

---

**T U R N I N G  
P O I N T S**

**N O R T H E R N   G A Y   W R I T E R S**

---

# TURNING POINTS

## Northern Gay Writers



## Commonword

# TURNING POINTS POEMS & STORIES BY NORTHERN GAY WRITERS

Printed and published by Commonword 61 Bloom  
Street Manchester

© Tommy Barclay, Mike Binyon, Ian Briddon, Simon  
Curry, Ray Ede, Ian Everton, John Gowling, Elaine  
Okoro, Di Williams 1985.

This collection was selected and edited by Mike  
Binyon, Ray Ede and Di Williams.

Cover design & original drawings by  
Jonathan Hayter.

Photography by Di Williams.

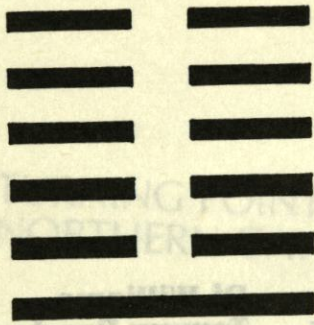
Photograph for "Night Phone" posed  
by Paul Cons.



Thanks: to Bernadette Tweedale, Ivor Frankell,  
Michael Narayn-Singh and members of Commonword  
workshops for ideas, help, support and encouragement;  
and to North West Arts and Manchester City Council  
Education Department for financial assistance.

## CONTENTS

4 Introduction	Di Williams
6 Some of my best friends	Tommy Barclay
7 The fly in the ointment	Ian Everton
13 Skin Colour	Elaine Okoro
14 True confessions	Elaine Okoro
14 Vices	Ray Ede
16 A Scout is to be trusted	Mike Binyon
25 Border patrol	Tommy Barclay
26 Going places, New York	Ian Briddon
27 Liar	Ian Everton
29 Night phone	John Gowling
30 Glitter town	Mike Binyon
32 Limiting factor	Di Williams
53 The desert garden	Ian Briddon
54 The turning point	Ian Briddon
56 Anniversary	Tommy Barclay
77 A day on the moors (In poignant mood)	Simon Curry
79 Rain in the graveyard	Mike Binyon
80 Innocence	Mike Binyon
81 Christmas 1983	Simon Curry
81 The in crowd	Ray Ede
82 Lying by my own side	Simon Curry
83 Spirit of sulphur	Ian Briddon
84 The transparent daffodil	Ian Briddon
85 The girls	Ray Ede
97 Amber	Di Williams
99 Postscript	Tommy Barclay
100 The writers	



復

## INTRODUCTION

This is the hexagram from the Chinese Book of Changes (I Ching) for 'Turning Point'. It brings a retreat, a 'step in the dark' but also a positive step towards crucial changes.

This collection was named from the title of one of the poems, about life, death and the future, all held in the balance.

One of the stories, *'Anniversary'* embodies a connection between life and death, also echoed in the poem *'The Desert Garden'*.

There are other turning points, changes, particularly changes in attitude brought about by a crisis. In *'The Fly in the Ointment'*, *'The Girls'* and *'Limiting Factor'*, considerable social pressure on the central characters leads to a raising of consciousness. There is a questioning of the values of those in society who bring about this pressure in these stories as well as in *'A Scout Is to Be Trusted'*.

And in many of the pieces there is criticism of prejudice, whether racial, in *'The Fly in the Ointment'* and *'Skin Colour'* or pre-judgement by sexist onlookers in *'True Confessions'*. Bigoted defensiveness is shown up in *'Border Patrol'* and *'Some of My Best Friends'*. Prejudice could mean you are already reading this book with a preconceived idea of its contents, or about to leave it as a closed book. Please bear with us in your own interest. You may learn a lot.

Because there is sexuality involved in the name on the cover, there is a threat – homosexuality subverts the standards of an economy based on the family, and sets up alternatives. More intimately, there will be recognisable aspects of the writing that shed light on what the reader may not want to face in him or herself. Aspects of the human psyche that are between the male and female gender, love and support between members of the same sex – which we're all capable of – and feelings that are often dealt with by projecting them onto those we don't like, enemies, the 'other'.

What is this 'other' but our reflection? Gay sexuality has been clinically called 'inverted' – in an attempt to label us as sick, a continuation of the exclusion from society through witch-hunting that has been our history. But we are part of the whole, like the dark side of the moon.

And Hecate, to whom the dark side is dedicated, is one of the many deities worldwide who inhabit the crossroads, places of change and the meeting points of death and new life.

To approach the intersection, face the crisis, is to gain understanding and overcome ignorance and fear. This is a challenge and the stories and poems reflect many ways we have coped and found solutions. We challenge you to read and share our turning points.

Perhaps as gay and lesbian writers we have reached them earlier than those who can take things for granted. Maybe some of us, like the lift boy in *'Going Places, New York'*, inhabit the place of intersection. If this disturbs you, I do not apologise – my sexuality was called into question almost as soon as I became aware of it. If you do not approach the turning point you will remain in ignorance of the wealth of human life, and also of areas of your own being that are hidden from you.

**Di Williams**

## SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS

**Tommy Barclay**

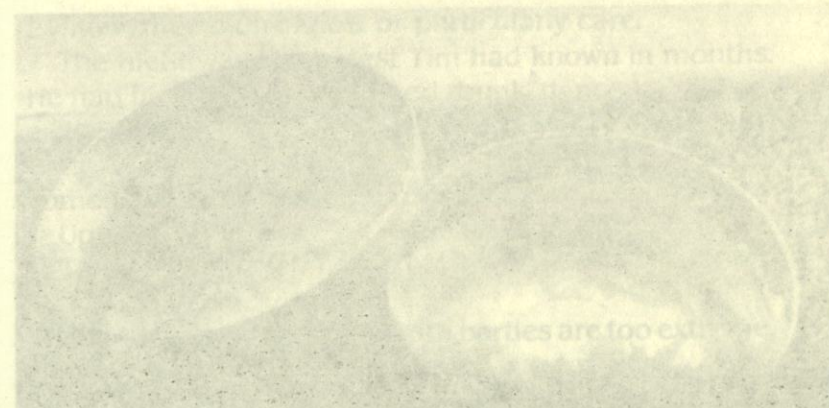
Look, I've nothing against homosexuals,  
I mean, no-one's more liberal than me.  
So if you're trying to say  
That it's wrong to be gay,  
Then I'm sorry, I cannot agree.

See, it's your type that causes the aggro,  
Little mean-minded bigots, that's who,  
With your cheap nasty cracks,  
And your macho attacks  
Upon anyone different from you.

So what if they do love their own sex,  
It's the loving that matters – d'you hear?  
And because I defend  
What you can't comprehend,  
It does not mean that I must be queer.

Now get this, I'm not a bit poofish,  
I'm a randy and red-blooded male.  
And if one of those nances  
Fancies his chances,  
I'll bloody well shorten his tail.

As for you pal, just watch what you're saying,  
Don't think I don't know what you meant.  
You just might feel the touch  
Of my boot in your crutch,  
As a thank-you for calling me bent.



## THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT

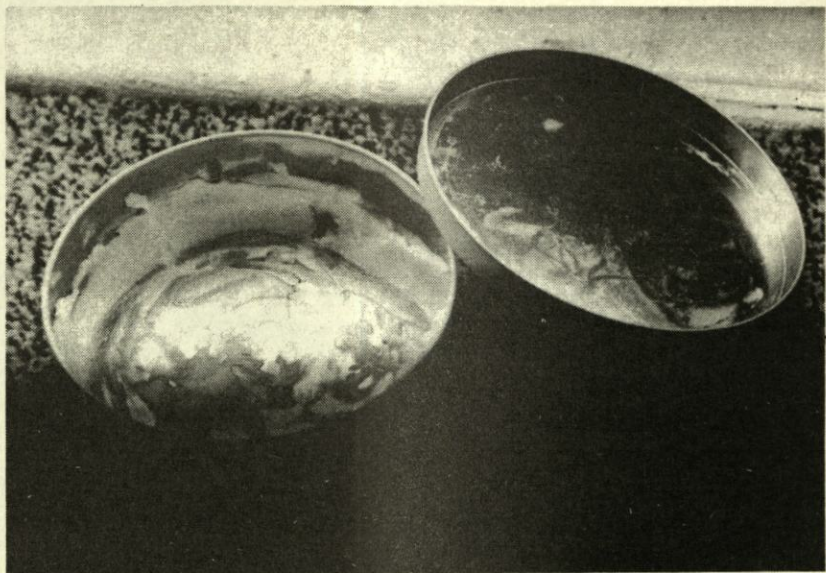
**Ian Everton**

AFTER Yusof's visas had run out, he had to return to his own country. Tim knew that Yusof would never be able to come back – they had arranged marriages over there – and now his country had been at war for some time.

Tim was an ordinary man in an ordinary city. It had a radical gay group, a conservative gay group, one night-club, and three bars. After Yusof had gone home Tim attended these places on a sporadic basis. He had the occasional look at one, then another, and grew tired of seeing the same faces. But these places had to pass the night, the weeks, the months.

One night Tim went to the CHE group. He noticed a new face sitting in the corner. Jack was even shyer than Tim, although Tim was on nodding terms with most of the people in the group. Jack's eyes were so blue – Tim was immediately attracted to him.

Everyone had to listen to an hour's dialogue between Stephen and Bill, the group bores. Tim had heard the same anecdotes on his previous visit, and the one before that. But at least they were new to Jack. Tim had determined not to come again; but on seeing the newcomer, he somehow changed his outlook on things.



After the meeting the group went to a pub, and Tim noticed that Jack had tagged on behind, not speaking to anyone. In the bar Tim worked his way to Jack's side, as people got up to leave. Both of them seemed to be brooding over something known only to themselves. It mattered little. The regulars from the group were having their usual conversations, about the things that seemed to interest that sort of person. There was nothing wrong with sitting talking rubbish. But what was Tim going to do next time? How long could he bear the pretence?

"You must ask him *now*..." Tim thought, and plucked up the courage to ask Jack if he wanted a drink. When Tim brought the drinks over to Jack a conversation naturally started between them. Soon they forgot about the other people they had come in with.

When it was closing time, Tim and Jack headed for the night-club, as though it had all been prearranged, as though the two of them had done this together so many times before. Where the others from the group had gone

by now, they didn't know or particularly care.

The night was the fastest Tim had known in months. He had no idea how much he'd drunk, danced with Jack as the night-club filled, then emptied, and finally closed. They walked back to Tim's place, intoxicated by something quite different from music or alcohol.

Up the stairs, kettle on, sex mags out.

They laughed their heads off, sitting in bed from three o'clock to dawn.

"I don't vote," Jack said. "Both parties are too extreme. They'll *never* do anything for me".

Jack was right – neither party did anything for Tim either.

Tim thought that next time he wouldn't even bother filling in the electoral registration form – as a sign of protest. He was glad that Jack wasn't political. All too often, Tim got stuck with a left or right-wing fanatic. Or rather 'bore' would have been a more apt word. 'Fanatic' sounded like a compliment.

Jack and Tim must have fallen asleep eventually, because at noon they woke up to find themselves in each other's arms.

Jack came round to Tim's that night. They went out to one of the other bars, saw no one they cared to speak to, then the night-club. It was packed. Some of the people from the CHE group were there. Would Tim and Jack be at the next meeting? Tim grinned. The man was definitely joking. They had better things to do now.

After much dancing, each step that Tim took with Jack was like the beginning of a new world. When they stopped for a rest, Jack would shove a five pound note, or whatever, into Tim's hand and say, "You get the drinks tonight." Tim went over to the bar.

"You're looking happy tonight," Mick, the West Indian barman said.

"Yes. Have one yourself." Tim said.

They went back to Tim's place – as if there was any

question that they'd be doing anything else.

"I bought this jar of ointment." Jack said, sitting on the bed, revealing his well-kept secret from a leather pocket, which matched his huge, leather boots. "It's better than the stuff you have. I'm full of surprises."

"Are you?" Tim said. "Is that a promise?" And they both quickly got undressed.

As the days ticked by the ointment in the jar went down until it was nearly empty.

"I'll buy the next jar," Tim said. "It's only fair."

"Oh, it's only fair," Jack agreed. "You'll find I'm a very fair person — anyone will tell you that — it's my hair that does it." Taking up the pose of a model.

That same day Tim went to the chemist's.

"Have you got some...Dr. White's...er...skin...?"

"What's it for?" the assistant said.

"Er...chaps," Tim said.

"Oh yes, I know the one you mean. We've been selling out of that lately."

"Lately?" Tim asked — not quite knowing why. Perhaps he wanted some feedback into how other people used it.

"Since 1967," she said, in a matter-of-fact way.

After some searching on the shelves the assistant had to ask the pharmacist into the shop. A queue was forming behind Tim, which he was trying to ignore. The pharmacist asked Tim what he wanted.

The pharmacist then went back into the back room where he did all this pharming. For some minutes Tim could hear the clinking of jars, the opening and shutting of drawers, the conversation between the pharmacist and other members of staff as they held a conference on the matter. Meanwhile, the young assistant took care of the queue with her, "Can I help you?"

Tim felt himself going quite red.

The pharmacist came back into the shop.

"I'm sorry — we seem to be out of Dr. White's. I can order you a jar — it'll be two weeks. What did you want it for?"

"But I can't wait that long," Tim said, feeling the eyes of the other customers who tuned into this fascinating conversation, as one would automatically look at a television screen on entering a room. Whatever did he want that particular ointment for that was so pressing?

"Would you like to buy another type?" the pharmacist said. "It's basically the same ingredients." The pharmacist offered Tim a tiny jar with a label — £3.

At the bottom it said:

WARNING — MAY CAUSE IRRITATION TO SENSITIVE PEOPLE

"No, that's no good," Tim said, and left the shop glad to be out in the fresh air.

Tim caught the bus into town and tried every chemist that he could find. The ointment had sold out everywhere. Somehow — and why not? — the ointment itself had become symbolic of his new relationship with Jack. After all, he had said that he would buy the next jar, it was only fair. And so far, a jar lasted a whole week, which was pretty good value for money.

Tim went home feeling downhearted. Perhaps Jack had managed to buy some of the ointment himself. But Jack was fair — he also said that he was full of surprises. Since Jack was so fair — he might overlook Tim's letting him down on such a small matter.

That night Tim felt different; he didn't know why. It was like a premonition. Jack didn't seem to notice Tim's mood — he was jolly, talking to the barman in the night-club. It was Mick's night off. That helped Tim to feel a bit better. They drank more than usual, danced more than usual, until the night-club closed.

