customised number plates
number 36 buses
gentlemen's urinals
The British Museum
funeral parlours
fried eggs
Seventeen things which shouldn't be pink*

This week Penge Poets audience was increased by a couple of raven-haired, clothed and eyed creatures; Gothic punks somebody said. He called out, 'Oh yes !' after every piece while she laughed and clapped constantly saying 'Yeah !' By the interval everybody was in a frenzy of appreciation. I don't go on till the second half these days, such is my meteoric rise. I strove to maintain my usual mild and unassuming cool.

Nervous about my latest poem, I'd forgone my interval sausage and was surreptitiously consuming peppermints in the almost empty upstairs room, stepping up and down the lino. They've become used to the exotic persona of Oscar Peckham and his anti-social habits. The noise from below, already more raucous than usual, became deafening as the aroused poets added their shrill chatter to the bleeping of the war games the thumping reggae and the companionable cursing of hoi polloi.

I finished my spot with Seventeen Things (inspired by the extraordinary shopping complex at the Elephant and Castle which is astonishingly pink!) then led by the GP's the audience set up the shout:

'Peck - ham, Peck - ham, Peck - ham !!!'

Uncertain whether they lusted after me in general, or merely my poem of the same name, I decided to silence them with the latter. Through my steaming glasses I could see refugees from the bar below crowding in the doorway. I was horribly nervous and faint with sweat, but Oscar was steady as a rock star. He spoke the definitive lines on Peckham with quiet menace and steely control, sat down modestly and refused to do more, because, unknown to them, he had as yet nothing more to offer.

Fingering his rollneck, glancing nervously at the punks, Humphrey got up to a murmur that wasn't exactly ecstatic and was able to rapidly subdue the proceedings with a broken-backed sonnet. The crowd in the doorway trickled back down to the bar, where a promising fight seemed to be developing between competing groups of the unemployed.

I sidled downstairs, circumnavigated the punch-up and went out of the door, suddenly as twitchy as a preacher in a Wild West saloon. The streets were black with rain. I sat next to the window and stared out at the little red

semis with their neat gardens as the bus loitered through Sydenham and Forest Hill. An upstairs light glowed through some mauve flowered curtains and I caught sight of my mother, lying on her large bed, under a mauve eiderdown.

'I'll see you in the morning son. Run off to bed now.'

But she didn't. In the morning my father, silent and downcast as always, gave me a bowl of cornflakes and hustled me off to school with the boy next door. After school, Auntie was there and she explained that mummy had gone away for a bit of a break and I could spend the rest of the week at her house. I liked her house. People laughed in it. But I didn't dare to ask what had happened because I knew mummy was dead and I wasn't going to be told. I kept it to myself not wanting to embarrass anyone.

Auntie was a tall lady who wasn't really my auntie, since my parents were both only children, like me. She gave me a folding bed to sleep on in a corner of her daughter's room. I remembered lying awake up there when my father came to call.

'All right is he, the boy?'

'He seems fine. Sleeps the night out, good as gold.'

Nothing else of that time at Auntie's remains with me, except the smell of Pears soap emanating from the bathroom, and a bristle-faced man with cycle clips who shouted 'Ta ta', every morning outside the bedroom window. I'd watch him cycling off down the dark early morning road then creep back into bed and wait for Auntie to call me, and the sense of relief when I sat in the comfort of her smile to have breakfast.

I got off the bus by the King's Head just as it was turning out. Oscar Peckham reasserted himself and strode purposefully across the Rye away from the lights and noise outside the pub. The flats were quiet, and nobody on the walkways. His head buzzing with an idea for a poem about the Rye, Oscar walked straight past the kitchen grimacing disapprovingly at the mess, found some clean edges of chip paper, tore them off impatiently and started to write.

Dear Jet

Would you like to come to my house for tea next Friday (26th April).

Please ring me, 081-298-2531, if you can't come.

Love,

Lorna

No good putting any more. He'll probably have to get someone else to help him, even to read that. I wasn't at all sure he'd come. Kids like Jet only seem to function in their own territory - about a five hundred yard radius from their flats, apart from the odd sortie, mob-handed, to a football match or a pub in enemy terrain, normally in search of a wilder class of punch-up. God knows what these kids eat and drink - cakes, biscuits, ice-cream ? Tizer, lemonade, Fanta, Pepsi ? Or should I offer him a beer ?

