



# Mark's Shorts 2024

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Stella, our regular creative writing tutor, took an early break in the summer term for a well deserved cruise in the sun. We fellow classmates were bereft. Fortunately one of us, film maker Mark, stepped up and offered to chair proceedings and dream up the magic word for us to write on each week and then read out. We met in the vegetarian cafe of the Guildford Institute. It all went very well, with some great writing (and some hilarious performances). Thanks Mark. My results, nine very short pieces, some 10,000 or so words in all, are below.

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## Cappuccino

Sally Riley, thirty-two, single and quite presentable, sat at her usual table in her usual cafe, with her usual cappuccino, at her usual time, on her usual day. She was waiting for her usual monthly meetup session with her usual buddy Philip. They had been meeting like this, occasionally going out on a date, for over a year. Today things were pretty much as usual. Except for one thing. Charlie Munger was dead.

Philip came and sat down. He too had a coffee on his tray, together with two calorific Danish pastries. Sal could see why he was getting fat. 'Morning Sal, my darling, how're things with you?'

'I'm good thanks. You?'

'Yep. Just got a new client from my partner. All about offshore trust funds. Happy days.' Philip was a solicitor, as was Sally, though in a different firm. Sally groaned in sympathy. She knew all about trust funds. She found these meetings useful as she gained information about business trends in the local solicitor market. She knew Philip felt the same way. Maybe their relationship would develop further one day. Probably not if he carried on eating pairs of Danish pastries mid-morning.

'You poor thing. They seem to dump the tough stuff on you all the time. Perhaps they are trying to send you a message. You should come and check out my firm.' Her firm specialised in family law and handled many divorces.

'Well I'm inclined to think I'll never make partner with this lot, so maybe I should. But I'm pretty comfortable. I think the firm will see me out in my career till I retire.'

'But you're only forty Phil. Bit young to put a cap on your career don't you think.'

'Depends what one wants out of life. I'm a big fan of security and an easy life. This lot let me go home at 6 and no weekends.' Sally knew Phil well. She had been sizing him up as a

possible husband for several months now. He was rather dull. And probably doomed to become overweight, though very good company. She herself was more of a striver and a worrier. She was probably doomed to become scrawny as she grew older. Well they could make an odd couple.

She said, 'Charlie Munger died today. At ninety nine. Just didn't make it to one hundred. I heard it on the news.'

'Who's he?'

'He was a partner of Warren Buffett. Surely you've heard of him. Perhaps the third richest man in the world.'

'Oh right'. Phil had heard of Buffett, the 'sage of Omaha' and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, a monster successful investment company.

'Charlie was a bit of a hero of mine. He had a fund of terrible jokes. He would say of someone with a headful of muddled thinking, 'He's like a one legged man in an arse kicking contest'. Phil laughed, spluttering into his coffee, as she knew he would.

He said, 'I remember him now. Munger. He started out as a lawyer didn't he? Always on Youtube at the Berkshire annual event, drinking coke and stuffing his face with what the Americans call candy. Good advertising for those two companies wasn't it? Of course he owned a large chunk of their shares. Used to go on about being reliable and not working with people you didn't like. Maybe a message for me there'.

'Indeed', said Sally. She was quiet for a moment. The cafe was not busy. Outside it was gently raining. Phil had got his clothes slightly wet and was moving his arms and flapping his jacket to get them a bit drier. She decided she did like him. Maybe she loved him.

She went on, 'I came across Charlie Munger because my father left me one share in Berkshire Hathaway that he had bought years ago when the firm started. It is making a huge

profit, thousands of percent up, but Dad told me never to sell it. I'm still sitting on it. I made a study of Charlie Munger's psychological tricks, the ones used by magicians, salesman, con men - and, wouldn't you know it, politicians. He set out twenty five rules classifying them. I found them very useful in my business. People going through a divorce, and of course their lawyers, unconsciously use them all the time. Usually several psychological tricks at once. In my notes I write down the rule numbers they are using... Perhaps I should sell my Berkshire share and buy a house. What do you think?'

'One share is enough to buy a house?'

'Oh yes. And to buy some furniture. And say goodbye to my little rented flat. Whose landlord has just pushed up the rent once again.'

Now Phil was quiet for a moment. Sally looked at him and took a sip of her coffee as he thought. What was he pondering? Something deep it seemed. His brows furrowed. He actually looked quite handsome when he was serious.

'I've been thinking about buying a house myself ', he said. 'Silly to go through life paying some bloke rent and getting nothing back for it. I should have bought one years ago. They were too expensive then and they are too expensive now but one has to bite the bullet methinks.'

'Good on you Phil', Sal said. 'Bite that bullet. You're not a Muslim or a Hindu or a Jew are you. Bullet biting should have no fear for you'. Phil looked baffled for a moment. Then he laughed as he caught her jokingly obscure reference to the Sepoy mutiny in the British Imperial Indian Army, popularised by the Rudyard Kipling novel, when, upon the introduction of a new grease for the cartridge bullets for their rifles, which had to be pulled open by the teeth, the Muslim soldiers feared it was pig fat and the Hindus thought it was cow fat and both revolted.

Sal beamed as he laughed. They did get on very well she thought. Their intellects meshed. She made a decision, long delayed but now definite. A girl could not wait forever. He would be the one. She would have to get him to propose. She thought of psychological trick number twenty two.

She reached under the table and placed her hand on his thigh. His eyebrows rose up but he did not pull away. Then she reached higher and grasped his genitals firmly through his trousers. Higher still went the eyebrows but still no withdrawal. More massage. He was clearly aroused. She smiled. He smiled.

'Well?', she said.

'Well what?

'What about a joint venture? We could get married and buy a house together'.

Silence from Phil. More massage. Still no withdrawal. He was now rather pink in the face.

Finally his brain emerged above the hormonal fuzz and the penny dropped. He said, 'Oh God, will you marry me then?'