When they finally got to bed they had to manage with cooking oil. There was still a bit of ointment in the jar which had remained on the table at the side of the bed for a week. But there wasn't enough for their purpose. Jack made no comment on the fact that Tim had forgotten his promise to buy the jar of ointment. Not until the following morning anyway.

In the morning the world seemed fine again. As Jack was getting ready to go, he said, "They always sell that ointment in the wog-shop, but they overcharge for everything."

"The *what?*" Tim had never – in the whole week – heard Jack use a word like that.

"The *Paki shop.*" Jack clarified his meaning.

"I didn't know you were racist?" Tim said, trying to make the question sound like a joke – but he had to make Jack spell it out there and then.

"Of course I am," Jack said. "They're everywhere. When I was a boy, you could walk through town and you'd be lucky if you saw one. They're even behind bars." Jack grinned, not even realizing that he had made a pun to his own advantage.

Tim couldn't speak.

"See you tonight?" Jack said. It wasn't a question. It was...more like an order.

Jack had gone. The slam of the door had an eerie, metallic quality to it. The sound of Jack's boots down the stairs seemed to go left, right, left, right, left, right, *ten-shun!* It echoed over and over in Tim's head.

Tim had an internal picture of Afghanistan. The tribesmen – devout Muslims – fighting first the British now the Russians. He wondered where Yusof was now – if anywhere. If *only* they could write to each other.

Tim had a feeling that he didn't want to go out that night...He went into his bedroom, saw the bottle of cooking oil. In the bottom of the ointment jar lay a dead fly, stuck to the last of the cream that had now decayed into a white slime.

## SKIN COLOUR Elaine Okoro

She – the woman I love  
and indeed the one who loves me –  
holds my hand, life clasp in  
each other's.

In the street we stand  
looking, but never seeing  
what stands before us.  
Our skin tones compliment our  
love perfectly.

We who walk – are lashed  
out with, by vicious  
tongues  
whilst voices echo...  
"Black Bitch in White  
Man's land!"



## TRUE CONFESSIONS Elaine Okoro

I have watched them.  
Those who play their games  
with you and I.

I watch them...as their  
disguise slide and an attraction  
burns in their eyes.  
They make me step aside  
without aggression  
But carefully planned  
conversation, to keep my  
mind occupied.

Those guys' eyes lie  
and they see premature lovers  
with either you or I.

## VICES Ray Ede

"Have a cigarette," he says:  
"Oh, no, you don't do you? —  
Not one of your vices..."  
He grins. I slightly smile.

He tells me of  
The many things he's done. I nod  
And wonder when he'll talk  
About the only thing he hasn't.

"Smoking pot is great," he's saying now.  
"You haven't tried it? — Oh, you should,  
Not harmful at all."  
That alcohol's enough, I try to say  
But he's playing at being hip:  
"Accepted now you know  
And anyway  
Experience  
Is so important."  
He looks around the bar:  
"That's why I'm here."

We're on to sex at last  
And I was right — he hasn't.  
It seems his girlfriend left last week  
And now he thinks the time is right  
To try "the other way".  
It might be fun to try it with a man  
And — who knows? — he might find  
That he likes it.  
Maybe he's bisexual  
But he'd never say  
He's gay.

"You don't find men attractive then," I ask.  
"Not really." Then he's off again,  
Describing recent conquests.  
A pity none of them would stay  
To wash and iron his shirts.

Dry, he stops. "Another drink? —  
And then, perhaps... You said you have a flat?"  
"No thanks, no more to drink  
And if I'm taking someone home  
It won't be you —  
You're not  
One of my vices."

## A SCOUT IS TO BE TRUSTED **Mike Binyon**

"DON'T you think it's about time you settled down and found yourself a wife Jay? I mean, you don't want everyone thinking you're one of those 'gay bachelors'." Ron grinned and stared into the glowing embers of the camp fire.

"Nah, can't say as I fancy getting married just yet. Don't want to get tied down by no family. I want to hold onto my freedom for as long as I can."

"Oh, it's not all that bad. I'm happy enough. Got a great son I'm proud of." Ron nodded towards the line of tents fifty yards on the other side of the clearing. There his son lay sleeping with the rest of the scout troop. It was a small, neat campsite, surrounded by acres of coniferous forest and bordered on one side by a narrow stream that babbled quietly through the secluded valley. There was everything they needed there, firewood, water and shelter from the wind; everything a scout needed to make his back-to-nature camp complete. Jay stared

through the darkness towards the edge of the clearing. How many times had he been asked that question — "When are you going to get married?" One of these days he would snap, stand up and yell as loud as he could: "Never. I'm never gonna get married. I'm gay, you see. D'you hear me? Gay! I'm a gay bachelor and I probably will be for the rest of my life. I'll never have kids. I'll probably never even date a woman. I'm homosexual, for Christ's sake. But who gives a *shit*?"

He had been a member of the scout association for twenty-four years, ever since entering as a cub at the age of eight. As a schoolboy, the camping and hiking activities were an ideal channel for excess energy. Now, since all his energy was spent on work, getting out into the "great outdoors" was ideal recreation after being confined to factory all week. He was a tall, lean looking man with short black hair and a thick beard. The kids loved him, respected him, which made his job as scout leader worthwhile. He found that sharing his interests and passing on his knowledge of outdoor pursuits gave him even more reason to take an important role within the association.

Jay drank the last mouthful of cocoa left in his mug and yawned. "Oh well, I suppose I'd best hit the sack Ron. Early start tomorrow, remember. Christ! You know, I could just stay another week. I'm not ready to go back to work yet."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Think I'll be glad to get back. It's been a pretty hectic week one way or another. I'm not used to all this scout leader bit. When I offered to come along and lend a hand I didn't know what I was letting myself in for."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Well, lets face it, they're not exactly angels, are they?"

"Give 'em a break, Ron. It's the only chance they get to let rip, with being in school all day, then having to be 'good little boys' at home. They're bound to run wild, aren't they?"

"Suppose that's true. Anyway, I'll just go and check they're alright, and I'll be in myself in a minute. And for God's sake, try not to range around as much tonight. I woke up black 'n' blue this morning. I think you must've been dreaming about football or something. And you talk in your sleep. Jesus, no wonder I'm so bleeding knackered — I've hardly slept all week."

Jay unzipped the tent door and groped around for his torch in the darkness. It was a small two man tent, belonging to the scout troop with just enough room for two people to sleep comfortably. Getting undressed in such a confined space was an art which Jay had mastered over the years, and in no time he was lying comfortably in his sleeping bag.

RON walked quietly towards the line of tents so as not to wake the boys. Approaching the first one, he heard a muffled giggle coming from inside. "They should've been asleep hours ago," he thought. "They'll never get up in the morning at this rate." He crept round the front of the tent, holding a torch in one hand while quickly unzipping the door of the large six-manner with the other. What had been a circle of scouts only two seconds before was suddenly a scene of chaos. Six boys darted for the other door, while another five tried to push past Ron. The rest dived for their sleeping bags like cellar rats exposed in a beam of torchlight. With the sternest, loudest voice he could manage, he brought the panic to an abrupt end.

"Stop right where you are and come back here quickly."

The boys who had managed to get away returned silently and sat on the floor of the tent.

"Right. Would some one mind telling me what's going on." He was answered by a heavy nervous silence. "Listen, if some one doesn't own up, you can all consider yourselves ex-scouts."

As if in surrender, one of the boys stood up, holding a

magazine in his outstretched hand. Ron took it and flicked through the pages.

"I see. A girlie magazine. And who brought this? Come on, I'll only find out eventually, so you may as well make it easier for yourself."

Slowly and with great effort, a boy stood up. "It's mine, Mr. Tewksbury."

"Well, I'm too tired to stand here all night, so I'll talk to you in the morning. Does your mam know you've brought this?"

"No, Mr. Tewksbury."

"Well she will do when I see her. Now you lot who don't sleep in this tent — get back to the ones you *should* be in. The rest of you get to sleep. Goodnight lads."

"Goodnight Mr. Tewksbury."

Ron walked back towards his tent. The fire still glowed brightly, fed by the slight breeze that blew through the camp.

"Jay, you awake in there?"

"Yes. Hey, what was all the yelling about?"

Ron crawled into the tent, undressed and slipped into his sleeping bag. "This," he said, and gave Jay the magazine, who laughed and flicked through the pages.

"Little sods. You didn't give 'em *too* much of a roasting, did you?"

"No. Just scared the shit out of the lad who brought it. Said I'd show it to his mam. Should've seen his face. Anyway, you can have a read of it. I'm going to sleep."

"No thanks."

Ron turned round to look at him. "What d'you mean you don't want to read it?"

"Exactly what I said. I just want to get to sleep. There's no harm in that is there?"

"Are you sure it's not because you're just not interested?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"Hey come on, what did you mean?"

"I said 'nothing' Jay, now I want to get to sleep." Ron turned over on his side facing away from him. "Goodnight."

"Night."

"Oh by the way, for God's sake don't kick.... And be careful not to talk in your sleep... you give all your secrets away."

Jay managed a laugh but was a little unnerved by what Ron had said. He felt an empty feeling in his stomach and a cold shiver in his back. Did he suspect something? Did he really mean anything or was it just a friendly jibe? He sounded quite serious...

Jay had never told anyone about his true sexuality. Not even his parents knew. He had never done anything to satisfy his sexual urges, for that was his way of denying the truth.

He couldn't get to sleep, but lay on his back looking up towards the roof of the tent. After an hour of lying there, turning thoughts over in his mind, he found a shirt, jeans and shoes and crawled out of the tent where he got dressed. Ron lay sleeping, unaware that Jay had gone outside. The night was cloudless but warm and the moon lit the clearing in a crisp silvery glow. The outline of the scouts' tents was clearly defined even in the long shadow of trees, and Jay found it quite easy to pick his way through the campsite towards the other side of the clearing. He passed the tents and made his way into the wood. The forest scent was dank and musty, tinged by the occasional aroma of wild garlic. Eventually he found the faintly worn path and followed it down to the stream. There he sat and looked further into the forest. All these years he had managed to hide his real feelings but somehow, lately, everything was beginning to crumble. How long could he go on? How long could he endure this sexual and emotional void?

Often at night, he would lie awake trying to imagine

what it would be like to meet some one and realise his true sexuality in perfect fulfilling bliss. Once he had bought a copy of *Gay News* and had read it from cover to cover, absorbing every word. He had written a letter in answer to an advertisement in the 'Men's Personal' column, but lack of confidence had stopped him sending it.

He sat next to the stream for an hour before deciding it was time to return to the tent and try to get some sleep. He followed the path back to the clearing and picked his way towards the scouts' tents. There were three in all, pitched side-by-side, facing away from the forest towards the camp fire beyond which lay the leaders' tent and first-aid post. Jay walked round to the front of one of the tents and listened in. Silence. "They must've gone to sleep." The other two were equally as quiet. "Ron's reprimand must've worked." As he reached the third tent, he heard a rustling sound coming from the direction of the camp fire. It was Ron. He stopped once he saw Jay standing outside the door of the third tent. Jay walked across to meet him. Ron looked very serious. "What the hell are you doing hanging round the tents like this?"

"I couldn't sleep so I went for a walk down to the stream."

"In the dark? I wondered what was going on when I woke up and noticed you'd gone. That's why I got dressed and came down here. Anyway, you didn't answer my question. What are you doing hanging round the scouts' tents?"

"I've just told you. I couldn't sleep. I went for a walk and I was just checking to see if the kids were alright while I was passing."

Ron turned towards the direction of the leaders' tents. "You'd best get back to bed."

They both walked quietly over to the tent, undressed and slipped into their sleeping bags. After five minutes Ron sat up and turned towards Jay. "I've been thinking

about you, worried. Tell me something, are you gay?"

Jay didn't answer, but turned on his side.

"I said, are you gay?"

"No."

"Can you guess why I suspect you?"

"I think so."

"Then I'll ask you again, are you gay?"

"Ask me once more Ron, and I'll break every damned bone in your face. Okay?"

That answer was sufficient for Ron, so he chose not to retaliate, thinking: "He could be gay. He wouldn't just come out with it and say 'yes' to a question like that, but he sounded very defensive when I asked. Most people would just laugh. Perhaps I'm just suspicious. Perhaps I'm not."

After an hour of unbroken silence, they were asleep.

THE morning was bright and clean, bringing crisp newness to the campsite. Jay dressed and stepped outside into the daylight where he lit the small calor gas burner to brew the tea. That was the leaders' privilege. The scouts would have to light the fire which had slowly died down during the night. Ron was awake by the time Jay had poured the tea. He stepped out of the tent, yawned and stretched, blinking in the bright morning light. He took the cup of tea and watched Jay make his way towards the scouts' tents. In the distance he could hear a train pass through a neighbouring valley, but the sound eventually disappeared into the shrill dawn chorus of birds. Soon the air would be full of the sound of scouts attending to their morning duties.

Ron envied the rapport Jay had with the lads. He didn't have to shout or yell to keep them in order, for the scouts respected him. He knew all there was to know about camping and hiking, rockclimbing and canoeing. Ron was just a middle-aged man who found it hard to walk up steep hills and didn't know a tentpeg from a belay. His

own son had more respect for Jay than he did for anyone else. It was unnatural that anyone should have such an affinity with young kids. "He's gay," thought Ron as he watched Jay poke his head through the door of the last tent to give the scouts their morning call. "No wonder he wasn't interested in that dirty magazine. And all this time he's been bringing these young lads away on his own. Christ, I'll kill the little pervert if I find out he's been messing with my kid." He decided not to say anything to Jay, but to watch him carefully for the rest of the morning.

Eventually, the scouts dressed, washed and lit the fire in the centre of the camp in order to cook breakfast. Smoke, accompanied by the smell and sound of sizzling bacon, filled the small clearing. There were eighteen scouts in all, divided into three patrols of six. Once breakfast was over, and all the pots washed and cleared away, Jay gave orders to begin taking everything down. Within an hour the campsite was reduced to a few stacks of bundles, rucksacks and boxes. Ron was amazed by the efficiency with which the whole operation was organised. Jay had trained them to the point of perfection. Each scout had his own allocated duty and carried it out quickly, precisely and efficiently. Once satisfied that everything was in order, Jay left the boys with the equipment and joined Ron on the short walk to where they had parked the van, an old converted ambulance. The path gradually widened into a driveway which wended through the forest like an alpine road. The trees provided shelter from the warm summer sun as they walked side-by-side in silence. When they reached the van, Ron looked at Jay. "I'd like you to hand in your resignation from this scout troop, lad. You know why. And, if you don't do that, I'll be forced to tell them at the office myself and they themselves will ask you to leave. I think it would be much less embarrassing for you to do as I suggest. We don't want your type hanging around our

lads. I've thought it all out. Saying all this to you isn't easy, so please don't think that I am enjoying it. I'll take over until we find some one more suitable to take your place, but it's not fair to jeopardise —"

"What the fucking hell do you mean, jeopardise? Do you think that I'm a pervert or something? Alright, yes I'm gay, but that doesn't mean just because I am gay I'll have a go at anything regardless of age, religion and colour. How many eleven year olds have you eyed this week, Ron? Seen any little girls on our trips to town?"