I wasn't none too keen on going up Lorna's. What's she want? I ain't got a clue. Most teachers and I'd go stuff it. But Lorna ain't like a real teacher. She don't grease you up for nothing so there must be something. She ain't heavy neither. She can leave you alone as it goes, that's something most of 'em can't handle, not even down Centre. Be honest, I've never had much time for teachers - they're the other side innit. This git of a PE teacher down Peckham Sacred Heart Boys where I used to go school: massive shoulders on the geezer, Muscles we used to call him, Maxell the Muscles. He give me a bad time and I ain't never forgot.

'Where's your PE socks,' he goes, 'them stripes is the wrong colour.'

I goes, 'Whassit matter?'

'It matters to you Robbo, cause you're getting a detention.'

So he keeps me back after school and writes on the board, reads it out,

'I must remember my PE socks.'

'Fifty times,' he goes, standing over me like some Hulk.

Nowadays I'd just get up and walk out cos they can't touch you innit, but I didn't know no better then, so I writ it down fifty times and give it to him. He takes a look. 'You've left me out!' he screams.

'You...wha'dya mean?' I goes.

'Rember !' he shouts, ' what kind of word's that?'

He writ it on the board - 'rember' and then put a little v in the middle of it and then wrote 'me' over that. 'Not too gifted up top are we Robbo. You can write it all out again, properly.'

I writ it out again and he screwed it up and bunged it in the bin.

After that I never went in Wednesdays. Me and Junior used to hop off round the car park instead. How we met John innit.

Centre teachers ain't like that. They don't never give you a hard time. You have to give them a hard time now and then, case they think you're cured and try to send you back school. Cured what of I ain't sure. Liberty innit. As it goes remember's about the only word I can spell. What's the use of that - remembering remember?

Lorna's ain't down Peckham. You have to get a bus and I ain't into buses. My eyes is sometimes a bit knackered and I can't sometimes read the fronts good or the road signs. I usually stay Peckham unless I've got Junior with me.

Lorna lives down Dulwich. There ain't no flats hardly, just them old manky looking houses along the edge of the road stuck onto each other sideways. Some of em's big and sort of curly round the windows and doors, like the brickies ain't had nothing better to do them days. Some of em's little and flat. Lorna lives in a big curly one.

Her house is massive man, inside. She ain't bothered to put no wallpaper on. She's got it all white, dead white, she ain't hardly got no furniture. I know teachers ain't supposed to get paid that much, but it's weird. There's this piddling little telly in one corner what you can't hardly see, and she don't have it on. No video or nothing. It was dead quiet and I couldn't think of nothing to say.

We go in the kitchen and she's give me some tea.

'You'll have to have brown sugar', she goes, 'I've run out of white'.

The tea goes all dark and I had to drink it, didn't I, not to be rude.

It ain't that clean as it goes, her kitchen. She don't put stuff in cupboards like in proper kitchens. Round our flat, you have cupboards you don't see nothing out, cos my mum likes everything maculate, besides there's cockroaches innit. But in Loma's everything's out on shelves. She's got these glass pots full of, well, rubbish looks like. No microwave or nothing. I don't know how she manages. Well, thin as a rake ain't she. Maybe she don't never eat.

'What's that up there Miss?', I goes.

'Loma. They're beans; black eyes, pinto and aduki - the little red ones. You make casseroles and stuff with them, delicious.'

Black eyes! Must remember not to go round her house dinnertime.

We sit down at this rough old table she must have got out of some skip, and she starts talking about the geezer.

Jet came in and he wouldn't eat a thing, kept gazing around as if he'd suddenly been transported back to the sixteenth century or something. As usual, I'd run out of white sugar - I hardly ever buy it now Tony's left. He put three spoons of brown in his tea and sat there looking embarrassed and angelic.

'Jet, this is just between you and me. I wanted to ask you for a bit of help.'

'Yeah.'

'It mustn't go any further.'

'I won't say nothing.'

'It seems you live next door to a friend of mine.'

'Yeah...?'

'Number twenty-six. Brian Walters. I was at university with him.'

'Yeah...?'

'Well...he came round to supper the other night, and it seems some of the kids on the estate have been bothering him.'

'Yeah...?'

'I haven't said anything to Brian, but while he was talking I realised you were neighbours. I thought it was better to have a chat to you rather than get on to the coppers. I thought you'd take care of it better than the coppers would, knowing the estate like you do.'

Jet was looking at me open mouthed.

'That geezer with the carrier bags. He's a friend of yours?'

'One of my best. I know he looks a bit strange sometimes, but he's the cleverest man I know. Bit shy, you know, a bit different, that's all.'

'Did you say he went university?'

'That's right'

Jet's eyes met mine and lowered.

'I'll see to it Miss.'

'Loma.'

'Sorry, Lorna.'

'Thanks. More tea.'

'No, thanks.'