'Yes', she said, 'Of course I will you dope. I've been waiting for you to ask'.

She looked down at his coffee cup. He was drinking a flat white with coloured speckles. Oh well, she thought, nobody's perfect.

## Whispers

Fate, and the cool uncaring indifference of particular proteins, those responsible for the shuffling recombination of the cards of her mother's and father's genes, gave Janet a bad hand in the looks department. She was short and thin. No bosoms or hips to speak of. She did have large lustrous grey eyes which occasionally attracted the gaze of a young man or two. Her politics were unconventional: left wing on matters of taxation, right wing on matters of state ownership and education; she was difficult to pigeonhole. She was particularly patriotic, which was why she was very happy in her career as one of the many thousands of individuals who worked at GCHQ, the UK's secret intelligence agency.

GCHQ, founded in 1919, served as the listening and decryption post for the government, spying on foreign governments and armed forces and endeavouring to keep British communications safe. The agency had had spectacular success, with the help of the Poles, in breaking the Nazi Enigma code in World War Two, which many believed had shortened the war by two years. The profound secrecy in which the success had been held had prevented general knowledge of the event for decades, but news had belatedly trickled out to the young Janet at school, and inspired her in her career choice.

She hero-worshipped Alan Turing, one of the main Enigma code breakers and a pioneer of computer programming and AI, and detested the way he had been treated by the authorities after the war, stripped of his security clearance because he was a homosexual and chemically castrated, so that he committed suicide by eating an apple laced with cyanide. What she particularly found obnoxious was the contrast between his treatment as a patriotic Englishman and that of the other homosexuals, Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess and others, who were indeed spies for Russia.

Right now Janet had her eye on a chap who she felt might, just possibly, in some shape or form, be a spy. A real spy - here in GCHQ itself. It didn't bear thinking about did it. She came across him each day in the canteen, here in the new Doughnut Building in Cheltenham. His name was Jason Wells. He liked to talk to her at lunch, ostensibly because they were both fans of modern classical music. This made sense. There were so few fans of this esoteric genre that one treasured the appearance of a fellow enthusiast. They discussed Schoenberg, Webern and the like; even John Adams. None of their lunch neighbours ever joined in, preferring to talk excitedly about the chances of Manchester City for the Cup.

She didn't think he was homosexual, but who was to tell. She quite liked him; he was rather handsome, with dark brown eyes, brown hair and a chunky build. Perhaps he looked a little like Alan Turing himself. He didn't seem to be attracted to her in any way, other than as a musical companion, but she was used to not being attractive to the opposite sex. She worked, as he did, as a computer programmer. She was not comfortable with the way he kept asking questions about her side of the work.

She was working at the moment on surveilling Russian businessmen suspected of organising sanctions busting on oil sales. The sanctions had been imposed after the attack on Ukraine. She had programmed a little code animal that could worm its way inside their mobile phones and tell her all. What she had learned, and immediately passed on to her superiors, was hair raising. Clearly the sanctions were all but useless. For this effort she had received a promotion and commendation.

She was very ambitious. GCHQ had recently appointed its first female head. Perhaps one day she could be another. But not if a spy were discovered in her vicinity. Perhaps even if the spy were discovered by her. Rather a large quandary.

She had little confidence in the competence of her superiors, or indeed of their superiors up to the top levels of government. They seemed to lack basic common sense and



will power. If it were up to her she would fix the sanctions busting people by infiltrating a few pieces of traitor mimicking code in their phones. This would disrupt the entire network as they flailed about looking for the human traitor. She had suggested this but her suggestion went nowhere. Sometimes she wondered if her superiors all worked for Amnesty International, which in her opinion had been deeply infiltrated by Chinese agents.

'Hello Jason', she said at lunch as he sat down. 'How're you today?' She was on her pudding. Jam roly-poly and custard. Enough calories for a route march. Clearly the head chef had been trained in the army.

'I'm not happy', he said. 'My boss hates me. I was going to ask you for a little help. If you have time.' He lowered his voice and whispered. 'Look at this.' He furtively showed her a page of paper with faint markings on it. She knew what it was. The powers that be tried to prevent copies of the computer code from leaving the secure environment by banning copying code onto flash drive sticks, and banning mobile phones that could photograph screen shots. A waste of time. The ingenious copier just held up a bit of light sensitive paper to the computer screen and made a dim but readable copy of the code that way. She herself had never so brazenly defied the rules.

She felt she should immediately denounce him to the authorities, but her curiosity (and her desire to impress him) made her peruse the code imprinted faintly on the piece of paper. 'It looks like a bog standard piece of HTML for a boring website. What do you want me to see here?'

'Look at the Javascript there'. She looked and saw it. A tiny bit of code that showed a typical weakness of these coding methods. Anybody could gain control of this website if they knew the location of that piece of code.

'God yes. Why do people use bloody Javascript? It's so easy to compromise'.

'What should I do about it? If I report it then I get the blame for missing it before it went live. If I don't I leave the open door lying there. It's from an RAF app at Coningsbury. Used to direct the Typhoons tracking the Russians.'

'You've no option. You must report it. If you don't then I will'. She was clear. His duty was to report it and take the flak.

'You're right. I'll do it. You may not see me around here again. They'll move me on. Maybe into Wormwood Scrubs for a six month spell'. He got up from the table and looked at her searchingly. 'Goodbye Janet'.

She watched him walk off and then sat and let her lunch start to digest. Poor Jason. What a fool. She would miss him.

A week went by. Indeed he had vanished.

Her basic nature made her double check. She approached the authorities. In this case a middle aged and rather overweight person in one section of Human Resources which everybody knew was really security. She had requested an interview. She entered the little office.

'So what do you want to see me about?'

'Has Jason Wells reported a security breach on the RAF app at Coningsby?'

'How do you know of the breach?;'

'He showed me an illegal copy of the code. He said he would report the breach. I'm just checking that he did what he said he would do.'

'Leave it with me. I'll be in touch'.