"You *what*?"

"It's just the same. You're saying that it's dangerous having me around these kids cos I'm gay; it must follow that all straight men are a danger to little girls."

"That's ridiculous."

"No it's fucking not."

"Well what were you doing round the lads' tents last night?"

"I told you, I went into the woods cos I couldn't sleep, and on the way back I was just listening in to see if they were alright." Jay slammed the palm of his hand against the side of the van in frustration. "You've got a mind like a sewer, Ron. You're bloody twisted. Right, well you can have my resignation if that's the way you feel. I should've known better than to give so much of my own time and effort to people who can't take me the way I am. That's gratitude for you. All these years. All these years I've taken lads camping and hiking all over the country and never gave it a second thought. I never looked twice at any one of those kids. You're the one who thought of that, Ron. You're the pervert."

Once the van was loaded, the scouts checked the campsite for the last time. They didn't know that this was their last camp with the person they worshipped. Once they were satisfied that everything was tidy they climbed aboard the van. The only sounds were the engine, the wind in the trees and the small narrow stream which

babbled through the valley. The van drove off and left behind an empty clearing and the scene of many happy memories for eighteen boys.

## **BORDER PATROL Tommy Barclay**

We who patrol the borderland must be ever watchful.  
The price of peace is eternal vigilance.

The emotional horizon must continually be scanned  
For feelings of a subversive nature  
Which at any time may dash  
Across the no-man's-land of longing.

We who guard the frontier must be ever watchful.  
The price of peace is eternal vigilance.

Speech must constantly be scrutinised  
For seemingly innocent phrases  
Which may conceal the infiltration  
Of terrorist meaning.

We who man the boundary must be ever watchful.  
The price of peace is eternal vigilance.

Thought must be ruthlessly controlled  
Since persistent sniping of looks and smiles  
From the enemy  
May weaken resolve.

We who patrol the borderland must be ever watchful.  
The price of peace is eternal vigilance.

## GOING PLACES, NEW YORK Ian Briddon

The glass-elevator boy is ever vigilant.  
He is gay and finds it hard to avoid  
Bodies.

He moves at considerable speed  
With the grace of a gazelle,  
From ground to 31st.

"Press firm against my body please.  
Feel my clothes rubbing your clothes."  
Upwards to heaven.

Every minute counts, for his time  
Is always fast disappearing.  
Lower ground ever imminent.

"Let me take you to the galaxy  
And beyond to paradise."  
Management material?

The glass-elevator boy is proud  
Of his enclosed freedom.  
"My job takes me places."

## LIAR Ian Everton

Liar,  
You are no more than a liar  
Nothing more  
Nothing less  
You are a liar  
You think you have it right  
Every way  
You spin a web of  
Myth which you believe  
I swallow.  
You are a liar  
Nothing more, nothing less  
You do not have the  
Properties unique  
Which you believe  
People have their  
Breaking points  
And that is what you enjoy  
You think that you're  
So special  
And anyone who doesn't  
Agree makes you all  
The more special  
Paranoia  
Delusions of grandeur  
That's all that  
You are, all you  
Ever will be  
You're in for a shock  
When you start to age  
Pretty boy.



## NIGHT PHONE John Gowing

Me here dear, a night club song  
You sung to your gypsy mother;  
A fast car in the night you  
wrapped around a few bollards;  
I'm still here dear, a joint you  
passed around your hairy friends;  
Love, an ashtray full of butts that  
got washed up after the end.  
Sugar love me, a lager can  
you once dumped downtown.

His A level in Sociology  
transcended our pit,  
Said I took you for granted,  
Put my understanding to ground;  
My intelligent mind that  
couldn't iron and loved canned food;  
In your stormy nights please think  
I was instant disposable:  
a hundred and twelve pounds of garbage  
I let you toss around.

Darling, was I just a stopping town?  
a drizzly night in Salford,  
Jewel in the Midland bar,  
leather jacket, taxi-car;  
When you watch your life flashing past  
See me exhale from my nose....  
Fat cigar on my handful of rings  
from the seafaring men.  
Tired thighs, heavy, masculine and  
flesh, the part you liked the best.



Yes, I'm still here on your night phone,  
Your ever-resistible masculine clone,  
Your brain for the week  
whose hair fell out too soon;  
With my false teeth and reading specs,  
My redundant working boots and  
arthritic hands;  
Shall I put my receiver down?  
Can I anoint us  
The unholy kings of fools?

### GLITTER TOWN **Mike Binyon**

In a shiny long corridor  
Clinically clean  
As quiet as a funeral  
With lights like small suns  
Burning in a cold universe  
I sit and wait  
For an end to come to this limbo,  
Your self-induced state of half-being  
That came as a result of  
Your calculated detachment  
From that little home-made world.

You – to whom life seemed  
just one long breath  
of putrid stale air.  
You – who were married to the room,  
your home  
my world  
into which you slipped  
and were lost  
amongst the many room-worlds  
of Glitter Town

And now a glass membrane  
Separates the dead from the living.  
You in your last dream –  
And me in mine out here.

I don't want to see the morning  
Don't want to see the sickening golden shafts  
Of brand new life  
For by then you'll be gone  
And I'll be left  
To face the things  
That finally did you in:

The well paid job in Glitter Town  
The furnished flat in Glitter Town  
The trendy friends that once "popped round"  
To drink your gin and laugh and joke  
And sneak and scratch and pry and poke.  
And say "Ha Ha! doesn't he look down  
On those who build themselves a life  
With furnished house and matching wife....."  
While all the time the joke's on you!

You dug your own grave  
And tripped up into it.

And now I wait for you to die.

No breathing cuts the static air  
And a nurse goes by and in your room  
rustling cloth and heavy flesh  
shuffling feet and frantic stares.  
groaning stops

And I wait no longer  
The small suns have just gone out  
And the universe is ice  
In Glitter Town

## LIMITING FACTOR Di Williams

WAITING for his fifth bus of the day, he began to be disturbed by the thought that he might have made a wrong choice. The steady stream of cars in his vision underlined both his powerlessness and the lateness of the hour. He had two more visits to make today.

George's tones of disbelief came to him:

"I don't know how the hell you'll stick it for long. Most social workers at least make sure they live at some distance from the conditions of their clients. You're not even getting away at weekends."

Weekends, especially Sundays, provided the odd quiet hours when he could write up – catch up on, that is, his case notes.

There was still a hint of afternoon sun, enough to strain his eyes as he read the front of another bus. No good, this one.

If he got to the new guys before four, which was just possible, he could walk from there onto the High Street and catch a bus to see Carole. From the map last night, it looked a fair walk, though.

Two more buses coming. He was looking into the light first thing in the morning, too. The bright streak of dawn in the grey dimness had hurt his eyes as much. Perhaps he was getting eyestrain. This morning, he sighed, was like another day completely.

The second bus, thankfully, was on the right route and, unlike the mornings, not full.

"I practically live on buses," he thought. "Another world again."

It was always a bit more stressful going to a case in an area you didn't already know. You seldom know the name of the right bus stop if you want to be told where to get off. Drivers have a very variable knowledge of the roads in their area.

He found this stop himself by looking out for an overhead railway bridge. He closed the A-to-Z he'd used to check it, and crossed over the road. His turning at the end of the yellowish wall brought him to the edge of a building site with some new flats beyond. Thomas's road was behind these, and, familiarly, one of the older rows of terraces, partly boarded-up following development plans. They had probably been shelved, too, as there were indications that most of the houses were occupied.

Quite probably a good number were squatted, too.

*You'll easily recognise us*

*By our corrugated iron curtains*

*And weatherboarded door, oho*

He found the road and looked along to find any house numbers. Most of the gardens had rubbish in corners, rusty objects, rags, mis-shaped bits of concrete. On the street, two paper bags whirled in front of him. There was a dry cold wind beginning to come up.

When he got to the door and knocked, there was no answer.

One of the hazards of this job, that you can gear yourself up to meeting a new client, who just doesn't turn up. And as they're not really a 'client' who is buying a 'service' off you, it doesn't seem that they stand to lose. You'll come and chase them up later. Meanwhile, you fulfil your role in coming, and, take steps to ensure that as far as possible contact would be made. Leave a note?

"Mr. Reilly?"

There was a scuffling sound from above at the back part of the house and a small man padded to the door shortly, pulling on a worn jacket.

"I'm sorry, now, you have to be a bit careful, these days."

"I've come from the Social Services. My name's Barry."

The man looked with weather-worn eyes at the card he held out.

"Oh, yes, well come in. I'm sorry, I was upstairs

because they've been to cut off the gasfire last week." The Social Services had been informed of this.

They went through to a back room with an old sofa, a low window and a small electric stove next to a sink.

"I was only using the gas fire, you see. There used to be a gas stove but th'other family took it when they left."

"Do you know there's a new scheme for paying off fuel bills — if you get it re-connected?"

He realised, in the middle of asking this, that the man had been implying that it was allowed to be cut off, as an economy. When you run out of money, something has to go.

He hadn't meant to plunge into the issue of re-connection so soon, but it could possibly bring to light difficulties over money, that could be helped.

"What was the date when you last got any money from the Unemployment?"

"Oh, I don't rightly know, I —"

"You see, there might be time for us to ask if you could get it sorted out before the next benefit comes."

The kitchen room was noticeably cold.

"You've got the envelope — was it posted to you?"

"No, I used to get it over the counter, those days, let me think —"

"Are you working at the moment, then?"

"I was working, for my cousin, like, but I was laid off, they said I wouldn't be fit, with the lifting and that, when they had the new yard —"

"You're unemployed now, then?"

There was a pause.

"Yes."

"So you could claim Social Security money, d'you know that?"

Another pause. Barry thought, Christ, what's stopping him? He'd clearly got very little money, but there was something not quite straight. Possibly a kind of deal in the building trade that he's worried about. But no, this

guys just had his fuel cut off, and doesn't look as if he's even got food —

"I was getting something from my cousin, each week, for a bit."

"Like redundancy payment?"

"A bit each week. But they're not doing so well at the moment."

It sounded like the family helping its own.

"Well at least now, you can claim a benefit. You'd have to have at least a thousand pounds of redundancy money before they'd say you had to live off your savings."

He looked at the man's face and found he had to look away. It was as if someone had told him he'd won something, but he was bewildered as to how he'd come to win. And near to tears that wrinkled the pain and confusion in the lines round his eyes.

"Didn't anybody tell you?" Barry spoke gently, still not facing him.

The man couldn't speak yet. There needed to be care taken, in case he'd not claimed money for reasons of self-respect.

But no, when he found a voice, choked in his throat, it was a brief, "I wish I'd have known."

Barry silently cursed the now-locked doors of the forbidding D.H.S.S. building on the High Street. This was another case of unclaimed benefit, through lack of information — misinformation? A small saving of the State's money, to make more cost for the state through the Social Services. But that was common knowledge these days.

"You've not registered for work since they laid you off?"

"I thought, as I'd not qualify —"

"Look, tomorrow, you need to get your name down at the Labour Exchange, and get a piece of paper to take to the Social Security."

Aware that some time would have to be spent sorting things out, Barry made a quick calculation as to whether he could fit in seeing Carole tomorrow morning. He ruled

He ruled out the possibility.

"Have you got your P 45? They should have given it to you when you stopped working. It'd help if you can find it."

Mr. Reilly was looking very anxious, though turning eagerly to reach down a small shoe-box of papers from a shelf above the fireplace.

"That's it, I think — no, it's a National Insurance certificate. But at least it's got your number."

The box was offered to him. He felt uneasy, as he often did when a client's personal belongings were entrusted to him. He could no longer shrink from the responsibility. A social worker has a share in burdens that do not touch the stranger.

Sifting through forms and letters, he found two styles of filling-in spaces, one in bold capitals, the other very spidery and thin. It began to dawn on him: "This guy has writing difficulties, and maybe is a non-reader."

There was a very old, folded B11 form, not filled in.

"This isn't it, but can you see what it is?"

"Bee — one, one. Two six sixty-nine."

He could read some numbers, but probably hadn't realised that was the date. Six years ago, it had never been taken to make a claim — he'd found work rather than face not being able to fill it out — though someone must have helped with the other forms. He was going, worse luck, to need help in the employment exchange, to fill in forms on the premises. Barry's morning was going to be even more impossibly packed than it had been.

"You'll get another of these tomorrow. I can — help you if you want."

There was the beginning of a smile of relief. Ruefully, Barry noted the prematurity of any hint of gratitude at this stage. Wait, he thought, till he's gone through all the queues, the cubicles, the departments at the Town Hall, wait for the anticlimax when the minimum giro does arrive. Even then, for Barry's kind, there would be little

cause for self-congratulation.

"I could come to the Labour Exchange with you."

He remembered the last hour-long wait at the Enquiries desk and wished he hadn't committed himself. But it was the job. What was most urgent tomorrow? He'd have to go to the Housing department. And Graham? Possibly.

"If I came here about ten in the morning?"

Mr. Riley was nodding. He was picking up the box to put it back.

"You might need your rent book, if it's in there. And, let's see, if you've got a bank account — no? Or if you've an old Post Office book, they'll want to see it. In here, yes, and it's empty. O.k."

"I want to say thank —"

"It's o.k., and sorry I have to go, but I've got —"

"I'd have given you a cup of tea, but —"

They were reaching the door, and the sudden thought reached Barry, that he'd have to do something about Thomas Reilly's resources immediately. The place was freezing. You can't just forget about something as obvious as that.

"Oh, does your electricity work on a meter?"

"Yes."

Lucky, that, or there could have been another unpaid bill\*coming up to 'final demand'. How many ten pences could be spared?

"Here you are — no, it's o.k. It takes tens, does it? And look, if you want to get something to eat —" He put another fifty pence piece in the man's hand.

They were going to have to get an emergency payment, and soon. Money from Barry's pocket didn't fit in with the machinery of grants and wages.