'Would you rather have a can of lager?' I opened the fridge and handed him a Budweiser.

'Thanks Loma', he pocketed it. 'I better go.'

'See you down the Centre. Remember what I said, not a word to anyone.'

'I won't say nothing.'

I watched him through the window (I don't usually do that kind of thing) swaggering towards the bus stop, drinking the lager as he went and throwing the can in the road as he got on the bus.

John come round today with Junior and they wanted to go and wait for the geezer. Well I ain't into that no more after what Lorna said. Dunno why. It just don't seem funny no more. And I give her my word innit. Tricky. So I goes, 'Nah, I ain't in the mood.'

'Wass a matter with you these days', goes John, 'ain't you got no bottle no more?'

I grabbed hold of him. 'What you know about bottle? I'm Jay One and I ain't short of bottle - got it!'

I start backing him down the walkway by the tee shirt. Junior's dancing about and he ain't sure what to do.

I get John up against the side of the walkway and his head's looking up at the sky and it ain't propped up on nothing but air.

'Let me go!' he goes, in this chicken voice.

'Elton yells down from upstairs, Aint you got no feelings for no one else!'

Junior pulls John away. 'Come on, let's go down the arcade then.'

John's red round the face. 'What about tomorrow - ain't you on for tomorrow now?'

'Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow night.' I've gone back into the flats, not wanting to take it no further.

Tomorrow night, yeah. Tomorrow night we're supposed to meet Arnie with his van and start the new business. We've cased it out and tomorrow we're supposed to do it. Arnie's taking us down some boozier first, where he knows the barmaid and there won't be no questions asked. After the boozier we do the job. But I ain't sure. I ain't at all sure.

FIVE

Man exists only part-time, during the working days, as an instrument of alienated performance ...moreover, from the working day, alienation and regimentation spread out into the free time... the libido becomes concentrated in the genitals leaving most of the rest of the body free for use as an instrument of labour ... libidinal relations with others are mostly confined to leisure time and directed to the preparation and execution of genital intercourse.'

(Herbert Marcuse - *Eros and Civilisation*)

(Yeah - well...)

I became convinced that the true artists of sex were not hippies, anarchists and libertarian socialists all of whom counted among my friends and lovers before I met Tony, but British Leyland track workers. On the track and on the job - this was what Tony knew. Being on the track what is there to think about but being on the job, what escape, what pleasure but sex, sex and more sex.

Tony had become a sexual gourmet, mulling over, refining and elaborating his fantasies, as he tightened down the nuts with two air guns onto the procession of Mini engines, timed to pass in front of him every two minutes ten seconds. Some of the men played chess, moving the board up from engine to engine, popping seized pieces into the pockets of their overalls; then there was the poker school, the games of bridge. But Tony dreamed of sex, finding in the yielding pink and whiteness, the peaches and cream-ness of women's bodies, some antidote to the metallic masculinity of his situation, finding in the murmur of love talk some counterpoint to the drum-stitching zizz zizz of the socket guns. (And as he pointed out at a much later date, a cosy suburban semi with no lodgers, visitors, guests or children was the perfect venue for a couple to explore their possibilities. Wall to wall bathroom carpeting, rugs by the fire, Dralon settees from Debenhams, were for keeping up with John Thomas.)

Day, night, clothed, unclothed, half-clothed, re-clothed, on the table, in the bath, in the garden, in the shed, against the wall, on the phone - Tony could script them all and combinations of them all, as well as the more Arcadian possibilities offered by the surprisingly pleasant countryside around Brum.

None of this was in the least obvious from his previous visits nor from his appearance as he sat and wept at my kitchen table.

Tony is thin, the thick glasses make his eyes seem enormous and deep brown. Now he sat, holding his glasses in one hand and a handkerchief in the other and his eyes were small and red-rimmed.

'What happened ?' I asked.

'Clara...Clara was in bed with that...that fucking folksinger. That bastard...Rory. I walked in on them. In our bloody bedroom.'

I put my arms round him.

He squinted up at me, his face wet and skewed, 'Can I, I dunno, stay for a week or two, just while I sort myself out?'

'You're really not going to go back?'

'I can't, I'd kill her. I'd kill both of them.'

'So you won't go back to British Leyland?'

'No fear. I'll find something down here. I'll pay you some rent, don't worry.'

'I wasn't.'

The first thing Tony did every morning when he woke up was say, 'Oh Dear' and grope around for his glasses to confirm his pessimism about the state of the world. He washed his hair every day as well as showering and deodorising himself so as to be in constant readiness for his main leisure activity. When he was not preparing for, having or recovering from sex, he worked compulsively at physical tasks grumbling constantly at the incompetence and lassitude of those around him:

'I've never known such a lazy shower of wankers - I don't know why you put up with it, I don't.'