Janet left it. She felt bad about snitching but good about doing her little bit to protect the country she loved.

A week later she was summoned by the Human Resources section head. He had with him an older, thin faced woman. She smiled at Janet.

'Do sit down dear. We want to commend you for your coming forward. We also want to promote you. Again - yes again. You have a bright future here in GCHQ. You may meet your friend Jason again. Please forget everything about your previous encounter with him. He works for my outfit in security. Checking out potential spies - and potential high fliers. We like your idea of traitor mimicking code infiltration. Get the buggers distrusting their friends. We want you to work on it and see if it might work.'

Janet was overwhelmed. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she resisted her body's urge to cry. It seemed that her beloved country was not ruled entirely by idiots. She laughed aloud. The older woman joined in. Two girls giggling together. After a while even the man joined in.

## **Tragedy**

The summer sun had heated up the little theatre. The staff had flung open the big doors to the outside in an attempt to cool the spaces inside. As evening came down the temperature did drop a little. The performers managed to keep reasonably cool as they prepared for that evening's production of 'Peter Grimes', the opera that had made Benjamin Britten world famous on its debut in London at the end of the war. Now, eighty years later, the Portglade and District Amateur Opera Company was putting on its own performance. This was the opening night. The orchestra musicians were arriving and lugging their instruments into the little pit. The percussion section, double bass and harp, having left their instruments in a locked room since the dress rehearsal the previous night, were grateful that they at least did not have to lug stuff from the carpark up the road. The audience was assembling in the bar for the odd gin and tonic and drifting into the theatre.

In the men's dressing room Peter Grimes himself, played by Jimmy Cuthbert, a good looking young tenor who surely had a bright future, was putting on his costume and makeup. He was even getting paid, the cash disguised as 'expenses'; the only one in this amateur company who was, except for the orchestra musicians, all professionals who wouldn't work unless they received money. The dress rehearsal had gone well and he was confident and enjoyably nervous. He made an effort to get into character, trying to ignore the rowdy gentlemen of the chorus telling jokes, eating the chocolates provided by the company Chairperson and generally having a good time. Grimes was a miserable old sod of a fisherman, poor, unhappy and a sadistic thug of a tyrant to his wretched boy apprentices, who had an unfortunate habit of dying at sea in his boat. At music college Jimmy had been taught that a tragedy was a play about suffering with a sad end. The opera was certainly that. Poor old Peter Grimes commits suicide in the end by drowning himself in his boat.

Jimmy looked at himself in his mirror, adjusting the stick-on grey beard the director had told him would disguise his inappropriate pretty youthfulness and pondered his future. If he got a professional job with Glyndebourne or the Royal Opera he would be assigned a role in the chorus. It might be many years before he even got close to playing a great solo role like Grimes again. Best to enjoy it now and perhaps become an accountant for a day job as his mother kept advising.

In the ladies dressing room his fellow lead Ellen Orford sat before her mirror. She was being played by soprano Joan Rigby. Joan was older than Jimmy. She was a tall and beautiful divorcee in her mid forties, a singing teacher at a posh private girls school. She was also taller than Jimmy, but the two managed. In their love scenes staged by the director there was no touching. They just sang at each other from opposite sides of the stage. So that was all right. But the two had become good friends and often went for a drink together after a rehearsal. She would be sad when the show ended. Just now she was sad about something else. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer a few months previously. She wore a silk scarf around her neck to disguise the scars of her operation. She had kept her condition a secret. Jimmy knew nothing about it.

Her oncology consultant had said it was fine for her to carry on performing. Hopefully the meds she was now taking would slow down the progression for a while. But the prognosis was bad - she was heading for death in a few months. The meds had the unfortunate effect of making her feel sick, but she girded her loins and prepared to sing her heart out. Perhaps this would be the last time.

The pair came out of the dressing rooms with the chorus and made their way down to the wings as the opera started. Joan gently whispered, 'Toi toi' to Jimmy; the traditional greeting opera singers give to their fellows about to enter the gladiatorial arena of the stage.

Jimmy smiled back at her, then dropping the smile, entered into Grimes's surly and unpleasant character and went onstage.

Grimes confesses, before the judge in the little village courtroom, the apparently accidental death of his wretched apprentice. Then the eerie music of the 'Dawn' sea interlude sets the tone of weirdness. The cold, grey, spindrift flecked waves of the North Sea brought to life by the rippling white note arpeggios of a solo flute. Then the storm and the pub scene. Jimmy gave his all to the aria, 'By the Great Bear and the Pleiades', putting his own stamp on the character. He succeeded in creating sympathy and pathos for Grimes, varying the colours of his voice through the often unvarying notes of Britten's music, yet retaining the essential ugliness of Grimes's soul. The audience got the message. The work of at least three artists, composer, librettist and singer, not to mention all the others, from conductor to costume lady. The listeners loved it and showed their appreciation by standing, stamping and shouting their bravos. Jimmy was very pleased. Then he resumed his scowl for the rest of the opera.

In Act Three it was time for Ellen Orford's great and difficult aria, a masterpiece of musical, lyrical and dramatic construction. She has found a boy's jersey on the beach. She recognises on it her own embroidery. She had sewn it to try and bring some small shred of beauty into the life of Grime's apprentice. It is without doubt the jersey of the wretched child. Now presumably dead.

She sings, 'Embroidery in childhood was a luxury of idleness, A coil of silken thread giving dreams of a silk and satin life, Now my broidery affords the clue whose meaning we avoid!'

As she sings her mind splits into three, the first part focussing on technique. The aria is notoriously hard. Britten has written sparse, percussive chords as accompaniment. The singer has little help with the correct notes but must produce them largely from memory.

Most singers manage this, not that most audiences would notice much if the singer was slightly sharp on an odd note.

The second part of her brain focusses on acting, She knows she needs to convey the tragedy of the discovery of the child's death. She feels this deeply. Somehow tears drop from her eyes and run down her cheeks. Somehow her voice is not affected.