"No: you keep it, you need it more than me. See you tomorrow."

THE wind in the road was now icy, and it was dark and

beginning to be busy with rush-hour noise. He turned left, away from the busy main road.

His next thought was, "Carole'd better be in".

He wished he'd walked this way when it was still light, as the waste ground at the edge of another building site was unlit for a stretch.

After clambering round a few loose old bricks, he found the main path well-bordered and smooth underfoot. There were clumps of dead Michaelmas daisies on either side, drooping in the brown light.

Somewhat useful way of spending the winter, he thought, being a plant that just keeps the roots alive underground.

He smiled, realising it was George that had put him in mind of the plants. George was doing a project in Cambridge, keeping plants in 'the minimal conditions to support life'. Lucky sod, spending all day in plush labs and heated greenhouses.

"We find out the smallest amount of, say, water, that a plant needs to stop it wilting," George had described, methodically, last summer. "We control all the other conditions, light, heat and so on. On minimum water, there's zero growth, just basic life, then when we increase the water – wham, rapid growth immediately. Water was the 'limiting factor' – the need that was holding everything else up."

"And when you've found all the minimum levels, then what?"

"First, it takes ages to establish all the factors affecting one species of plant. There are often 'trace elements' – tiny amounts of a mineral like cobalt, for example – that can be a limiting factor. No growth without a certain level present. And that level is what the plant needs to be able to grow in the soil of a region – as a crop, for instance."

"So you, what, you tell the agriculturalists how to control the growth of their plants?"

"I wish it were that simple. There are always factors

you can't control, or that cost too much, or even problems due to something we haven't begun to unearth yet."

So George too had his headaches.

He'd caught himself thinking that Thomas Reilly was an example of a species living under conditions of zero growth, when he reached the end of the flat ground and could see a high chicken-wire fence ahead. He had to get out the map to decide whether to go left or right, but could barely read the page numbers. When the wind whipped its loose page out, he gave up and chose 'right', where the slope had flats that should have a path up to them.

There was a foot-path, that led into the middle of a court and stopped. A low street lamp gave enough light for him to find that the map was out of date. But he could hear the roar of traffic ahead, not too far, so there must be a way through. He looked at his watch, annoyed at having to make another blind decision. Gone five, and he was having the first wind-pain of hunger. It was lucky that he'd cooked yesterday, so it'd be a meal cooked by Martin waiting for him when he got in.

If Carole wasn't in, which he half-hoped she wasn't, he'd go straight home on the bus.

Because some of the flats were half-completed, there was more fencing. The way to the road by choosing the right-hand path may not have been the 'incorrect' choice, but took over 15 minutes. If the captive ape has to go round the partition in order to reach the banana, he thought, if it has to move away from its goal in order to circumnavigate the obstacles, it will eventually learn to do that. This is a form of deferred gratification.

Not that the High Street in all its neon blaze was much of a gratifying sight. He even had some disinclination to cross to the block where Carole lived, remembering too many humiliating scenes around that doorway.

"Hello, this is my young man, this is! Come in and meet

--"

He'd persuaded her that it wasn't helpful to refer to one's social worker this way, particularly if the D.H.S.S. had any likelihood of sending people to ask neighbours about any potential cohabitation going on. She'd grinned and stopped that particular game recently, but not others.

He realised he'd probably avoided another game by having insufficient loose change on him to lend her 'meter money'.

When he pushed the scratched plastic bell-button he heard her steps on the stone stair well. The yellow light went on.

"They didn't send it, you know, the bastards."

"What didn't they —?"

"The money for the shoes, and the clothing grant. Look, I've been on the 'soche' for two years now and you said I was entitled to it and we'd filled all them forms out and you know, you said it would come through."

It puzzled him, since he'd referred it to the office and found that it was going through, that she'd not received it yet. That was a week ago.

It was annoying, too, for it was likely she'd been counting on using some of it before the end of the week. You couldn't tell her 'don't count your chickens'. She signed on the day after next, so that was four days yet before she would get her dole money. Not unless she got it over the counter — and that gave him a thought. He was following her up the stairs, aware that she'd carried on talking, though he'd switched off from listening. He must be getting tired.

"Wait a minute," he said and paused till she was looking his way.

"Are you on Personal Issue?"

"Whatsat?"

"You know when you go and sign on, do you go once a week and get your money in a giro, or do they tell you to come back and collect it?"

"I have to go on Friday morning and queue up. You see a lot of the same faces, it's a real laugh, you know, last week it was out in the street —"

"O.k., I think that's why. I think they've kept it till you go to the Employment office."

"That's bloody mean. Why can't they just let me have it?"

"Well, if they think these flats aren't a 'safe' address, I mean if everybody gets the post together and sometimes it gets stolen —"

"There hasn't been any giros stolen here. I know everybody, too, and —"

"But it looks as if they've decided it's not safe enough."

"What d'you mean, we're going to have burglars or summink?"

"No, they've decided, about these type of flats, see, that you all go and collect in on Friday."

"Yes."

"And because they've decided that, they won't post any other money here."

"So what are they keeping it there for? They going to spend it?"

"Invest four quid? No, I think you can go for it even if it's not your signing-on day. You'll have to go to the Enquiries."

"What do I have to ask for?"

The picture of the queue loomed again. Please God she wasn't going to ask him to sort it out for her.

"If I give you a note, you can ask them if it's come or not. I doubt if they'd know more than that on the counter."

"And what if it hasn't come yet? I'm going to run out of money."

No, he thought, this would not warrant an emergency payment. Bad luck.

He pulled out his letter-headed pad and put down as short a request as he could manage, giving the dates.

"Here you are. It should be there, or at least they'll ring the S.S."

While she was looking at it, he buttoned up his coat again and made a movement towards the door.

"Are you going off then? Is she going to be cross with you for bein' late home?"

She knew this game always embarrassed him. He found it hard lying.

"I'm going to have a rather old fried egg heated up for me, yes."

"Oh, can't she cook better than that? You ought to —"

"Course she can — I meant I'm going to have whatever-it-is re-heated."

"You ought to come up here some time, I can do you a meat-and-two-veg — save you havin' to wait that long —"

She had that sparkle in her eyes again.

"No, and I'm hungry now. And I'm going. O.k. about tomorrow?"

She wasn't listening.

"You know I'm only jokin'. But why don't you ever come down the pub — I know you're only a stone's throw away too? Why don't you treat yourself to the odd night out? Go on, I'd like to meet her. We'd get on like a house on fire, I'd bet."

He could keep in calm control all the time he was working, except when caught in a double-bind like this. It took the wind out of his sails.

Now, a straight answer would have been that, no, I haven't got a lover, I'm on my own, and also I don't fancy you, I'm your social worker. He was in a weaker position. Maybe it was from missing George that he protected himself by inventing someone, maybe it was that evening she figured out that he must be having his meals cooked. You don't tell clients about your communal living situation — or anything about your living situation, if you follow the guidelines. It's a question of not expecting the maturity from them you would from a colleague — and usually with reason.

"No. Anyway, I've got a lot of work on, more than you'd

think. And she doesn't like pubs."

He was calling from the first landing. Hell, he thought, is all this necessary?

"Bye, then."

"Don't forget, come down the pub some time."

Little bitch, she's just said she's run out of money, he remembered, then in the next breath it's — 'Come down the pub'.

The cold street hit him all at once, and he stepped back inside a minute to put his collar up at the back.

Traffic was still thick, moving its reckless ways past with extra gusts of wind that pulled him off balance. At the lights an ambulance came wailing towards him and past his right ear. He had to walk round a group of teenagers outside a chip shop, and one of them nearly fell backwards onto his ankles. He edged round the older people waiting behind, and continued past the last block of shops, then turned left into his street.

He could see he was going to need time sitting, unwinding, writing down notes for the earlier visits made, and he was desperately hoping the meal had been kept warm. Sometimes Tracey had insisted on leaving his share raw, and said it retained more of the vitamins. But it was not his turn today.

Tracey was in, Martin didn't seem to be around, but there was one of his squat Spanish omelettes cut in the big frying-pan.

"Oh, you look like a 'Had a good day at the office, dear?' Do you want me to let you eat it in peace?"

He wished Tracey didn't have to state the obvious.

It was warm enough to be palatable, so he cut a thick piece of bread and went to sit by the fire with a plate on his knee.

George's words came up at the back of his throat and he tried to swallow them down;

"I hope you'll do all right, sure, but if you're trying to prove that you can do it, I hope you don't get hurt. It's your



choice."

He'd chosen to live in the squat, but the job was his training. Inevitable that at that point in the summer he should respond to the crying need he saw for his kind of social worker. One works from the grass roots.

The very mild flavour was just right for his present appetite. Lucky one of the two not working had good sense with food. There was the disaster with Tracey's undercooked chicken curry last week, which cost the kitty and their stomachs a fair bit.

Tracey was in the back pantry, where he'd started to re-package some dry cereals and spices in empty screw-top jars. He came through after a lull in the sound of clattering.

"Here, do you want to see where I'm going to put them back? You see, all labelled, and the spices in the small jars."

Barry didn't really feel he needed to be shown, if they were labelled anyway. But he realised that this was Tracey asking for appreciation. He was very young, in some ways.

"Mmm. We've got quite a lot, then."

"I was lucky when I got all those jars from the Smiths. Must have been just the ideal time to ask them. Sometimes I'm just fortunate like that, things come into my lap and I use them, see."

"Be a good idea in case they get damp."

"Oh, but we mustn't keep anything too long, else it'll get musty."

"Better than when the mice got in."

Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned that. He was only making conversation and his heart wasn't in it. He was already beginning to worry about the next morning. He went to pick up his large file from the bookshelf.

Martin came to the door before Tracey had been able to launch very far into the mice anecdote.

He wasn't carrying anything, so when Tracey flew



towards him he had his heavy anorak-clothed arms ready to catch him.

The lump in Barry's throat rose again slightly. This was one strain he'd not anticipated, this particular loneliness. He kept his head bent over the open file, though he wasn't reading it, seeing in his mind's eye Martin's mouth opening on Tracey's, the warm hug of his arm on his shoulder.

Sooner than he expected, the private silence was over and Martin was calling across to him:

"Did you find out if they're having that benefit bop at the Gay Centre next week?"

"Ah yes, I saw Geoff and he said they couldn't have it on the Saturday, so they're having it on Friday evening."

"Why couldn't they have Saturday? We'd get a lot more people coming," Tracey asked. "Are they scared of losing the custom by getting political?"

"That's not the reason they gave, though it might be true. Not all the group on Monday wanted the benefit."

Probably Friday and Saturday that week Barry would end up absolutely exhausted, he realised for future reference.

"Why don't you stay to the end on Saturdays? You always slope off before anybody dishy comes and carries you off. You don't have to act as if you're married to George, like a grass widow. I'm sure he doesn't."

Yes I do leave early, Tracey, he thought. It's one of the few times when I have any space. Allow me that, and please, don't turn the knife about George.

"Work going all right?" That was Martin, good man.

"Pretty busy. But I cleared up one of the giros today. Oh, did your rebate come through?"

"Yeah. It was in the post, like they said."

"Still, it was probably worth phoning up, or they might have just forgotten it. You have to kick the old machine sometimes."

Martin gave one of his grins. Barry warmed to the sight

of his face.

"There shouldn't be a bloody machine," Tracey started up. "There's only a machine there to keep bloody bureaucrats in jobs."

"Yes, but in the history of the Welfare State," Barry began.

"You've got room to talk! Wrong side of the bloody counter!"

Barry kept it to himself that without his wage the chicken curry would have been even more of a disaster.

"If you take it that there aren't enough jobs, and there are social workers," Martin was speaking now, "it's just that it's too big, stupidly unfair and geared to dole out the absolute minimum."

"I feel as if too often I'm caught in the crossfire," Barry said.

"You'll go on taking all the fire as long as you're mug enough to stay there" was Martin's response. "They've caught you in this middle-class guilt trip. Offer you a job where you can feel you're being useful, and you're doing their dirty work for them."

"Look, I'm trying to get people to find out their rights and get them sorted out for themselves."

"It's bigger than that, Barry, and you'll never change things. Just like money'll never be all the answer, either. You could give all the unemployed a basic living wage, and still, though it'd be a lot better, there would be problems. Those in work would demand a lot more because they're working, and we'd still be the bottom of the shitpile. And you'd still have social problems, and people starving."

Something clicked in Barry's memory — the unaccounted factors that limited plant growth. There was no end to problems.

"Anyway, it'll keep you in work, that's one thing."

Martin was grinning again. Tracey possibly saw their eyes meet, and said, suddenly impatient, "Well, aren't we

seeing this new disco, then?"

"O.k., I won't take off my coat. You go and get yours," said Martin.

As Tracey disappeared upstairs, he said, quietly, "You know, they've got you by the short and curlies. Because you're gay, they know you'll work like a nigger. I mean, you have to be even more diligent, take a lot more. They could kick you out so easily."

Barry had, he admitted, told, individually and carefully, all of his colleagues about his relationship with George. And each one had coped with it. He was doing the job he wanted, and he had come out.

"They've got you where they want you. You'll find out if you make a slip, that they can stop being liberal and tolerant. There are unwritten laws they can use. You know that. You'd find out who your friends are. And even they are safer than you — because they're straight."

Tracey came down. Barry found himself wishing he didn't wear such bright colours.

The hand grasping the hand, and the warm ripple that seemed to spread between the two heads of hair along their arms, aroused a tenderness in Barry that was upsettingly near the surface. He turned back to the file.

When the door closed he buckled under a welter of painful tears.

He couldn't see the page, and the thought of writing anything up revolted him. Meaningless notes on blundering victims.

But what he could just do without at the moment was a work block. He was behind in his schedule. Tomorrow morning was, in its form planned so far, in a word, impossible.

I didn't need that, I really didn't, he thought. Now they're both out, unwinding at a disco.

But their support was invaluable. Imagine an empty flat, no meal, and nobody who understood your terms of reference.

He wondered if even George would understand his terms of reference.

You makes your bed, and you lies in it.

That was an idea, and probably the best thing to do, while the house was quiet, lie down for a bit. The work needed doing, but probably it would come more easily later.

He had to scrawl down a timetable for tomorrow. He scratched out two names in it and rewrote them in a list for the morning after. There was the Employment Exchange visit with Thomas, and he couldn't realistically fit in more than one short visit afterwards. That could possibly eat into his lunch hour too. He was worried — he didn't want to risk missing a meal when it was Tracey cooking in the evening.