Or watched television, giving an abusive running commentary on the programme.

'Fucking Callaghan. Worse than the Tories if you ask me.'

After a few days he got himself a job as a carpenter handyman with a local building firm. A fortnight later he took a five pound note out of his wage packet and handed me the rest. That night I had a gig and the next morning I slept late. Tony didn't. At eleven he brought me tea.

'Come on sleepy head.'

He was wearing his work clothes and his hands and face were dusty.

'What's going on?'

'You'd better come and have a look.'

I put on my caftan and went downstairs. Where the old kitchen dresser had been was a pile of broken wood and rubble. A thick layer of dust covered the kitchen.

'I felt in the mood to get started. Trouble is there's some dry rot behind this cupboard, so we're going to have to strip back and replaster. Way it goes kid.'

He hacked at the wall with a hammer to demonstrate and a large chunk of plaster fell off exposing a fusty smell and fronds of cobwebby stuff latticing the brickwork.

Knowing my technical inadequacies as a handywoman, I had never delved too far beneath the surfaces of my house. At Habitat, a new-ish store in Tottenham Court Road, you could buy the deep purple and orange emulsion paints which were all you needed, together with a packet of polyfilla, to maintain a sufficient veneer of modern chic. My kitchen was an artful combination of old chests of drawers and cupboards bought from the local junk shop and covered with a sheet of polyurethaned laminated board which the woodyard had cut more or less to size. The difference between this and a modern kitchen was carpentry.

By the following Friday, the wall was re-plastered and Tony had started making kitchen units out of chipboard and pine tongue-and-groove. The house was coated with dust but a new kitchen was taking shape.

I, Lorna, who for so long had lived surrounded, invaded, by impractical and feckless men had at last got someone to look after me, to build cupboards, un-block the sink, dig the garden, mend the car and put his arms around me lovingly and gratefully, day after day, night after night. A

simple man who could cry. A man who handed over his wages every Friday. What had there been before? I scarcely remembered. In the heartbreak hotel of the deep past was my ex-husband, Charlie Waterford, father of my two girls, jazz artist extraordinaire. The post-war years had already rocked into their blue-jeaned adolescence, Robert Zimmerman already dropped out of college into Bob Dylan. And there was Charlie (remember him?) sitting on the sofa of our cramped Waterloo flat puffing on his pipe, musing on which Mississippi blues artist he might paint next whilst I cooked and cradled and decorated around him. And when the decorating was done, he instructed me to re-paint the picture-rail deep emerald green. He was right, it looked better. Then he carefully hung his pictures of Big Bill Broonzy and Blind Lemon from the green picture-rail, filled his pipe again and contemplated them. Shortly after he moved out, declaring that domesticity was the death of art and he needed to be alone. Alone included an art student of his, just a little younger than me and some fifteen years younger than him.

After that...? Men I met at gigs and brought home on impulse. Clawhammer pickers and mouth-harp blowers; lazy guys, broke guys, guys who wanted to hang around with a slightly famous folksinger, guys who needed somewhere to stay; flatterers, talkers, dope smokers.

I loved Tony's thin slightly miserable looking face, his manic toothy smile, his sludgy Birmingham accent with its slurred t's and hollow u's, his coarse track-bent humour. Other men might look good and sound good, play fantastic blues guitar, but in bed they were mostly uninteresting, inhibited. Rolling off with an undeserved sigh of achievement they'd fall asleep, stay that way until, say eleven or twelve next day, roll on and off again and then start talking about themselves. This little Brummie builder sometimes shy, sometimes garrulous, made love quietly, gently, thoughtfully, building up to a passionate climax through a series of sensuous manoeuvres, speaking out his fantasies, cradling me to sleep in his arms. Then in the morning he'd get up and bring me tea and put small gifts and posies by the bed.

He had an appreciation of the subtle links between the poetics of love and the bizarre posturing of sex. He understood that the day was better than the night, the floor better than the bed, kneeling up sexier than lying down, the kitchen juicier than the bedroom. I had never met anyone before who showed this dedication of body and spirit, time and space to the act of love.

He had sweet, quaint ideas: love was forever; you should 'see the whole thing through to the end.' I was besotted.

One day I was practising a riff on my guitar. I'm not a very good guitar player so I have to practise little licks over and over again to put in between the verses of songs. Tony was in the kitchen building shelves. Suddenly he burst into the sitting room and flung his hammer down, breaking a plate which lay on the table.