The third part of her brain considers her own situation. She is gloriously happy, singing at the top of her game one of the supreme musical masterpieces of the operatic literature to a very appreciative audience. A chance offered to few people. She gives thanks to her maker for her good fortune, her voice, her artistry, her life to date. Soon to be cut short.

She holds it together until the final sung note. The word 'Avoid' is set very low. It breaks her. She gasps out the word and falls to the ground sobbing violently. This is not how the director set it. But oddly it works perfectly for the drama. The audience are again on their feet applauding enthusiastically.

In the wings Jimmy is watching delightedly. She is the star of the show but he is happy for her. In the bar afterwards she will have to tell him.

## **Baltic**

Balkan - no not Balkan, Baltic. Easily confused those two words. Near homophones in sound they conjure up similar sets of images. In each case the word conjures up a higgledy-piggledy and fractured group of small, far away geographical entities that have a powerful shared culture, a strong group identity, but remain proudly separate nations. Just how do they sit geographically? All long time vassals of the Imperialists who created the Russian Empire. What are the languages spoken there? Leave aside the Balkans. What about the Baltics?

Three countries, three languages. Mutually unintelligible. What about the one in the middle; Latvia?

Ah Latvia. Why do I pick this one out? Well I know, or rather knew, because he is dead now, a Latvian. At one time, for a year or two, he was one of my best friends. Alf Vanags. Alf was the leader of a four person group of friends with a common interest, perhaps more of a devouring passion, for Economics. This enthusiasm was perhaps understandable. We were fellow students in the Economics department of University College London.

Good old UCL, the place with the stuffed body of the early nineteenth century philosopher Jeremy Bentham in a glass case in the hall. The first among British universities in allowing admission of various undesirables: women, Jews and the like. Jeremy Bentham, as well as being an early opponent of slavery and imperialism, and much against causing pain to animals, thought that the prime object of politics should be 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', a belief that to this day earns him opprobrium from philosophers.

Our fellow students in the department seemed to have little interest in the tricky and seemingly incomprehensible subject of Economic Theory. This was but a part of the degree course, the rest being Political Theory, Economic History, European History, Statistics and so on. They didn't want to talk about Economic Theory over coffee in the students refectory. So



Alf, Dave, Wouter and I formed our own little group and chuntered on about demand curves, liquidity functions, velocity of circulation and the like. This was the early sixties. Milton Friedman's monetarism was the latest fashion at the time, over from the USA. The official syllabus had not yet noticed. It was strictly Keynesian. We students were possessed of new knowledge and were largely teaching ourselves. In a few decades the revolution would penetrate the Establishment and several politicians became at least partly converted. To this day Friedman's belief that 'inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon' flickers dimly in the minds of politicians. One notices that the recent eleven percent inflation did not bring out a universal cry for a wage and price freeze, which would certainly have been the case in the sixties and seventies. Even the Governor of the Bank of England finally worked it out, put up interest rates and lo the inflation dropped back to three percent. Something to do with printing vast amounts of money in the form of 'quantitative easing' methinks. Alf would have understood.

We four enjoyed smoking rollup cigarettes. The link with smoking and cancer, rather like the link between money and inflation had not yet penetrated our brains. Rizla cigarette papers, packets of tobacco that Wouter brought over from Holland and much fussing about rolling and lighting the things.

Three of us had funny surnames. We didn't find Vanags especially remarkable. I thought he was English. Well he was. I knew he came from Milford on the South Coast.

Alf was perhaps the cleverest of us. He was the only one to get a first. That in the days before grade inflation. We lost touch after graduation. Sixty years went by.

Then one day. Blow me down. There was his voice on Youtube. Unmistakable in phrasing, cadence and timbre, each phrase considered slowly and then gently and logically produced, often with a slight laugh, the conclusion unanswerable. A voice from sixty years ago. A great pleasure to hear it again.

I looked at the image. I did not recognise him until I looked closer. This fellow was old. That was not surprising. He was fat. Well that happens, though I would not have predicted it for him. But the voice was unmistakable. It could be no other.

Alas he was dead. The video was part of an obituary. So long Alf. I was honoured to know you. You were a great man. I looked up more stuff online to see what he had been up to all these years. I watched all the videos of interviews he had given in recent years, mainly to hear more of that delightful voice that haunted me. His mind was exactly the same.

Intellectual haute cuisine. I longed to jump in and challenge his conclusions, as had been my long ago habit.

He had apparently emigrated to England as a little boy of two, from Latvia. Then, after a career as a lecturer in English universities, had returned to Latvia to head up The Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy Studies in Riga and be one of the founding editors of the Baltic Journal of Economics. Well done Alf.

See - these things were all Baltic - not Latvian, Lithuanian or Estonian. The group had a presence.

All this was in English. I wondered how Alf had got on in Latvian. Had he learned it afresh or kept it up at home as a child? I looked it up on Wikipedia, home of all knowledge. Latvian has seven noun cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, locative, vocative; six declensions, eight inflectional types. Golly! What a nightmare to learn. But of course all Latvians, especially the young, speak English. They used to speak Russian, but that language is now a minority sport, save among the large contingent of Russians settled in Latvia by Stalin and subsequent despots. Latvians can use English as a lingua franca to talk to their fellow Baltics (and the rest of the world). Alf will have had no trouble making himself understood.

Latvia is an interesting example of nationhood. What is it that makes a nation? Latvians are just a million or so people, conquered by everybody over the centuries. No great literature. They do have a language and a flag (which dates from 1279), a tradition of folk singing and costume and one large city in Riga, wherein lives much of the population. It seems this has been enough. No doubt Alf was pleased to become a big fish in a small Economics pond when he went to Latvia, but, looking at his smiling face on the videos, I see more. I see someone happy to be with his family. I suppose this is how one feels in a nation. One enjoys the sense of belonging and works to preserve the family. Perhaps Alf also felt some kinship with the other Baltics.