He closed the file with the slip of paper inside, and went to make a cup of tea. Everything was an effort. There wasn't enough water in the kettle, and Tracey must have found that too, earlier, for the safety catch was out. He had to wrench it back in.

When he got under the sheets, in the welcome dark, he wondered, "What is wrong with me?"

There was the dawning fear that things were getting worse, not better. But he was used to this level of everyday stress, and was usually satisfied with the way he could deal with problems.

He knew when a client was on a 'losing streak'. He'd managed, many times now, to bring in the right measures to turn the tide, to keep someone from the loss of will that led to hospitalisation and worse.

But seeing that he felt he was losing now, his nausea was clouding his thinking. Stubborn fool for taking on so much, he scolded himself. His head was hot and the sound of his heart pounding too fast and hard scared him.

Hang on, he thought, 'Physician, heal thyself.'

What would he do if it had been a client, not himself, in

this position?

There didn't seem a problem. He was working, wasn't he? Tomorrow he'd get through it, a normal working day.

Maybe it was indigestion.

With a client, you check out a number of obvious problems, he told himself, and you isolate each one and clear it up. Till there's a working solution. It might be right down to a vitamin deficiency.

He couldn't concentrate enough to string together the questions he usually asked. It would help if he could only eliminate those things that were sorted out.

He fumbled for the lamp switch, put a blanket round himself and hunted for pen and paper.

'Regular income. Own room in house, with heating. Adequate diet.'

It was unnerving, but it seemed a positive step to tick them off.

'Support group' even.

'Job satisfaction' — he would have ticked, but he wondered if that wasn't denying most of his recent experience.

But if the work was destroying him, what was the alternative? He would have to sign on while he looked for something else, if he gave it up. The wage of a trainee social worker was not much more than his student grant had been — and it would not be too much of a step down to the dole. It'd work out o.k. now he'd got into sharing resources with the others.

Or he could go and sign on in Cambridge. — No way. That would be to fail in everything he had set out to do. He got back into bed.

George, among the tanks and glass dishes, was used to the carefully controlled day, to quiet talk that expected understanding.

People George had introduced him to — "And this is Barry, who graduated in social science," — were pleasant, quietly measured in their actions, and comfortable.

Barry wondered about his reaction — had he simply got a chip on his own shoulder? He could never grow to blend in with the Cambridge scene.

"And who's this you're hiding from us, George? I'm longing to be introduced."

To him, it was as artificial as a period play, and he didn't respect it.

And he had to keep his job to respect himself. Now, if George were back in London with him —

He imagined his shape there on the wide bed, asleep, his breathing coming over the pillow.

"You don't have to make it so hard for yourself, always," — George's voice always sent a resonant thrill through Barry's bones. He lay, holding himself in the bed, curled as if within the shape of George holding him.

HE couldn't have more than dipped asleep when there was a clatter and a howl from Tracey by the door.

Barry didn't want to move a muscle.

"I don't know if we shouldn't even get the fuckin' police!" The wail came distinctly. Barry knew he wasn't going to get back to sleep.

"Tracey, for God's sake," he murmured.

He could hear Martin's voice, sounding anxious, serious. He lifted himself up, with the blanket over him, and pulled on his jeans.

Tracey's face was actually bleeding. Instinctively, Barry slipped to get the first aid box from the bathroom, the shock finally hitting him as he regained the foot of the stairs. This was going to mean time talking Tracey down. Martin wouldn't be able to manage that alone. Barry could be calmer.

"Fuckin' kid, stupid fuckin' brat, fuckin' dangerous —"

"Yeah, Tracey's right. He was a bloody-minded little menace. N.F. maybe. He had a bottle — he must have already broken it 'cause there was no glass anywhere — and started up with that stupid old bit about the

'handbag'." Martin added, "But we don't get the pigs."  
There was a note of resignation, of unspoken abeyance to the laws of experience, in his voice.

Tracey came out of his tall defiance outside the door, and came in.

"Let's have a look at it," Barry ventured, as Tracey leant on a chair back. Barry hadn't noticed how pale he looked, till he came in.

There was a cut on his right jaw, but it looked clean.

"Come under the light. I don't think you've got any glass in it."

Barry took a swab of cotton wool and pressed gently at the side. There might be a lot of blood, he thought, but it was possibly past the worst of the flow. The cut didn't look big enough to need stitches, and he hoped it didn't.

Remembering long-past first-aid practice, he made a circular bandage dressing and told Tracey why it mustn't be pressed over the part with the cut, in case. If there was glass, he and Martin could go in the morning. But the blood was not soaking in, so it looked as if it would be o.k. for the night.

Martin was also looking shaken. Barry put on the kettle.

He noticed that it was quiet, and Tracey was unusually subdued. Barry made tea instead of coffee, took his upstairs and left them.

He might have a job 'the other side of the counter', as Tracey put it, but this was the 'Front Line' where they were living.

Before he switched out the light, he wrote another word on the list, unticked.

'Peace'.

## THE DESERT GARDEN Ian Briddon

Standing in a corner of my desert garden,  
I see a figure so pale and still, he almost blends  
Into the ever-shifting sands,  
He rarely speaks and when he does, he talks to  
The wind.

I try not to look into his face; it hurts  
Me to see him so; it reminds me of all that  
I thought I had forgotten.  
But still my eyes are drawn up to his,  
And there he holds me – spell bound.

There is no hiding place in a desert.  
My garden is no ordinary garden. In it  
I grow memories and hopes – these offer no shelter;  
There is no shelter.  
He watches me constantly.

Even now he stands before me, naked;  
I reach out to touch him and he smiles.  
The sand, blowing into my eyes, blinds me and  
I stumble over mounds of memories:  
Fond – troubled memories.

When I can see, I am no nearer to him than before,  
But relieved to see he had not disappeared  
From the garden,  
For I need his presence – always.

**THE TURNING POINT** Ian Briddon

The easy sunlight of dawn fell about his face;  
And the rock on which he sat felt warm on  
Naked skin.

He was a boy of some eighteen years – no more,  
With skin bronzed to coffee-cream and beyond.  
Hair in silken strands – ash golden, tinged with white.

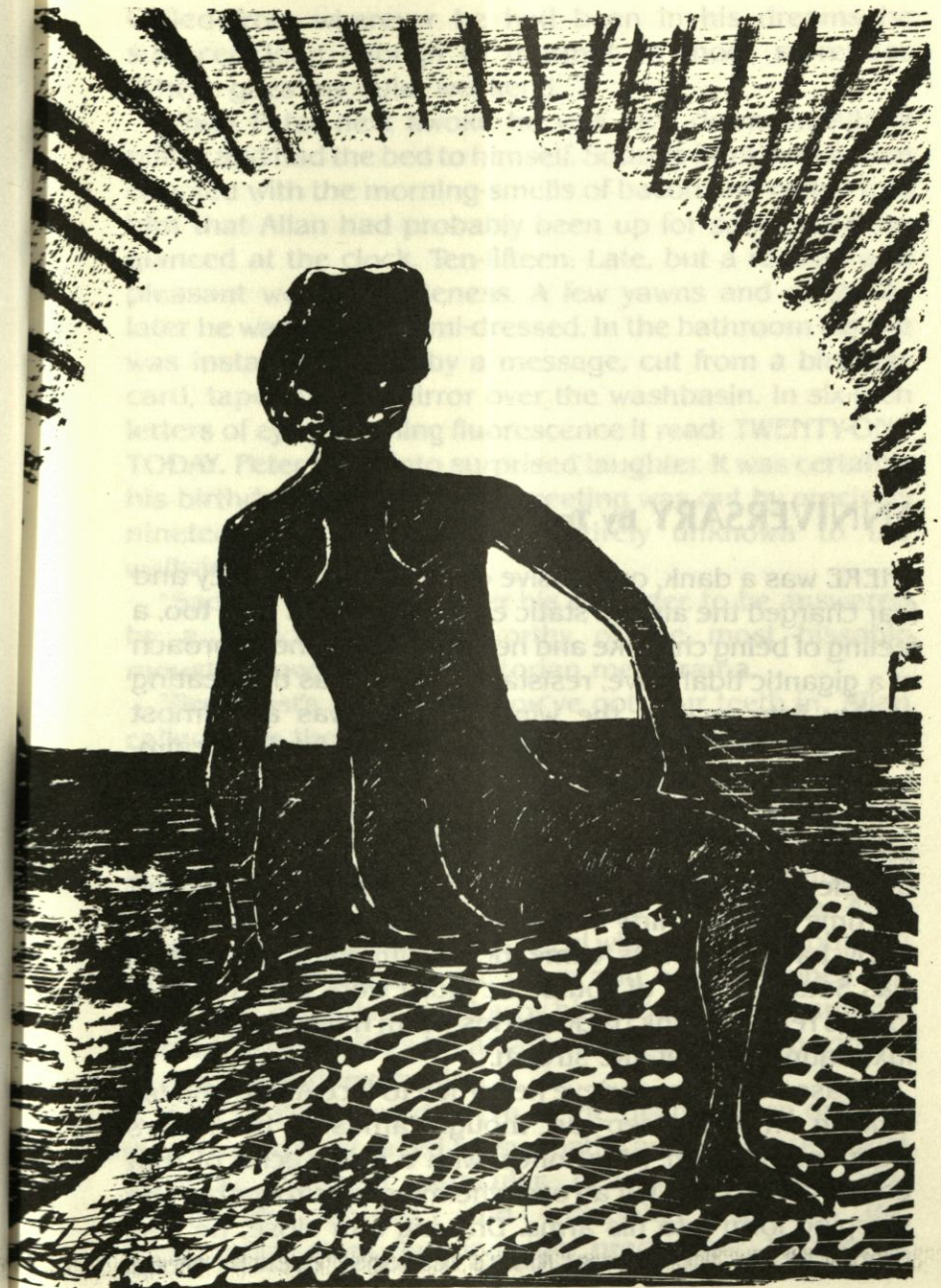
The rock-bound fiord – magnificent in Pavonian blue,  
Was as motionless as sleep;  
No hint of a ripple – no sign of a fish.

He looked out to the sea, far away.  
The cold, inviting – exciting sea, where life began,  
Or ended just as suddenly.

He thought he heard the roar of the waves;  
He imagined the voices of men and lovers;  
He almost saw the finger beckon him, urge him  
To leave the rock.

With a smile of sudden beauty he rose  
And eased his fingers slowly over his body.  
Turning to face inland, he waved to the man  
Standing by their cabin.

Like a Kingfisher he was gone, on this  
His halcyon day.



## ANNIVERSARY by Tommy Barclay

THERE was a dank, oppressive darkness. Expectancy and fear charged the air like static electricity. There was, too, a feeling of being childlike and helpless before the approach of a gigantic tidal wave, resistance as futile as the beating of tiny fists against the wind. Tension was an almost tangible force, yet overlaid with a numb and fatalistic calm. Any minute now. Any minute. Any second now. Any second.

Peter awoke suddenly, looking about him in nameless panic. The bedroom seemed far too bright. He had overslept again. A fumble for the bedside clock revealed the time as eight-thirty-five. In mid-course, as he prepared to throw back the sheets, came the blissful realisation that it was Saturday, and of course he didn't work Saturdays. In joyous relief he sank back into his warm hollow in the bed, luxuriating in a cat-like stretch.

Pleased with his reprieve he turned to face Allan, who lay smiling in his sleep as though amused by Peter's momentary alarm. All at once, with a dying echo of that earlier panic, Peter felt an overwhelming urge to gather the sleeping form into his arms. Drawing him close, he was comforted by the ease of Allan's response even in sleep.

Called from wherever he had been in his dreams he surfaced long enough to murmur, in mock surrender, "There goes my quiet weekend..."

When Peter next awoke he was face down on Allan's pillow and had the bed to himself. Sounds from the kitchen coupled with the morning-smells of bacon and coffee told him that Allan had probably been up for some time. He glanced at the clock. Ten-fifteen. Late, but a relaxed and pleasant weekend lateness. A few yawns and stretches later he was up and semi-dressed. In the bathroom his eye was instantly caught by a message, cut from a birthday card, taped to the mirror over the washbasin. In six-inch letters of eye-punishing fluorescence it read: TWENTY-ONE TODAY. Peter burst into surprised laughter. It was certainly his birthday, but the glaring greeting was out by precisely nineteen years. A fact not entirely unknown to the wellwisher.

"Sadist!" Peter yelled over his shoulder, to be answered by a malicious cackle worthy of the most hissable moustachioed villain in Victorian melodrama.

"Breakfast's ready when you've got your teeth in," Allan called from the kitchen, "and there's a telegram from The Queen just arrived."

Still laughing, yet with a vague tingle of adolescent anticipation, Peter entered the sunny kitchen and was met at the door by an exaggeratedly solicitous Allan who insisted on aiding his decrepit body to the table. After playing along with much theatrical wheezing and wobbling of unsteady legs, Peter sat down and began to open the small pile of cards which lay by his plate. Allan, meantime, busied himself with a breakfast which appeared to consist of too much of everything.

Most of Peter's cards were of the plain-spoken opinion that turning forty called for sympathy and ribaldry in equal measure. One in particular, heavily decorated with cornflowers, daisies, and marigolds, featured the predictable stork bearing the predictable bundle of

cherubic and dimpled innocence. Inside, the twee little verse had been crossed out and LIFE BEGINS AT FORTY substituted in bold letters underneath. Peter was chuckling at the leaden wit when Allan placed two packages in front of him, in his face that engaging combination of eagerness and shyness which characterizes the vulnerability of love.

"For today," he said, "and for two of the happiest years of my life."

Peter switched his gaze back to the elegantly wrapped gifts for a second or two, not trusting his voice.

"I'm not going to say 'you-shouldn't-have,'" he said at last, "you know me, I..."

"I do," said Allan, "and I'm glad I do."

"Well, be that as it..." Peter began.

"Open the bloody presents, will you?" laughed Allan in exasperation.

The largest proved to be a sweater with a stylishly simple, yet quietly expensive look.

"Without a daft motif, too," Peter noted with pleasure.

"Unique, these days."

"It's not easy," said Allan, "trying to find something suitable for a guy who's such a typical Gemini."

"Not a twin-set, surely?" Peter asked, briskly shaking the wrapping paper.

"No pearls, either," laughed Allan, "but that little parcel is for your other side, so to speak."

"Oh great," said Peter, "on my birthday he calls me two-faced."