'Can't you stop that fucking noise and come and do something useful. I'm out there all on my own, working away like a bloody fool and all you can do is play that poxy thing over and over. I can't stand any more.'

He went out slamming the door. I sat there for some time trying to push the two halves of the plate together then crept nervously into the kitchen. Tony was sitting with his head in his hands. I touched his dusty hair. He lifted his head, the tears snailed down his sawdust cheeks.

'I've got to go and see Clara. I can't just leave it.'

Clara. I had forgotten Clara existed.

'I need to know what she's doing, who she's with. The damn bitch.'

My stomach flipped.

'Go and see her then. I'm not stopping you.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

He put out his callused workman's hand and felt for mine without looking at me.

That night he roared off on his motor bike towards Birmingham, leaving the shelves on the floor and his woodworking tools littering the kitchen surfaces.

We're in the bar see, stuck in some corner round a table and I ain't feeling that good. Couldn't hardly get my Bud down me. Junior's grinning as usual and staying with the Coke but John and this Arnie's pissing me right off. Arnie's twenty-five if he's a day, trying to hide his beer gut with this flash leather jacket, sitting next to John like he needs to warm his leg and he's got one hand on John's knee. Thing is, John don't seem to mind and that's what I can't handle. He's smiling up at the geezer like it's his nan. I don't know about John no more. Seems like he don't have no feelings like, innit. I don't see what's in this business for the Jays except a load of trouble.

There's this house, see. We cased it up and it's got scaffolding up one side. Posh. Some old duffer lives there and that's it. Arnie's doing the pointing and he's seen where the old geezer puts his stuff - notes, fifties, inside some book on a shelf. Dozens of 'em. Arnie's left this window open and he wants us to go in there. He don't want to go hisself, says he's got to keep right out of it cos of the connection, he's going to wait down the street in his van. He's stuck some stencil thing on it so no one don't know it's his.

I ain't sure we ain't getting set up, cos he ain't taking no risk, but I like the sound of the money and I got the bottle for it. Buzz innit. Blinding. But what's the difference between showing some bottle and being a div? That's what I wanna know.

This boozers getting crowded and it's nearly ten o'clock; geezers standing right up against the table so you can't hardly breathe; everybody's shouting. Arnie don't want us to drink no more, but he goes and buys us crisps and crap like that from the bar. Junior looks at me like maybe I ought to get him out of here. I look over at John but he ain't looking back. Arnie's chucked the bags of crisps on the table and John's busy giving him his poppet look. I can't take no more.

Arnie hands round the fags and holds his lighter up to John's face and smiles. His teeth are dead grotty like he don't brush 'em proper and don't go dentist. John's teeth is well-nigh perfect but he smiles back. I don't get it. Well I do get it and I can't take it.

'I'm going for a piss I goes', treading on the fag. 'Me too', goes Junior.

Arnie's eyes peel off John's face like they was sellotape. 'Stay there Junior', he goes, sharp as razors, 'wait for Jet to get back'.

I have to squeeze through this crowd of noisy gits what's standing everywhere to get upstairs, and upstairs it's just as loud. There's this room up there opposite the bog and they're in there shouting at the top of their

voices. Sounds like 'Pick him, pick him', like, some competition or something. I've took a look. The room's gone dead quiet and this big geezer starts spouting. It was weird man cos I knew I seen him before but I couldn't think where. Then I got it. The geezer round the flats what knows Lorna. Him! I stood there to see what would happen, and I couldn't help listening, and it was like someone had got one in right between the eyes. This geezer in his horrible charity suit with the sleeves about ten miles too short was on about Peckham. And it was like, as he talked I see it, in front of my eyes only I see it better. The flats - the way the walkways knock out the sun of a morning, and down Rye Lane, the way half the shops is gone, boarded up with torn old posters stuck all over, every shop's got a sale, but all the stuff's crap. The way Nan Robinson daren't come up of a night time. He was saying it all like he was telling me something personal - like.

Forgot what I've come up for didn't I. Forgot I come up to take a piss and think up a strategy. Some skirt was sitting by the door and she goes to me, 'Would you like to come in. Half price now. Are you a concession?'

'What is this', I goes to her, 'what's going on?'

She goes, 'Penge Poets. Here have a leaflet and a book of poems. Here, it's free.'

She's shoved this book in my hand. I've stuffed it in my pocket and gone to take a piss. I had to get out didn't I. I went downstairs quiet, keeping my head down. Down there it was murder. Some gits was at it already with the bottles and glasses and two of 'em was down on the floor of the boozier getting their faces squashed into the carpet like fagends. Everyone's squeezed against the tables and I couldn't see Junior or John. I could see Arnie couldn't I, standing on a table trying to look for me over the top of the fight. The fight looked worth staying for but I couldn't hang about to see no more. I shot out into the street. A black cab come down the street, cruising, I've flagged it and got in.