When I was a boy my nation was England. It had its own language, a flag, dating from 1348 perhaps, with the foundation of the Order of the Garter. England has a wonderful literature and a music tradition of sorts. I felt at home in my family, boring though it was at times. Now I am not so sure what I belong to. Perhaps a new nation is being born. The language is an overwhelming melange of dialects: I take great pleasure in being able to imitate them all, albeit badly. The Indian 'V' that comes out like a 'W', the Chinese omission of final consonants, the African emphatic vowel tones and fronted consonants. Our uneasy flag is the Union Jack. I was delighted when I saw a television broadcast from Lancashire, with African English children and Indian English children conversing in a thick and entirely correct Lancashire accent.

The Americans call us Brits. Perhaps I am a Brit.

### **Mission**

The wind was brisk and the sea choppy as the flood tide rolled in to the beach at five o'clock in the morning. A fine day for a sail thought the fine young fellow, as he watched his comrades being sick over the rail. They had been bobbing about since yesterday night when they began their Channel crossing in large ships, but the last few hours were the worst. They had climbed down rope ladders to their landing craft in the night and headed for shore. The landing craft sailed like pigs, rolling and bucking in the swell, rendering most of the group, tough chaps though they were, nauseous and vomiting.

This was one thirty man troop from the four hundred soldiers of 47 Royal Marine Commando heading into battle on 6th June 1944. Captain John Smithson, the fine young fellow, commanding the troop.

The Captain looked about him at the awesome sight of the mighty invasion fleet. Hundreds of ships of all sizes crowded in the water. Close on starboard the great grey bulks of the Royal Navy cruisers Ajax and Argonaut sat low in the water. Blinding flashes at short intervals as they fired their big guns ripple fashion at the concrete pillboxes wherein lay the gun batteries defending the shore. Smoke arose thousands of feet in the air from the results of the bombardment.

'Come on Sergeant, get your head up and look at all this. Stick it in your memory. You won't see its like again.'

'No Sir', said Sergeant Roberts. 'I bloody hope not'.

Roberts may have been referring to the bodies floating in the water. Sodden brown bags oozing dark red blood. There were dozens of them. Several landing craft ahead of them had been hit by fire from the shore batteries or blown up by mines.

The beach was approaching as they wallowed towards it. Captain Smithson looked over the bow forward to the tangled confusion of defensive structures that were in their way.

Wrapped in barbed wire and tipped with mines. OK, first objective, get to the beach without the landing craft being hit by a shell or a mine. Second objective, get him and his men off the landing craft without drowning in deep water should they step into a hidden gully, no hope of swimming carrying their heavy packs loaded with ammunition. Third objective, get up the shingle beach to cover under the cliffs without getting shot or blown up. Then worry about the next objective, whatever that was. First things first.

The landing craft shuddered as it beached. Good. The front of the craft opened up and came down with a rattle of chains and a splash. Smithson's thirty men slipped down the ramp and into the water, only up to their necks thank God, and struggled to the beach as he followed behind. All held their weapons up high, hoping to keep them ready to fire in short order. Each rifle with a stores issued condom over the barrel to prevent the entry of water. Unfortunately a German machine gunner firing from a pillbox immediately found their range and began firing.

Six men dropped, five of them silent, dead or unconscious, one began screaming in pain. Don't stop for the wounded. A strict instruction from on high. They would be left to get to the shore by themselves or drown.

Third objective - up the shingle. Was this a passage through the wire?

'You three - covering fire the pillbox at nine o'clock, three hundred yards! The rest leg it up the beach! At the double!' Smithson's voice was loud and confident over the noise of the wind and the constant gunfire and explosions. The command to double was entirely unnecessary, as he well knew. The men were already moving as fast as humanly possible, struggling and staggering over the shingle with their heavy loads, but it helped to bring to mind the arduous training they had undergone, with lots of shouting 'At the double!' The three marines knelt and fired at the machine gunner, who decided to leave off for a bit. Perhaps he was hit.

They reached the cliffs and crouched down in a shell crater fresh dug from the bombardment. Briefly safe from the machine gunner. Third objective attained. Now what?

Use your initiative. Probably a good idea to take out the pillbox. Save the remainder of 47 commando the same experience as they followed behind.

'C and D sections with me. We will climb halfway up the cliff slope and then fire on the pillbox. Sarn't Roberts - take A and B sections, while we keep their heads down you will climb up the cliff and take out that pillbox.'

Up went Robert's section while Smithson's section emptied their magazines on the pillbox, crawled closer and threw grenades. When Roberts and his men reached the pillbox it was short work to drop grenades through the gun slits and kill all those inside. Roberts made sure by entering the pillbox and spraying around with his sten gun.

Captain Smithson tried the radio to contact the Colonel. No joy. The bloody things never worked when you wanted them to. Sea water didn't help much. He looked back at the beach. Many landing craft now discharging their load of marines, the men struggling ashore and up the beach still taking fire from a pillbox to the West. Next objective. He recalled the briefing from the Colonel.

'Our mission is to take the small port of Bassin to the West of our landing site. That is where the petrol pipeline will come ashore. Rendezvous and regroup at the top of the cliffs'.

Captain Smithson's soaking wet socks and trousers impinged on his consciousness. Never mind: the day was warming up. In time he hoped they would dry out. In the meantime he felt he should use a little more of his initiative and take out the second pillbox.

'Sarn't Roberts! You will stay here with A and B sections to await the Colonel. C and D sections with me. We will take out that pillbox at three o'clock from the rear. Covering fire Roberts!'

Smithson and his men ran crouching towards the rear of the pillbox, then attacked. Phosphorus grenades through the bunker slits took care of the occupants. Job done. It was still only ten o'clock. The long day not yet over.

47 Commando, now much depleted in strength, regrouped and set off for Port Bessin, killing Germans along the way, sleeping on the ground that night and attacking the port in the morning. By nightfall on the 8th June, yet more depleted, outnumbered four to one by Germans but aided by naval gunfire, they had taken the port. Mission accomplished.