Unwrapping the smaller gift, Peter was surprised and touched to see the dirty old copper photo-frame which he had first noticed weeks before in a junk shop on the way home from work. He had told Allan about it at the time, how it was just lying there in the window on top of a pile of dusty old books and chipped ornaments. He had tried the door many times but the shop always seemed to be closed. Just why the frame, out of all the junk in the window, should have caught his eye, Peter couldn't begin to guess. At first

sight it was pretty, though unremarkable. Closer examination however, even through the grubby shop window, revealed the swirling and intricate workmanship of the Art Nouveau period, speaking of days when the most banal articles could be designed and realised as things of beauty in their own right.

Peter laid the frame down on the wrapping paper and smiled across at Allan, who had sat down opposite, expectantly watching his reaction.

"Beautiful," said Peter, shaking his head at Allan's unusual and thoughtful gift.

"I haven't cleaned it up," said Allan, nodding towards the frame. "I knew you'd enjoy doing that yourself."

Peter rose and gave Allan a loving hug where he sat, thrilling as the young man's arms slid up under his teeshirt to pull him even closer.

"Thanks, Allan," Peter whispered into Allan's springy, deep-red hair, "thanks for today, for the presents, for being here, for everything."

"I'm the one who should be..." Allan mumbled, his lips against Peter's chest.

"Look," Peter interrupted, "quit muscling in on my thanks. It's *my* birthday."

"OK, OK," Allan laughed, "we'll settle for *snap*. How does that grab you?"

As they cleared away the breakfast things in the bright, cheerful kitchen, Peter felt, on such a morning, absurdly and undeservedly blessed.

Allan insisted that Peter's lazily begun day continue in leisurely style, telling him to take it easy, it being his birthday, while he drove into town to shop and collect some dry-cleaning. Wallowing later in a sumptuous bath to the civilised strains of Radio 3, Peter relished every moment. Afterwards he padded about the flat opening windows, allowing the soft June breeze to follow the warm sunlight which flooded the living-room and kitchen.

He was chuckling again at his cards, standing them up

on the TV like any proud teenager, when he remembered the photo-frame in the kitchen. How nice it would be, he thought, to have Allan's picture in it when he got back. Or even that daft one of both of them, taken last New Year's Eve. Rummaging in the cupboard under the sink, he found some rags and cleaning materials. Having spread a newspaper on the table, he dumped the lot down and unwrapped the frame once more. Retrieving the transistor radio from the bathroom, he switched it on while he made a fresh cup of coffee. This done, he sat down to pass a pleasant afternoon.

Peter's first discovery was that the cleaning was not quite so difficult as he had thought it would be. Even after only a few minutes of pretty robust rubbing and wiping, the copper showed every promise of a particularly fine piece of work being restored to former glory. The glass was sticky with the accumulated dust of years, the long shards held in place only by the frame. Peter turned it over and carefully raised the four metal tabs so that he could lift out the stiff cardboard backing. Tipping the cardboard slightly, he shook and slid the broken glass gently onto the newspaper. As the glass fell away, Peter made his second discovery.

What he had thought one stiff backing-board was in reality two. Between them lay what appeared to be folded tissue-paper. And a photograph, reverse side up. With an odd sense of reverence, Peter reached out and switched off the radio. In the silence, curiosity proved stronger than reverence. He picked up the photograph, turning it over slowly to reveal a sepia portrait of a young man in army uniform. He gazed out at Peter over the long years with the level, clear-eyed look of youth sure in its purpose and proud of its calling.

So engrossed was Peter in his find that he failed to hear the key turn in the lock and the front door close, so when Allan walked into the kitchen he was startled back to the present by his bustling greeting.

"Birthday or no birthday," he groaned, "you can make me

a cup of your renowned coffee, I'm just about dehydrated."

Putting the groceries on the far side of the table to avoid the clutter of rags and polishes, he hung the dry-cleaned clothes on the back of the kitchen door and collapsed into a chair.

"How's town?" Peter asked, spooning coffee into two cups and switching on the electric kettle.

"Don't ask," Allan replied. "I think Saturday should be moved to the middle of the week, when there's fewer people about."

The kettle came to the boil and Peter made the coffee.

"How's your renovation coming along?" Allan asked. Then, noticing the photograph of the young man, "Hey now, who's the fine young soldier boy?"

"It was in the back of the frame," Peter said, "packed with tissue paper."

"A mystery," enthused Allan, "how romantic. How long d'you think it will have been there?"

"Hard to say," answered Peter, "its certainly old, First World War, by the look of the uniform."

Allan held the photograph up, peering at it in odd fascination.

"Good looking bloke," he mused. "Wonder how he lived and where he died."

"Don't you mean where he lived and how he died?" Peter asked.

"Isn't that what I said?" Allan answered, puzzled.

"You've been in the sun too long," Peter joked, trying to stifle the feeling that something had changed the atmosphere in the room. "Anyway, who says he's dead? He might still be wobbling about, one of those indestructible pensioners."

In a positive attempt to shake off the faint shade of gloom which had almost imperceptibly descended on the sunny kitchen, Peter took his coffee into the living room and picked up the morning paper. He had been reading for some time and despairing of the weekend's alleged



entertainment on TV, when Allan's voice from the kitchen cut through his mild disgust.

"Hey, Peter," he called, "that tissue paper isn't tissue paper at all. Looks more like a letter."

He entered the living room with a strange, subdued look on his normally cheery face, and handed Peter a single sheet of very thin, translucent paper. Saying that it might give them a clue to the identity of the mysterious soldier, Peter took the paper over to the large easy chair by the window. The writing was in indelible pencil, faded now to a bluish-violet tracing, but legible enough in the bright sunlight. The paper, however, was dry and flaking with age, the folds threatening to split.

As he was about to begin reading, Peter noticed that Allan was slowly pacing back and forth before him, never taking his eyes from the yellowed sheet of paper. Curiosity was there, certainly, but something gave it an edge, something Peter couldn't quite place. Suddenly Allan seemed to reach a decision and came to perch on Peter's chair, one arm along his shoulders, as he began to read. The writing started off parallel then gradually sloped down to the right as the letter went on, showing it to have been dashed off in something of a hurry. Nevertheless, as the two agreed, it was a firm hand, free of unnecessary flourish.

Dear Victor,

At last, the opportunity to pen (pencil!) a few lines in answer to your most welcome letter. I am sorry it has taken so long, but I don't need to explain delays to you of all people. At least that is one benefit of writing to one who has actually been out here. Well Victor, it really is too bad of those learned docs (quacks, indeed!) to say that you cannot come back out. Too bad for me, that is! I am happy for you that you are out of it, of course, but (selfishly) I would have enjoyed seeing you again. Most of all now, when things are so bloody. I do so miss our 'chats', as there is no-one else here that I would even dream of talking with like that,

although as you know they are every one of them grand, good-hearted fellows.

Some sad news now, if you don't already know. Vaughan, Butler, Lloyd, Calder, and young Randall have all 'bought it'. A wiring party, with the moon suddenly lighting them as though they were on the stage at the bloody Empire. You'll remember shy little Randall, nose continually in some book or other. He screamed for an eternity, hanging on the wire. I pray sometimes for deafness. But this is not the stuff to give a wounded hero (yes, I heard, congratulations) so on to more current matters. I had hopes (no, I had dreams) of leave pretty soon, so that I might visit you, but that, it seems, is out. Something is definitely in the air. Can't say much here, naturally, but the terrific pounding we've been giving Jerry for the past week is thought to be preparation for yet another of Haig's 'breakthroughs'. There are enough of us here, God knows, so pray that this is the one to do the trick. (Later) Just heard from Kirk and Martindale that the show is set for tomorrow. Should therefore be all over by the next letter. If I come through (it must be said) I intend to say much, much more to you in that letter. You will know what I mean then, dear Victor, so in the meantime, Cheer-oh!

Your Friend,  
Edward.

P.S. I enclose the snap you asked for.

Although the reading took only minutes, when Peter laid the letter down he had the feeling that he had spent those minutes, and many more, somewhere out of time, far away from the sunlit room in which he and Allan sat, where the soft June breeze gently lifted the curtains at the window. Immediate reaction seemed suspended, as the mind assessed the emotional impact of the poignant message.

"Well," Peter said eventually, more to break the silence than for any real comment, "what d'you think, eh?"

Allan appeared moved, but deeper somehow, Peter felt, than was merited by the mere reading of a musty old letter. He seemed touched by something akin to grief.

"Hey, Allan," Peter coaxed, "an old letter, that's all. Just an old letter, eh?"

Allan looked at Peter as though from a great distance for a second or two, then shook his head as though to dispell an image before some inner eye.

"Right," he said. "I just felt... never mind. I'll make us both a drink and you can tidy up your mess in the kitchen."

"You're on, squire," said Peter, eagerly, feeling that a cloud had passed over the sun momentarily. Now it was gone and the room was bright once more.

Saturday evening's TV being the usual godsend to publicans, Peter and Allan met the usual crowd at the King's Head, and soon were laughing and dirt-dishing away with the worst of them. It came as no surprise to Peter that his birthday called forth every cliché known to man. He would be thirty-nine next year, thirty-eight the next, and so on. He was now due for an M.O.T. He looked terrific, providing he avoided bright lights. He didn't mind the good clean fun and the good dirty laughs, for in his time he had doled out the same treatment. All that really surprised him was Allan's drinking. Normally Allan drank very little, not simply because he was driving but because he genuinely didn't like alcohol all that much. The sight brought Peter up short. Not that Allan was anything near incapable, he was far from that. He simply had that vague, glazed look in quiet moments which reveals the beginner who has overstepped his limit.

Luckily Peter had barely started, so he decided on a switch from whisky-and-dry to straight dry ginger in order to drive Allan and himself home. As the evening wore on Allan edged closer and closer to Peter until he was leaning against him, his head on Peter's shoulder. Though still

contributing to the conversation, his offerings were dreamy and often out of context with what was being discussed. The crowd, however, merely favoured Peter with smiles of varying degrees of indulgence, particularly when he excluded Allan and himself from drink-rounds with an imperceptible shake of the head.

They left the pub before closing time, Allan making no protest when Peter told him that he would drive. He wound his window down, the fresh breeze seeming to revive his spirits, making him quite chatty in an inconsequential way. Peter said little, choosing to wait and see if Allan offered any explanation for his drinking. In time Allan fell silent, his head back against the seat, the breeze ruffling his hair.

"I didn't mean to get drunk, Peter," he said suddenly in a bewildered voice, as though his own actions had taken him by surprise.

"You're not drunk, Allan," Peter said blandly, "just unused to it and... tired."

"I feel a bit better now," Allan said, yawning, "but you're right about being tired. Tell room service to cancel my cocoa."

Peter glanced at him and laughed, but somewhere at the back of his mind a faint alarm bell rang. "Now you know how we poor boozers suffer for our art," he said.

Allan only smiled, eyes closed, his face turned towards the breeze from the open window. The remainder of the journey passed in silence.

As soon as they got in Allan suggested that they leave everything exactly where it lay and go straight to bed, but Peter told him to turn in first as he had one or two things to do. This wasn't strictly true, but he wanted the time on his own to try and put Allan's behaviour into some kind of perspective. Once Allan had gone to bed, Peter tidied up rather half-heartedly. Rinsing cups and milk bottles and putting magazines away, he tried to pin down just exactly what Allan had done that was so out of the ordinary. A few moments vagueness over an old photograph, a deep but

entirely understandable reaction to a moving letter, and for once in his life he had got slightly drunk. Not falling-down drunk, but fuddled. That was all. What on earth was there in that little catalogue of minor events to cause unrest? Nothing, or at least very little. With this open verdict Peter was nine-tenths satisfied. True the alarm bell still rang, but rather distantly now, and could safely be ignored. Peter decided on bed, sure that tomorrow all of this would seem pretty silly. Trying to slide under the covers, Peter was surprised when Allan lazily stretched and turned to face him with a wide, sleepy smile.

"You took your time," he said, his voice husky.

"I thought you'd be spark out, you fraud," Peter replied.

"Come here," said Allan, smiling wickedly, "You've still got a good hour of your birthday left."

THE sound woke Peter up. The bedroom was in darkness and at first he couldn't be sure if he was truly awake or dreaming. The sound clarified into a voice. It stopped suddenly and Peter was instantly fully awake, his ears straining to catch the slightest whisper. Something about the voice was familiar, and yet strangely altered, causing his scalp to prickle. Hoping that he would be proved wrong and yet knowing what he would find, he reached out to nudge Allan. The sheets were turned back. Allan was not in bed. He closed his eyes tightly, praying that when he opened them again it would be daylight and Allan would be soundly asleep by his side. He opened his eyes to the same darkness.

The voice began again. Allan's voice, and yet not quite, as though someone were impersonating him. The words, mostly indistinct, were a low murmur, but in them there was an urgency which he had never before heard in Allan. He got out of bed, deciding against switching on the bedside lamp, and dressed as swiftly as he could while his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. Silently, he reached the living room door where he paused, suddenly struck by

the prosaic thought that Allan might simply be making, or answering, an urgent telephone call. Even as the thought was formed, Peter dismissed it, pushing the door wide and switching on the light.

Allan looked up with a start, squinting at the sudden glare. His face drawn and beaded with perspiration, he turned away and cast still narrowed eyes here and there around the room. There was not a sign in his face or behaviour to show that he had even registered Peter's presence. Indeed the intensity of his manner, the absorption in looking around, suggested to Peter that whatever Allan was seeing, it was most certainly not a suburban living room. Then Peter noticed the furniture.

Most of the movable pieces in the room — settee, easy chairs, coffee table, TV — were arranged, end to end, in two rows. In the two or three-foot gap between, Allan crouched. Spread before him on the coffee table was the old letter from the photo-frame. Pausing every now and then to glance over his shoulder as though constantly expecting interruption, Allan was painstakingly pencilling over the faded original writing. Peter felt a chill of fear in the pit of his stomach. Sleepwalking he could understand, but this was something far beyond mere somnambulism.

"Allan..." he said, tentative, unsure of what to expect.

Allan did not answer, or give any indication that he had heard, continuing to follow the old script with deep concentration.

"Allan..." he said, a little louder, with the same result. With a sinking certainty, Peter suddenly knew what he would have to say in order to gain Allan's attention. He waited, fear and love battling within, until Allan had finished and was in the touchingly ordinary-looking process of reading over his handiwork.

"Edward," said Peter, softly.

Allan immediately looked up in his direction, face taut with strain, making an obvious attempt at brisk efficiency by smoothing and straightening the paper on the table

before him. He peered slightly, as though trying to identify a figure seen in poor light, then recognition lit his face. His eyes widened, his mouth opened and closed in disbelief. A wave of almost uncontrollable relief flooded through Peter and he stepped forward as Allan, transformed by a joyful smile, rose to greet him.