'Where to sonny?' goes the cabby.

'Peckham innit,' I goes.

My mum was upstairs with Elton. I could hear 'em. I got out the book but I couldn't make out what it said could I. Picked out a few words and that's all. Yeah, I don't read that good as it goes and I couldn't make out nothing much. I looked through the curtains until I seen the geezer coming up. He didn't have no carrier bags and he let hisself into his flat. You needn't pass it on but I felt gutted. What for? Yeah - well. I was gutted cos I couldn't read good, and I was gutted cos mum was having it off with fucking Elton, and I was gutted cos of these grotty flats with the cockroaches where we don't live proper. I kept thinking about what we done to that geezer night after night thinking he was a wanker and a div. And I was worried man, I was fucking worried.

SIX

*I don't know
how rain comes on, what dampens
grumbles in unclear skies, worries the days
then sudden and cold hammers the town
or about you:
your sour stubborn chatter
then laughter rinsing down bleaching your words
I liked your workman's hands turning the lathe.*

*I don't know
how love comes on, what quickens
your blunt fingers flowing on my skin
while you flattened my house with lumpen blows
or about hate;
the sullen streaming of it
hate's from the heart, love's closer to the bone
I don't know how you cramped and turned my feet
or how I'll chisel free alone, in the rain.*

I've done as much as I can to this piece and I'm determined to move on to something else. It's a pretty slender achievement considering the time spent and the pain endured. It's been pared down a lot of course, and worked over and over.

By the Sunday night I was hovering by the front curtains like somebody's lonely aunt. It was about ten o'clock when Tony's bike crunched onto the gravel in front of the house. He rang the doorbell.

'I didn't like to just come in.'

'Was it horrible?' I asked.

'Pretty horrible. I made her give me a list.'

'A list?'

'Of all the men she's had since we've been together. Practically everybody we know. Bastards. While I'm doing fortnight about they're screwing my missus.'

'Fortnight about.'

'It's what you do on the track. Two weeks days, two weeks nights.'

'But didn't you ever have anybody else?'

'I tried. I kept trying. Never made it - that's the problem.'

'So it's envy not jealousy.'

He began to pound the kitchen table with his fist. 'I've had enough. I've had a-fucking 'nough.'

'That's my kitchen table you're battering.'

'Sorry...sorry.' He flung his arms around me, 'I'm a stupid bastard. Come on, let's go to bed.'

We reconstructed the house and deconstructed each other. It took fifteen years and neither process was quite complete when we parted. Tony had patiently removed the stair spindles six at a time, removed all the old layers of paint by immersing them in caustic soda, and dried, sanded, varnished and replaced them. There were ninety-six spindles altogether and on the morning he finally left, six of them still lay soaking in a tin bath on the floor of the workshop he had built for himself in the back garden. The old paint and varnish had curled off revealing the grey knotted wood beneath.

The demolition of the next room always preceded the completion of the one before as if Tony always had to leave something that only he could do, in order to remain a necessary part of the household. He was afraid of the imperfections that a finished project would reveal - minute wrinkles in the wallpaper, hairline gaps in the skirting board.

Each project was punctuated with bouts of temper and despair when he would throw his tools around and break up the things he had just made.

And Lorna the apprentice, going to the woodyard or the DIY shop and being constantly screamed at for returning with the wrong things.

'I said floor brads, not fucking galvanised nails.'

'They didn't have any. The man in the shop said these would do instead.'

He threw the bag of nails at the wall and they spilled out across the floor falling between the chisels and saws and rolling over into the open spaces where the floorboards had been removed.

'He's a fucking wanker. They won't fucking do. You need proper fucking floor brads.'

'You'd better go and get them yourself.'

His scream became a menacing growl. 'Go and get those fucking floor brads. Now!'

He stamped about in the floored half of the room. His work glasses were flecked with paint and sawdust, his baggy overalls flapped around his thin legs. The nicks and calluses on his fingers as he clenched and unclenched them looked painful and raw.

So I'd go out and scour the district for floor brads.

When I returned he'd be sitting in the kitchen, his rough hands clamped around a mug of tea.

'Come here.'

I'd go over to him, undo some buttons on his overalls and put my cold hand against his skin.

'You're the nicest and most patient person I've ever known. And I love your tits. He kissed them. Let's go and get in the bath.'