Roberts went on to fight through France and Germany to the end of the war. Captain Smithson was killed on the 8th June.

## Embarrassment

I rootle in the dusty chambers of my brain,  
 Seeking embarrassments from out of my past.  
 Through cerebral spiders webs that cling,  
 Caress, and stick to lips, nose and chin.  
 Through old memories stacked dustily in piles,  
 To find two lumps of burning red shame,  
 Two chiding coals of dull radiation.

I see the callow management trainee, relaxed  
 With all his fellows on a coach, to  
 Visit that day's fascinating factory.  
 They laugh at the crass and pompous ass  
 When he denies one of Natures basic facts, convinced  
 A run of heads will make a tail next toss.  
 And willing to bet with his cash on those odds.

Unlike my brain, a penny has no memory.  
 It can not know of previous heads and tails.  
 A bloody obvious fact, put like that,  
 No way for the past to affect the present state.  
 Some time later truth dawns like the sun.  
 Oh the enveloping shame of revealed stupidity.  
 So easy to be stupid, one blushes to one's bones.

I see the cocky boy of seven or eight  
 And recall the grey and hot asphalt where we came,  
 Scruffy boys in our school play ground,  
 And argued over how to say a name.  
 The cocky one was convinced he was right.

The name was that of a Red Indian tribe,



Famous for killing Custer at the Big Horn ,who  
Have a name spelled S- I- O -U- X.  
Their name is from the French, it rhymes with roux  
And not as one might think with fix.

The cocky boy of seven or eight knew otherwise.  
He knew and was convinced that he was right.  
His little mates, usually submissive and withdrawn,  
Would not let this go and held their ground.  
He argued on - a passionate battle of wills.

Truth at last bloomed bright in his brain.  
The name, pronounced all wrong was yet correct.  
A dreadful horror spread throughout his veins.  
Sioux rhymes with roux or clue and not with fix.  
The stain of shame enveloped him. It still sticks.

However sure you may be of your fact  
Do not play the Lord High Autodidact.  
For the avoidance of future embarrassment  
Use a smidgeon of tact.  
It could be that your fact you may need to retract.

## Curiosity

Robert Timmons walked in to the singles bar one evening in Summer. He looked about him. He was on the pull. No single ladies. A pair of lovelies just a few feet down, framing an older man, black hair, goatee beard and pencil moustache, probably dyed. The old chap was solidly focussed on the far woman, ignoring the other one, who was looking lovelier by the minute. Robert ordered a beer and attempted a conversation with her who was neglected.

'This looks like a nice place. It's new to me. What do you think of it?'

She smiled back at him. 'I like it. It's just around the corner from work. Usually a nice crowd'.

Robert took a pull on his drink and said nothing for a moment. Best not to appear too aggressive. Then, sufficient time having passed, he essayed a next step. 'Can I get you a drink. What are you having?'

She smiled again and checking that she was still being ignored by the other two said, 'Thank you. I'll have a Cinzano please.'

Robert liked the please. It showed good breeding.

'What's your work then? Do you enjoy it? I'm in sales, but I get sick of selling. I want to try something new but I don't know what'.

'I work in the Tivoli theatre. Two shows a night. We've just finished up.' She glanced at her companions. Still being ignored. The other two were in a world of their own.

'Oh wow - a thespian. I love the theatre. I'll have to come and see your show. My name's Robert by the way'.

'Carlotta'. She offered her hand and Robert shook it.

'How d'you do'. Robert liked to be polite.

'Do come. It's a great show, though I say it myself. There'll be plenty of tickets. It's been on for six months now and the audience is dwindling. I guess we have another month to run at most.'

'What's your part in the show then?'

'I'm the magician's lovely assistant'. She nudged her companion till he turned round. 'This is Robert. He's going to come and see the show. This is Billy. The Maestro of Magic. And Barbara, the magicians' other lovely assistant.'

A few words were politely exchanged, then the pair resumed their in depth conversation and left Robert and Carlotta alone to continue to get to know each other. Robert fixed a date to see the show the next day and take Carlotta out for a drink afterwards. All very satisfactory.

The next night Robert went to see the show. A string of variety acts. The usual stuff: a proud lesbian comedian making cringeworthy jokes about vaginas, a female pop singer singing low and incomprehensible songs into a booming mic, a trio of dancers turning somersaults while balancing balls in the air with their feet. Then the main act: The Maestro of Magic and his pair of lovely assistants.

The show was superb. The audience gasped at the magic tricks. Robert loved it. The ticket worth every penny of the thirty pounds it had cost him. Billy proved to be a master of his craft. What he did was impossible. Yet somehow he had done it. The lovely assistants were exciting and gorgeous, practically naked in spangly bras and pants and wearing long white boots high on their thighs, they underwent various dangerous indignities in the cause of magic. Huge knives were thrown by Billy alternately at each girl, pinioned to boards, one at each side of the stage, the missiles thunking in and quivering vigorously, very close to vital parts. Carlotta's gorgeous head was held under water by the other girl assistant for what seemed to be minutes while Billy worked some card tricks. The water quite ruined her hairdo;

afterwards her hair remained wet and dripping. She was given a towel which she wrapped around her hair like a turban.

How had Billy done it? Robert was consumed with curiosity. He would ask Carlotta when he met her after the show.

Then the dramatic high point, the sawing the girl in half. A cumbrous apparatus was brought on to the stage and opened up to reveal a wooden cubicle. Carlotta wriggled out of her high white boots, climbed in and lay down, her head in its turban sticking out one end and her bare feet and legs the other. The other assistant brought out a large cross cut saw, the sort used to cut down trees, with a handle at each end. Billy closed the cubicle and inserted the saw in a slot just above where Carlotta's bare belly button, now hidden, was situated.