"Victor!" Allan gasped. "By all that's...I knew they couldn't hold you back, you old warhorse. Why I've just finished writing to you, this very minute, look..." With a sweeping gesture Allan indicated the creased and yellowed paper as Peter tried to steady his reeling mind.

Allan's delight, while undeniable, took a quaintly formal turn. Shaking Peter's hand with a warm and firm grip, he gave his shoulder the briefest and most discreet of squeezes. For Peter's part he could only accept, numbly, unsure of how, or even whether, to reciprocate. His jaw ached with the strain of maintaining a fixed smile born of desperation, but Allan seemed to take his nervous rigidity for a correct and seemly restraint. He continued speaking, mentioning this event and that place, this rumour and that certainty. All the while his eyes roamed the surroundings in an offhand, almost automatic manner, as though there was nothing upon which to settle with the slightest degree of pleasure.

Close to, Peter noticed that he wore that drained, hyper-alert expression often seen on the faces of those who have journeyed far beyond exhaustion and are powered solely by sheer nervous energy or blind devotion to duty. Listening to him speak, Peter also noticed, to his surprise, that his own bewilderment was diminishing and being replaced by creeping acceptance of the situation. Logic told him that he should merely cross the room and telephone for someone, anyone. Common sense said that he should calmly but firmly encourage Allan to snap out of it, but he didn't know as yet what 'it' was. All that could be done, he felt, was to play along.

It was obvious that Allan was not facing him in the

pleasant living room of their comfortable flat, but inhabiting some dislocation of space and time which owed nothing to logic or common sense. If the price of leading him out of his trauma was that he impersonate someone – Victor – of whom he had no knowledge, then Peter was ready to pay. Of the period in which Allan was marooned Peter's information was sketchy, culled mostly from novels and films, and it was while he was searching his memory for something contemporary that he noticed Allan – or rather, Edward – regarding him with concern.

"Are you sure you're all right, Victor?" he asked. "You seemed to be miles away."

"No, no, it's nothing, really," Peter replied. "Still a bit crooked, I suppose."

Edward smiled, the genuine care in his eyes momentarily disarming Peter.

"See here," he went on, "I can arrange for you to be sent back out of the line, you know. Perhaps you should have listened to your 'quacks' after all."

"You know me better than that, Edward," said Peter, immediately puzzled by his odd choice of words, since he had intended to say something quite different.

"I do," answered Edward, "and I'm glad I do."

Even before he had finished the sentence, Peter experienced a tingling, gone-in-an-instant sensation of *deja-vu*.

Trying to recall the departing feeling, he looked around the room. The light seemed dimmer, making the various bits and pieces dark blobs of shadow, vague and shifting. The very walls seemed closer, more dense, and seen through a shimmering heat-haze effect which made it difficult to focus properly on any object which might anchor his mind. The fading light might be accounted for by the fact that it was, he thought, early morning. But then, didn't that make it all the stranger? Dawn, he knew, meant that things should get brighter, clearer. Then again, he thought, Edward seemed solid enough in his smart uniform. A trifle



mud-spattered, but what was one to expect? One cannot look like a photograph all the time. There seemed to be great importance to Peter in this stray thought, but trying to pin it down was as easy as grasping cigarette-smoke. The increasingly claustrophobic feeling was heightened, too, by the wavering shadows thrown by the lighted candle near to where Edward had been writing his letter.

Peter wondered why he had not noticed the candle before. There was something about the letter, too, which rang a distant bell. Edward saw him gazing at it, baffled. He picked up the paper, folded it neatly, and presented it to Peter.

"Pretty redundant now you're here, of course," he laughed shyly, "but still I'd like you to have it."

Peter thanked him and took the crisp, thin paper from his outstretched hand. A shiver ran through him at the sight of its fine, translucent whiteness. It seemed so ordinary and yet so indefinably wrong, out of kilter. A thought came to him. "Isn't there a photograph, Edward?" he asked, "Didn't you once...?"

Edward's eyes widened in pleased surprise. Unbuttoning his tunic pocket, he drew out a sepia portrait.

"Had it done on on my last trip to Blighty," he said, handing the photograph to Peter. "Just the one. For you, of course, Victor."

Peter held the snap nearer to the light from the candle, the better to see the face. For a heart-stopping instant, at the sight of the earnest young man in uniform, he knew that he had seen it before, and that he also was aware of the contents of the letter. His head swam. He seemed to be pulled, stretched, in every direction. In his mind voices reverberated, names echoed. Names that he heard as though shouted into a long, dark tunnel.

Allan..Peter..Allan..Peter..Allan..Allan..Allan..Edward..Victor..  
Edward..Victor..Victor.

He awoke to Edward's worried face above his. There was noise all around, sounds of heavy, booted feet, clanking

metal, and creaking wood. Even in the cacophony, however, there was order of a sort, a purposeful quality, like the stirring of some monstrous machine before it bursts into full-throated life. Looking up at Edward, Victor saw the relief and love naked on his face. He still had a floaty, dreamlike feeling, but it was ebbing as reality rapidly solidified around him. A reality of sandbags, crumbling earth walls, candles, and broken duckboards. With a tense smile on his taut young face, Edward turned and motioned to the wary-looking orderly who was standing nearby. As he vanished through the frayed and filthy sacking which hung in the doorway of the dugout, the stale, sour smell of the trenches above them wafted in — sweat, oil, rusty metal, chloride of lime, and the stagnant odour of the ever-present mud.

"That's that," said Edward, helping Victor to his feet. "You'll be away within the hour, out of this bloody abattoir."

"I can't go, Edward," answered Victor, "and you know it."

"Too late, old son," he replied, tersely. "Made all the arrangements now, and that M.O. took some convincing, let me tell you. So there it is. Your first stop should be that Aussie Dressing Station, they'll soon set you up for the journey. When you get back, give my regards to your 'quacks'. And write. Immediately you land, write."

"Whatever is wrong with you, Edward?" Victor asked, concerned. "You know damn well I'll never agree to this. I am not wounded, I am not even...well, I mean, while genuine Blighty cases are being sent daily back into the line, it just isn't..."

Edward's jaw clenched and he closed his eyes, briefly, as though bringing them down on a pain with which he had to cope in silence and alone. Victor began once more to tell him that would not be leaving, but Edward suddenly turned on him.

"Who is Allan?" he said, rather abruptly.

Victor was taken aback, baffled by Edward's changed manner.

"Allan? Allan who..?" he replied.

"While you were...under..." said Edward, "you kept calling, over and over, for this Allan. Seemed very concerned that you should reach him, or find him. Something like that. Obviously he means rather a lot to you..."

A chill gripped Victor. Allan. The name called up memories, and yet he somehow knew they were not memories. Something was there in his mind if he could only take hold of it, but the image kept darting away from him like the silvery flash of a fish in a deep and murky pool. He saw a room, bright with sunlight, oddly furnished. Curtains, pale and ghostlike, lifted gently in a soft breeze. He heard a voice — "...isn't tissue paper at all. I think its a letter..." — and recognised the husky lilt. A letter. The letter. Edward's letter. Victor's hand flew to his pocket, startling Edward, and drew out the crisp, neatly folded paper. Edward watched his every move, eyes widening in horrified fascination.

Victor unfolded the letter and began to read, aloud at first, then, as familiarity spiked the hairs on the back of his neck, his voice trailed off into a low murmur. "This paper," he said, frowning in concentration, "something about this paper."

"Victor," said Edward, reaching out a hand to touch his arm. "Victor, look here, I didn't mean to upset you."

"I didn't mean to get drunk," Victor breathed, as though on the verge of some vital connection.

"What?" said Edward. "You're not drunk, maybe..."

"Not me, Edward," countered Victor, "don't you see? He said that."

Edward backed away slightly, pain and helplessness in his eyes, looking around him as though for confirmation of what he was hearing.

"Allan," he said finally, flatly.

"Yes, Allan," answered Victor, "but he didn't...I'm sure, positive, he didn't call me Victor."

Confusion was written on Victor's face. He seemed no

longer to be in control of his own thoughts. Memories and images of strange, yet familiar, scenes had taken on a momentum quite independent of conscious direction. He felt that he was being mentally shifted to one side by a force he both feared and welcomed.

"Peter?" asked Edward, with a sudden lightening of expression. "Could he have called you Peter?"

"Peter!" Victor almost yelled, clutching at the name. "That's it, Edward, that's it! He called me Peter. But why? And when?"

Edward's face reflected some of the steadily mounting excitement Victor was feeling as he at last seemed to be approaching reasonably solid ground, perhaps a solution. As he tried, with Edward's help, to discipline his errant thoughts, a ruddy-faced NCO interrupted their endeavours by raising the canvas flap and giving a meaningful cough to announce his presence.

Following a muted, urgent-sounding exchange with Edward, the NCO smartly saluted and, with one last enigmatic glance in Victor's general direction, noisily mounted the steps to be lost in the gloom of the trench above. Edward turned to Victor, his features a flushed mixture of elation and anxiety, his slim body tense as a bowstring. "Seems good old Kirk was spot on, Victor," he said. "Zero Hour is set for 3.10. I'm afraid you're stuck here with us, old chap. Queueing at the gates of Hell."

He looked at his watch, sounds of movement and rapid activity descending from the stairs beyond the tattered canvas, and began to change into another tunic, that of an enlisted man.

"Orders," he said, in explanation. "You'd better try and..."

"Edward," Victor interrupted, feeling a sort of concussed calm, "it might seem a damn silly question, but where exactly are we?"

Edward looked at him, long and deep, and for a fraction of a second Victor saw him in a bright room filled with oddly arranged furniture. Recognition came and departed in a

dazzling instant. Edward appeared to be the same, yet added to in a strange way, as if becoming more of himself.

"Flanders, Victor," he replied, quietly. "Messines Ridge. Remember?"

Impelled by a growing certainty, still with a fatalistic calm, Victor had to know more.

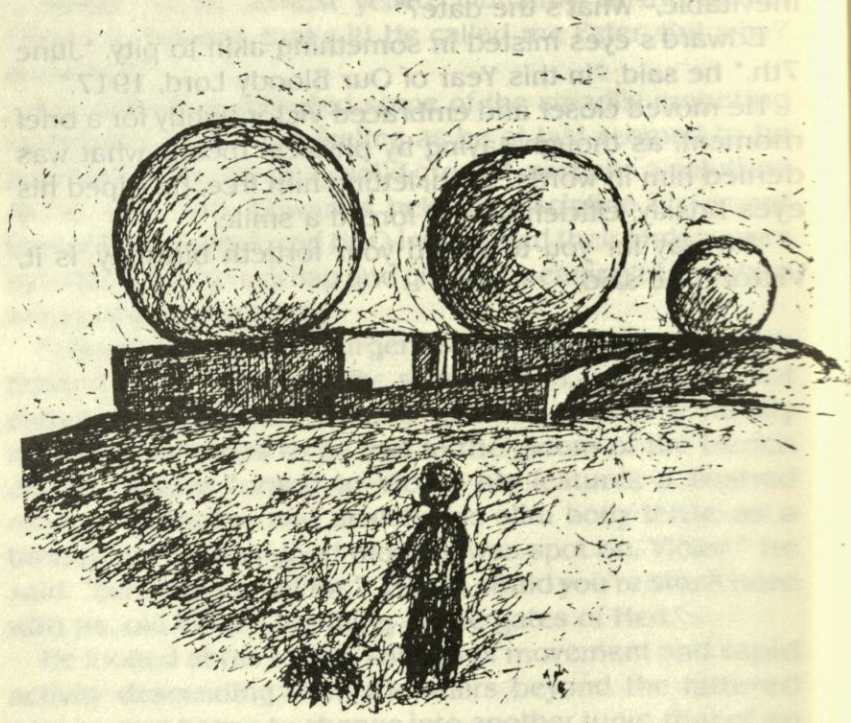
"And the date, Edward," he asked, surrendering to the inevitable, "What's the date?"

Edward's eyes misted in something akin to pity. "June 7th," he said, "in this Year of Our Bloody Lord, 1917."

He moved closer and embraced Victor tightly for a brief moment, as though saying by physical means what was denied him in words. Then, letting him free, he wiped his eyes briskly, efficiently, and forced a smile.

"No way for you to spend your fortieth birthday, is it, Victor?" he said.

dated... appeared to be the same yet  
added to a strange way as if becoming more of himself.  
... the night, quietly, "Messias Ridge"  
... one of his...  
... with a fatalistic  
... to know more  
... he asked, surrendering to the  
... the date, "Who's the date?"  
... to give, "June  
... 1917."  
... for a...  
... the...  
... as if



... into another...  
... "You'd better...  
... feeling a sort of...  
... damn silly...  
... long and deep...  
... saw him in a bright room...  
... Recognition came and...

## A DAY ON THE MOORS (IN POIGNANT MOOD)

Simon Curry

A Meccano golf ball perches in a moor,  
Unfinished, as a part-repaired broken ornament.  
Beside lie two more complete and menacing  
All snow white and delicate, hiding their purpose.

The sun beats down on the Golf Balls,  
and the heather is bursting into bloom.  
Virgin white and lilac reflected brilliantly,  
as the countryside breathes in slumber, unaware.

Bright tents and banners,  
slogans to cheer the persevering protesters.  
Sightseers gloat at the spectacle  
while driving past without thinking.