Tony's life amounted to habit plus explosions. After he woke, said 'Oh dear', found his glasses and made tea, he would walk up the road for the paper, come back and eat a boiled egg accompanied by two slices of bread and butter and drink a cup of black coffee. He didn't really like it if I did not get up while he was fetching the paper, make his breakfast ready and sit and eat with him. I became almost acclimatised to breakfasts, something I'd rarely experienced before.

He was very particular about his egg, liking the white absolutely firm and the yolk soft. If it wasn't quite right he'd get angry with me, himself or heaven, depending on who he held responsible on that day for his duff egg. 'Bastard thing cracked in the pan didn't it. Fucking God. Why is it my egg that always cracks in the pan?'

My attempts to get everything absolutely right became obsessive. When everything was perfected he'd find a new complaint.

'Can't you get thick cut marmalade, this stuff tastes like slime.'

'I thought you liked thin cut.'

'Just cos you don't eat it you don't care.'

'For God's sake, you know that isn't true.'

'Shut up I'm trying to read the paper.'

After breakfast he'd go off to work on his motor bike. It was all of seven thirty, so I'd go back to bed for an hour's read, get up leisurely, play my guitar, put together a few ideas for a song, maybe do the washing up and potter about the house in my caftan. Other people living the same sort of lives would drop in, or I'd go off to see them. An hour before Tony returned I'd tidy round and have a bath. Tony would get back, exhausted and complaining.

'I had to take down this chimney today. Five stories up we were out on the roof. They gave me the wrong spec so I took down the wrong fucking chimney. Wankers they are, absolute wankers.'

Then he'd start work on the house. I felt my life was wonderful compared to his. He had the same feeling.

'It's all right for you, you don't do a real job.'

I couldn't help agreeing with him. I had a regular gig Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays in a restaurant called the Tudor Room. I supplied the olde English songs, in practice anything from Dowland to Dylan. Most of the customers were American tourists who in those days gave generous tips. I'd make jokes and get the customers to sing along with me. Sunday nights I'd bring home leftover food and wine. I earned three times as much as Tony did planing, sawing and swearing from eight to five.

'I've been humping bags of cement on and off lorries all day today. I'm knackered. Dust gets in your lungs.'

'Why on earth don't you pack it in? There's no need for you to do it. You could do a course. Get into something else. Or work for yourself. A good free lance carpenter will always find work.'

'I know. I haven't got the confidence that's the trouble.'

Sometimes a leftover from my day life would flow over into Tony's evening habit. He'd slam his helmet on the table and sigh.

'I suppose I'd better make the tea myself, no other bugger's going to.'

The visitor would hastily put his guitar into its case and say he'd better be going. Tony especially disliked male folksingers. Not only did he worry about their importance in my life, he also feared they might have screwed Clara and sometimes actually consulted his list to see if my visitor's name was on it.

'Can't you get rid of these wankers before I get home.' He'd kiss me. 'I like it best when we're on our own. Ruining my sex life having all these people round the house.'

A loving fuck cancels out six months of hell. It takes a great deal more of hell to cancel out the fucking. Such are the quantum mathematics of the heart. 'Come on let's go to bed.' And in bed he had the power and skill to enjoy, to please, to create. And to destroy.

'I'll bet you've never done that with anybody before. Better not have done.'

'I don't think so.'

'I'd like to strangle you sometimes for all those other guys you've had.'

'I haven't had that many.'

'You shouldn't have had any. I should bloody well strangle you, that's what'

His voice became vicious and he leaned across and put his hands round my throat.

'Stop it Tony, you're frightening me.' I put my hands up and loosened his grip.

'I should bloody well strangle you. Fucking cow.'

Stop it. Stop talking to me like that. You're a bastard.

He gave a wordless growl, 'I will strangle you one day,' and turned away from me and began to sob. I eased off the bed and ran out of the room. I went into the back bedroom, closed the door, rocked the rickety chest of drawers against it and climbed between the cold, slightly damp sheets on the single bed.

His egg was perfectly cooked next morning. As he was eating it I said, 'We can't go on like this.'

'I know.'

'Maybe it's the job. Why don't you give up that stupid job. Take a rest.'

'Maybe I will.'

But I never could persuade him to give up the job. Then one day, when our relationship was already twisted by tantrums and threats, when Thatcher was already riding her South Atlantic wave, a victorious destroyer, the job gave him up.

This tip of a council flat may be good enough for me but it is quite unacceptable to Oscar. I stood in the doorway of the bathroom. It's one of those minute spaces which just accommodate a bath, a basin and a lavatory leaving very little room for the user. My head comes dangerously close to the ceiling of this bathroom and when I sit on the lavatory my buttocks are squeezed securely between the side of the bath and the wall while my knees push against the pipes which flake crazily under the basin.