Then the sawing began. Billy at one end of the saw and the other assistant at the other. Good Lord - real sawdust was flying as they went at it. Richard could hear the rasp as the saw chewed through the wood. He could smell the pungent sawdust as it fell in a heap on the stage, some drifting out over the audience.

Then Carlotta began to scream - a terrified wail of pain that went on and on - then her head fell back - the turban fell off and her long blonde hair hung down. She was dead. The audience gasped. Had the trick failed? Blood poured out of the slot where the saw had cut and fell into a convenient basin below. Billy and the assistant turned and bowed to the audience, who hesitated, then gave a scatter of tentative applause. The show was over. The lights went down and the curtain came in.

Robert was much relieved when he saw the convenient basin. Things must be OK. They could clear up the stage floor from the sawdust afterwards but not a floor stained with blood.

Then the curtain opened again and all three took their bows. Carlotta was miraculously alive and in one piece, though her hair was still wet and she had a bright red

line through her belly that dripped gently with blood down her bare legs. Now the audience was properly relieved. They all applauded vigorously.

Robert hurried to the stage door to wait for Carlotta. The lesbian comedian came out to greet her enthusiastic fans, then the pop singer, who was met by her manager and whisked off in a car. The dancers seemed to have no fans. At least none were there to greet them when they came out. Well they were Moldavians and a long way from home.

Then Billy and his assistants came out. They chatted with Robert for a moment, then the other two left, leaving Carlotta with Robert.

'That was a really great show. You were wonderful. I am very impressed'.

Carlotta smiled. She enjoyed the praise. 'Glad you enjoyed it. I'm working up to be a magician myself. The money is three times better. I've told Billy I won't be around for ever. He says I can't take any of his tricks or he'll sue me'.

'Can we go up to the dressing room and you can show me how the trick was done? Then I'll buy you a fabulous dinner. Avec champagne. I'm dying of curiosity. I saw your feet moving the whole time. It's impossible.'

Carlotta's smile grew even broader. 'I'm starving. A champagne dinner would really hit the spot. Dreadfully sorry but I can't show you the apparatus. Your curiosity will have to remain unsatisfied. My magicians oath says if I did reveal the secret to you then I would have to kill you. And that would be a terrible shame. I'm only just getting to know you.'

### **Angst**

Writing this from beyond the grave, addressing my aging fans, who linger yet in the world of toil and sweat, I hope to be forgiven my new style. Yes it is I, Philip Larkin, Companion of Honour, England's finest post-war poet; also notorious racist, misogynist and general angst ridden curmudgeon. Gone are my limpid phrases, the cunningly wrought metaphors, the elegant paragraphs. Well you try writing after an hour of the hot poker treatment from the glistening grey imps who daily torment me here in the angst block in Hell. What did I do to deserve this for God's sake? Ouch - sorry- I'm sorry. Won't do it again.

Where was I? Oh yes my apology. I was apologising for it not being crafted in my usual near perfect style. Well my style has changed; for the worse I'm sure. Limpid phrases gone down the toilet I'm afraid. I put it down to my losing something. What I am losing - have lost indeed - is my apparent affliction of anxiety, my sad state of mind, my GAD (or generalised anxiety disorder). Among the living in my day a man suffering from those symptoms would often be told by uncaring spectators that what he really needed was a good kick up the arse. The imps down here administer that sort of treatment - and very painful it is. I protest that I do not suffer from the affliction but they point to my poetry as evidence and then persist in the punishment.

I refer of course to the dreadful anxiety of mind that attends the state, of being free to consider, the undefined possibilities of one's life, and the immense responsibility, of having the power of choice over them. That is my angst - a word and definition due to that miserable wretch Kierkegaard. Yes he is here with me in the angst block. Yes he too is a changed man. The hot poker has worked their magic upon him and he is much altered. Looking forward with verve and pleasure to the end of his sentence. The word is that he will soon be completely purged of his misery and will then be sent out again in a new stage of existence, reborn as a bunny rabbit.

So yes, I am losing my angst. I too am becoming a changed man. Probably a good thing, but I fear it does mean I shall be unable to write poetry any more, when I am reborn to undergo the next phase of existence. Probably as an elephant. Roll on Nirvana I say.

But I was a miserable sod wasn't I? Not especially in my personality. Everybody remembers me as invariably polite and courteous. But definitely so in my poetry. How about this little gem.

'Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.'

One of my better ones methinks. Or some of my grumpy sayings, still fondly remembered by my fans. For instance this little humdinger - 'As a child, I thought I hated everybody, but when I grew up I realized it was just children I didn't like.' Or this deeply perceptive aphorism - 'Depression is to me as daffodils were to Wordsworth'.

So no more depression then no more poetry. Think about that.

But what was it that gave me my existential angst? As a child I did have a pronounced stammer and spectacles with thick pebble lenses. The kids at school enjoyed that. My life at school was miserable. My dad was a Nazi sympathizer, even when war came. My mother was a bit weird too. It must be genetics working its effect on me I suppose.

But then I went off to Oxford and got a first in English. My specs stopped me going to war. I got a good job as librarian, wrote two novels, had lots of sex, at times with a trio of besotted women in tow (all the nice girls love a poet), and began the poems that made me famous and rich. Still not happy? Still full of angst?

Well what would you write poems about? They've got to be about something, though that view is contentious among the modernists who prefer their poems to be

incomprehensible and about nothing. Of course I detest modernism. Can't see the attraction. No, it's realism for me. If it be bleak and angst ridden then so be it.

I see that Clive James, one of my fans, and himself a fine poet, a fellow rhymer, says of me 'His career as a poet was a brilliant job of titrating his own propensities', meaning I suppose, that he thinks both me and my poetry are made of the same emotions - probably angst ridden. Clive has recently joined us down here, though he does not appear to be in the angst block himself. Some other sin bin no doubt.