There is a small window above the lavatory with a ventilator in it, now a wattle of cobwebs on which a combination of grease, dust and condensation has daubed itself. Embalmed in this furry, grey, textured paste are several large dead spiders, their legs bent in towards their bodies. The window, thickly coated with a similar emulsion, emits a few faint particles of light. I describe the bathroom mostly from memory for some time ago, maybe years, the bathroom light bulb went, speedily followed by the hall light bulb. The bathroom, even in daytime, is illumined mainly by borrowed beams from the living room where there is a somewhat larger but similarly curtained window. There is some merit in the arrangement. It softens the truth about the state of the bath, the basin and (Oh horrors!) the lavatory, and enables me to take a bath invisibly in comforting murkiness.

Now Oscar told me, You must go to the shop and buy some light bulbs.

It was Saturday, I put on my tattered grey y-fronts, a pair of second-hand English jeans, a shirt with a black line along the neck and my food spotted pullover, which reaches down to the middle of my chest leaving two straining shirt buttons exposed below it. I completed the outfit with my indescribable trainers (I've run out of socks) and ventured out onto the

walkway. The coast was clear as it was only ten in the morning. Oscar noted my appearance but said nothing.

The nearest shop is three walkways down in a sort of first floor outdoor square that was created when the estate was built, doubtless with the idea of generating a sense of community. The community, such as it is, doesn't seem to have warmed to this premeditated arrangement and only the one corner shop remains, unless you call the bookmaker's a shop. The rest of the square consists of chipboarded facades decorated with fanciful graffiti and covered with fly posters. The corner shop itself is girded with steel mesh. There was a time when it was also a sub-post office, but several raids on the counter at gun point and certain irregularities in the accounts have caused the Royal Mail to withdraw the facility. Now you can get your Sun there, fags of course, Wonderloaves, tins of dog food, budgie seeds, long life milk, a selection of packeted snacks calculated to dog both gut and taste buds, bottles of biliously coloured fizzy drinks and a few other household necessities.

I unearthed two 40 watt clear bulbs from behind a pile of soft porn videos and paid for them, stammering a greeting to the youth behind the counter, who, immersed as he was in the football results on the portable TV at his side, accepted the money without appearing to notice my patronage. I returned hastily to the flat, double locking the door behind me.

In the gloom I felt around for the old bulb, rough with fly dirt, eased it out of the stiff greased-up socket and replaced it with the new one. The bathroom instantly flooded with light as I had forgotten to turn off the switch.

Oscar was deeply disapproving of the scene so suddenly exposed to his critical gaze.

Do I know how to clean the bathroom? At the home you were disciplined if you failed to remove your body scum from the bath, and ever-fearful of punishment, I had learned to do this. So I do know. Delving back for the information is painful though. It involves remembering the day that Alan Sharp and Harry Bosmore burst in as I was nakedly bending over to clean the bath - no locks permitted of course - and...and...it is not something I care to talk about.

Oscar was brisk. So two delinquent children held you over the bath and looked up your bum. It wasn't your fault. And you still have a bum. (By God do you have a bum!) To clean the bath you have to go back to the shop and buy Ajax, a cloth, and probably a scraper.

I fitted the second bulb into the hall socket, this time remembering the switch, and set off again to the shop.

It took a week of after work effort to clean the bathroom, and I lost all my appetite for food during the cleaning period. It is now like a little white porcelain palace in the middle of a squalid slum area - I refer to the rest of the flat, which has received no attention as yet. I've taken to sitting in the bathroom most of the time, reading, talking to myself, and even bathing. I fit more comfortably between the bath and the wall now. Is it the layers of dirt I've removed, or have I lost a little weight ?

Like I said I ain't slept good last night so I ain't got up today. It's Saturday. Mum's gone work, Elton's gone football and my sister's round nan's. I ain't answering the door, but as it goes the bell ain't rang.

I got the book out and looked at it again but I still ain't made out much. I come to one page and I see the word 'Peckham' at the bottom of the page with this other word in front - 'O s c a r.' Course 'car' I can read - you got to innit...but 'O S car'? Maybe it's a garage round here. Nah, I know em all. I put my Garage on the Walkman but it ain't helped. I couldn't stop thinking about the Jays. The Jays is finished man, that's all you can say. Now what? Tell truth I didn't want to think about Arnie or John, and I ain't felt that great about Junior neither cos I shouldn't have left him, know what I mean. The bell went and the dogs started barking like it was a social worker or a gavver so I kept away from the window didn't I. But it was only the pools man bringing Elton's coupon. He live here now or what?'