It's true that a poet has to work with what he or she has got. But what Clive, of all people, should have understood, is that it is hard. Oh, of course he does. Bloody hard. One sits for hours. In solitude. One needs solitude. One pens a hemistich. One observes it, rolling it around in the mouth. One considers what might come next. Then one crosses it out. One does this for months on end. In solitude.

There are many, many thousands of us poets. Scribbling in our cold garrets. Some few are good. Some, even fewer, become rich and famous. Some vanishingly small portion of the poems endure. Perhaps some of mine might. Perhaps:

'They fuck you up your mum and dad,  
 They may not mean to, but they do,  
 They fill you with the faults they had  
 And add some extra, just for you.'

Why do we do it? No wonder some of us suffer from angst.

Careful when you next see an elephant then.



## String

I suppose many of us will have heard of string theory. Or at least those of us who are pleasantly astonished by new ideas as they may come along to brighten up our quotidian lives. String theory, that collection of weird and baffling mathematical ideas that has infested theoretical physics, engaging the minds and consuming the productive lives of many of our brightest and best young people for the last sixty years. I am not a mathematician myself but I was fascinated to learn what I could. So I was intrigued when, perhaps forty years ago, I met an actual living string theorist myself; across the lunch table.

'So what do you do then?', I bumbled to my lunch companion, a handsome young man bending over his soup.

'I'm working on string theory at Cambridge. Hoping to get my PhD soon.'

'Oh wow', from me. But that was about as far as it went. The intellectual gap between us apparently unbridgeable. He couldn't say more without grilling me as to my level of learning in mathematics, physics and so on, so that he could establish a basis for communication, and I could see that he, focussed on his narrow and intensive speciality, put me in a similar position regarding my own field of work. So we finished our lunch knowing little about each other. But later I learned more.

We were fellow participants at this summer music school at a posh boys public school in Dorset. Such summer schools were organised by professional musicians to provide paid work in the summer break, when the Royal College of Music, the Guildhall, the Royal Academy and the other music colleges were on holiday. We students, amateurs and would be professionals, paid good money for the first class tuition. It was a bargain. Several hundred of us, instrumentalists and singers, lived for the week in the broad and beautiful grounds of the school, working all day and attending concerts after dinner, before heading to the bar to relax

our overstretched brains and enjoy the overheard gossip of the world renowned conductors and instrumentalists about their peers.

The sun shone. The grass on the extensive and well manicured lawns was green and smelled sweet after mowing. Tall, black-barked cedar trees were artistically outlined against a cerulean sky. They kept real ale in the cricket pavilion that served as the bar. For me it was paradise.

Our group of solo singers were doing an opera. Mozart's 'Magic Flute', 'Die Zauberflöte'. We were singing in German, but everybody knew the story. No time to do the whole opera, but we were doing all the best scenes. Our teacher was a renowned singing teacher. He was also a fine conductor. But his real forte was as opera director. His staging was brilliant.

We gathered for our first rehearsal and took it in turns to audition with a piece we had prepared. It was a pleasure hearing the lovely bel canto voices of several I had met before - at a previous year's summer school. We old hands had got to know each other very well as we had sweated together through the tensions and terrors of rehearsals and performances and long hours in the bar afterwards.

I was auditioning for the role of Papageno, the bird catcher, the one who gets to play the magic flute. He is a baritone and a comic buffoon, so I would have been well cast I suppose. But Mozart has given him some vocal bars of genius. Sung well the audience could be made to laugh at one time and weep for pity at another.

There are many styles of singing. It has to be a natural activity doesn't it? Bel canto, so-called beautiful singing, was supposedly invented by the Italians, along with opera, around about the year 1600, but I expect it has been around for thousands of years. I think it is related to the heightened speech used for addressing audiences by politicians or actors, seeking to sway the emotions of the crowd, in the days before microphones and loudspeakers,

in theatres and open air meetings. Somewhat less natural than normal conversation perhaps. Some can do it without thought, but most require a year or so of training from someone who knows the style, after which many can produce a magical sound, that thrills the listener.

Bel canto voices well produced were evident in the auditions. Papageno's girlfriend Papagana, the tenor hero Tamino, the soprano Pamina, his would be partner, the solemn bass Sarastro, the spectacular coloratura soprano Queen of the Night, whose high C can make one's hair stand on end, three ladies, three boys (sung by girls in our show) and so on. All sounded fine and the casting was looking good. Then came the string theorist. I looked forward to hearing him. As a tall handsome fellow he looked good. A serious rival.

His voice, alas, was horribly produced. An excruciatingly unpleasant sound. Harsh and grating. Gears grinding. Cats being tortured to death. What did he think he was doing? We were all embarrassed for him. Did he have a teacher? Oh yes indeed he did. He divulged the teacher's insane instructions. Something to do with screaming into a hole in the ground until he was hoarse. Madness. The string theorist was a grown man and no doubt had a very high IQ. But somehow he had failed to comprehend the wrongness most profound, as Hercule Poirot might say, of these crackpot instructions. Had he no musical friends who would release him from the clutches of the charlatan?

We should have done. I should have done. But we didn't. It was too personal.

The opera director and teacher in charge had a problem. What to do with the fellow? He had paid his money and deserved a good week like all of us.

At the end of a wonderful week we performed our little opera to a packed house of fellow students and their families. The show went very well with the benefit of our teacher's brilliant stage directions. One of the girls had made little origami birds that the slender lovelies of the dancing female chorus dangled from their hands and made to flutter when Papageno played the magic flute.

Tamino was menaced by a serpent - more dancing girls who writhed around him in a snake.

Papageno sang with his mouth stitched up. 'Mmm, mmm, mmm , mmm'. Then he played his attempted suicide for sympathy.

The Queen of the Night thrilled us all with her high C.

Sarastro's great bass imparted solemnity and gravity.

And of course Mozart the genius had allowed for the string theorist's voice type. He had created the part of Monostatos, the evil would be rapist who is the villain. Dull notes and poor, cracked melodies set out for him. Our director's problem was solved. The string theorist was perfectly cast.