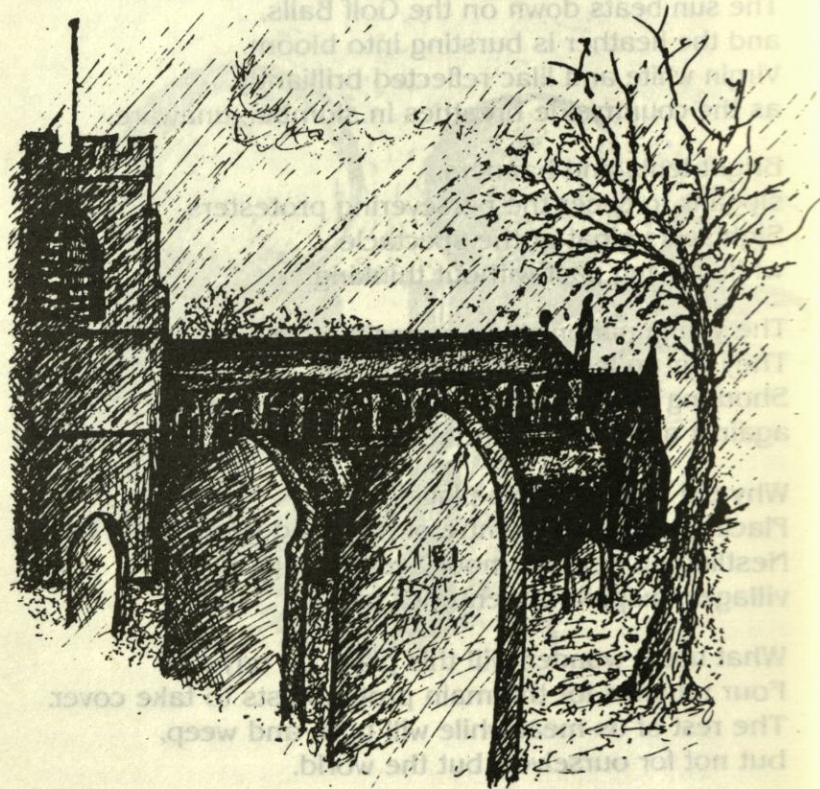
The young nationalists in opposition, laugh.  
They stir up fervour for patriotism,  
Shouting for peace but only with deterrents  
against an enemy that does not really exist.

Why did they pick this place?  
Placing such a vile centre of hate and destruction here.  
Nestling on heather moor overlooking  
villages unspoilt by centuries of war.

What use, I wonder, will this place be anyway?  
Four minutes for the main protagonists to take cover.  
The rest of us meanwhile will burn and weep,  
but not for ourselves, but the world.

Who wants to live after Armageddon?  
Only to be subjected once more to this folly.  
For surely the ones who survive will fight again  
in the name of revenge and self-pity.





## RAIN IN THE GRAVEYARD **Mike Binyon**

I see rain in the graveyard, while  
To grey the grave of death  
The brown leaves of Autumn fall  
And bury the saddened hearts so long in pain.

And the rain that falls from a dead sky  
Slips through the empty fingers of trees  
Like fragile life.  
Even the dead and gone seem more distant  
than before

But still the people pick their way  
Through these milestones in time  
To the patch containing the sum  
Of what their life has meant  
Still means  
And will inevitably be.  
So smart and black they stop  
Weep a tear for absent friends  
Rearrange the old flowers  
And drive solemnly home.

And still I see rain in the graveyard  
So I stand and bow to my unseeing audience  
And walk away.

### **INNOCENCE Mike Binyon**

As I look down on you little child of mine  
And I look into your innocent eyes  
I wonder if you'll ever know me  
Because I'm leaving now, so  
Look after your mummy when you are of age.  
She has never really been my wife,  
More my passport to society.  
And if you ever know me  
Innocent little child of mine  
Please accept me for what I am  
And not for what I tried but failed to be.  
I only hope my son  
That your society which is still in all the cradles now  
Will treat you better than mine has treated me.  
For even though they don't seem to believe,  
Or realise,  
I love you more than any of my chosen lovers.  
I'm leaving now innocent little child of mine  
So look after your mummy when you can  
And be a better man than I can ever hope to be.

### **CHRISTMAS 1983 Simon Curry**

One of the boys, am I,  
I told myself so the other night  
after kissing one of my friends,  
who was kind and grateful for my trouble.

Guilty, am I, I told myself after  
kissing one of my friends the other night,  
for my kiss was love and lust  
but his was comradeship and honour.

Who's the better for this drill,  
him or I, to choose between us if you will.  
I know not even now  
but I am sad to the very heart.

### **THE IN CROWD Ray Ede**

Outward-reaching  
Independent  
Outcasts move  
In a group  
Out towards —  
Individuality?

## LYING BY MY OWN SIDE **Simon Curry**

Lying by my own side on the sofa,  
dreaming I could be there with you.  
How can you put me through this hell  
knowing very well, how much it means to me.

But it's your way,  
never changing, always by my side.  
But it's your way,  
sometimes here mostly leaving.

A vision in my mirror on the sofa  
wakes to join the man in my eyes.  
He and I are here together on one side,  
the vision takes second place with the spies.

But it's your way,  
never changing, always by my side.  
But it's your way,  
sometimes here mostly leaving.

His eyes are watching me  
and my eyes mirror his soul.  
Now and then we see each other  
and we together control.

But it's your way,  
But it's your way,  
never changing, always by my side.  
But it's your way,  
sometimes here mostly leaving.

## SPIRIT OF SULPHUR **Ian Briddon**

Early evening – an orange orb suspended.  
A tranquil time; I'm feeling good.  
Not wanting to move – unable to rush;  
Cool vibes and lazy thoughts.

You, or someone like you – on my mind.  
And suddenly there you are,  
By the lake – in your coupé; your yellow machine,  
Your:- 'Spirit of Sulphur'.

Truly a beautiful sight – such curves.  
I am moved to tears already!  
So why not move on friend,  
Just move away – as you always do.

Can you remember the beach,  
The hot Bermuda mornings, the passionate  
Nights?  
Can you? Why the hell don't you  
Answer me?  
You, or someone like you.

You are so like your coupé;  
So beautiful – so sleek.  
Who are you; what do you want?  
Why are you smiling at me?

## THE TRANSPARENT DAFFODIL Ian Briddon

To see the other partner  
As we always see ourselves;  
It doesn't do you know,  
You can find yourself on shelves.

Of utter inexperience and  
Time and matter cost,  
You can find no other like you,  
And the one you hold is lost.



## THE GIRLS

by  
RAY EDE

WHEN I heard Simon's voice on the telephone, I knew that Helen had died. It was the only reason why he would call me. Nevertheless, we went through the formalities.

"Yesterday," he said. "Very peaceful."

"Not like?..."

"Lucy? No..."

Helen had endured the sight of her younger sister's series of strokes less than a year earlier. After a pause, Simon continued: "Funeral's on Friday. Ten-thirty. Will — er — will you be coming?"

"Certainly." No doubt that disappointed him, but he was on the defensive after our angry exchanges when I had not been advised properly of Lucy's death.

"You know where the church is, don't you?" He seemed a little nervous. Surely it couldn't be through grief, I thought, but he was telling me more. There would be few mourners, mainly family. Afterwards, perhaps I'd care to have lunch with him.

I put the phone down and went to find Roger preparing the evening meal in the kitchen. He looked up questioningly.

"Simon," I said. "Helen has died. Not really unexpected."

"Who?" He returned to his salad-bowl.

"You know. My distant cousin."

"Oh, the two old dears who helped bring you up. One of them died last year, didn't she? Now the other one's gone. Dear, dear." He prattled on. Sometimes he can be very tiresome. "And who's Simon?"

"Really, Roger, how many times do I have to tell you these things? Their nephew. My umpteenth cousin. He's a solicitor." I knew this would make Roger's eyebrows rise. There is something about the professions that appeals to him. "He's also a bore," I continued. "I'll be going to the funeral. Friday."

Roger stopped what he was doing, a piece of tomato dangling between thumb and forefinger. "But, Tim..."

"What now?" It annoyed me when he whined.

"Forgotten have you?" He threw his head back with the self-satisfied gesture of someone who knows something you can't remember.

"Oh, Rog, *what?*" I realised I ought to know what he meant, but I didn't. I *had* forgotten. Then it came back. "Oh, hell, the weekend. We were going..."

"It really doesn't matter," Roger put on his defiant voice. I had rather expected one of his irritating silences. "I shall find something to do instead. I've plenty of work." He beat some lemon juice and oil together with a fork, then poured the mixture over the salad.

We ate for some time in the silence I had expected. I was sulking, I suppose. Probably we both were. It was a warm evening and from outside the open door came the song of a blackbird, perched unseen in a tree somewhere. I wished I could be as happy and free as he sounded.

Simon's phone call had taken the arrangements for the weekend completely out of my head. Actually, we'd nothing definite planned. But Roger had sold a painting the week before and we had decided to have a celebration. I was to take the Friday and Monday off work; we might have a long weekend in London or Edinburgh, or simply go for walks in the hills around the village.

It meant a lot to Roger, selling that picture. As he had said, only fifty quid, but it was a start. It meant he was being taken seriously as an artist, not just as an illustrator of children's books, or someone who'd dash off a piece of artwork for the local paper.

I tried to pacify him. "I'm sorry, love. It won't take all that long and we can still have most of our weekend."

But the sulk went on. I knew in my heart that there was more to it than just the funeral breaking into our celebration. We had been getting on each other's nerves for weeks.

During the next few days we hardly spoke. Roger said he was working on something important and kept to his studio in the attic nearly all the time. I made a stupid joke about him having someone up there and he reacted by even sleeping in the studio on Wednesday night. That hit me harder than anything, for I felt lonely and unwanted in the night. I hadn't minded being left on my own through the evening. I had a lot of work to catch up on, including a particularly tricky consolidation which it was much easier to complete at home than in the continual interruptions at the office.

But I felt terrible on Thursday morning. Roger doesn't love me any more, I decided. I went up to the studio to tackle him about it, before going to work. I could hear him padding around on the bare floorboards, but as soon as I tapped on the door he stopped whatever he was doing and was quiet. I couldn't get him to speak to me, nor find the right words myself. In the end I just sighed, went out to the car and drove to work.

It was a long day. Simply having a two-day holiday seemed to produce hundreds of loose ends demanding my attention. Several of the partners wanted progress reports on various audits, some of them not even my responsibility. It was after 7pm when I finally left the office, wondering what I would find when I reached home.

To my surprise, Roger was sitting in the living room, watching television. He looked as attractive as I have ever seen him, in a pair of pale blue trousers and an open-necked white shirt.

"I didn't expect..." I began.

"To find me here — like this, I mean? No... Anyway, here I

am, and here you are." He switched off the television, walked over and kissed me. "Hello, Tim. All ready for the weekend?"

"Yeah..." I was overwhelmed.

Roger babbled on "Get out of those boring work clothes and wash accountancy out of your hair – you're on holiday now. Hurry up!" He patted my backside playfully. "Your dinner awaits you."

As I showered, I wondered what had brought about the change in Roger's attitude. Certainly nothing that I had done. Surely he couldn't have forgotten about the funeral.

Dinner proved to be one of Roger's delicious casseroles. A pinch of this, a dash of that; I don't know what goes in them but the result is always mouth-watering. He sat opposite me, looking up occasionally from his plate and smiling, but not speaking.

Eventually, I said: "Have you finished your project?"

"Yes. Stage-designs for the theatre. I took them down this morning. Andrew was quite impressed."

"As he would be." The sarcasm was intentional. I remembered that Andrew, leading light in the local theatre company, was one of Roger's old flames – one that threatened to ignite again every so often.

He instinctively knew what I was thinking. "It's all over now, Tim."

"Is it?"

"Well, I know there has been the occasional..."

"Occasional! Once a week more like." Even I could tell that I sounded childish.

"Don't exaggerate," Roger said gently, holding my hands across the table. "You know it was only a physical thing. And you do remember what we agreed?"

Yes, I remembered what we agreed, back in those mid-seventies days of 'open-relationships'. We were free to have other sex-partners so long as we didn't get emotionally involved. All very liberated in theory, but the reality was that I was jealous. And the jealousy was directed at Roger's

ability to have virtually whoever he liked, while all I did was lust after the latest intake of graduates at the office.

"Was?" I realised Roger had spoken of Andrew in the past tense.

"I said it's all over and I mean it. Now then! The weekend, as they say, starts here. Just you and me." He looked directly at me with a smile. "Can I come with you tomorrow?"

"To the funeral?"

"Well, not to the church or anything, unless you want to show me off."

"It's supposed to be just family," I said.

But it would be good, I thought, if Roger came along for the ride. "I know," I continued, "you have a look around the town while I'm at the church and having lunch with Simon, then we'll meet up again and I'll introduce you to the family's very own solicitor."

IT was one of those oppressive summer mornings when heavy grey clouds lower the sky and obliterate the tops of the hills on the other side of our valley. From somewhere an eerie light illuminated green hills, green trees – every shade of green. Whatever you looked at – sky, landscape or buildings – was either green or grey. I longed for blue and gold, for Greek islands and warm seas, away from the humid north of England.

I had managed to persuade Roger to wear sensible clothes and his white shirt and black cord trousers blended well with my dark suit and tie. For once he didn't chatter while he was driving. Maybe he realised that I needed to mourn a little as we sped along the motorway, across the Pennines and through industrial Lancashire.

Helen's death was not really a shock. I had been over to see her a few months after Lucy died and I could tell then that she wasn't terribly interested in living without her sister. I had not learned of Lucy's death until well after the event. Simon, ever the solicitor, had written to enquire

whether I might be "interested in the estate". Well, of course I was, I told him in an angry telephone call, but more to the point, I was interested in the people. Why had I not been informed at the time and allowed to offer my sympathy to Helen?

"We weren't sure whether you considered yourself part of the family any longer," was Simon's response.

"Who weren't? Helen and Lucy always thought so," I said.

"But the fact remains that you went off to Yorkshire several years ago and haven't been seen since."

"I don't recall anyone coming to look for me. At least Lucy used to write."

"Did you reply?"

"Well - no." I wanted to say more, that Lucy would have understood, but Simon never would so what was the point? "Forget that," I said. "How's Helen taking it?"

"Not good, not good. Has to have someone to look after her most of the time. Doesn't really know what's going on..."

My visit to Helen had occurred soon afterwards. "Someone to look after her" was in fact a kindly neighbour who often sat with Helen for an hour or two, talking, helping her about the house. Simon probably regarded Helen as a senile nuisance now, as she rambled rather, repeating the same story over and over. But she had known who I was, despite the lapse of years.

"Poor Lucy often used to say 'I wonder how Timothy is getting on in Yorkshire,'" she said. "Are you still with your friend? We used to think about you - both of you."

Helen looked at me with such a depth of truth in her eyes that I regretted forsaking the sisters since moving away. They were the ones who gave me support when I came out in a blaze of liberational fervour in 1973. My guardian, Simon's father, had thrown me out. The girls, as they were known in the family, took me in and encouraged me to find my own way. When I was offered a job with a firm of accountants at Bradford, they told me I was right to go. And when I wrote to tell them that I had met Roger and we were

living together, Lucy replied with a touching letter, the sort aunts write to favourite neices and nephews when they get married. "We both wish the pair of you," she wrote, "a lifetime of happiness together."

I smiled at the memory, and blinked as the motorway traffic came back into focus.

M6, the blue sign proclaimed. PRESTON 27.

"Where the hell are we going?" I turned in my seat towards Roger.

"M6, M58 and up through Ormskirk."

"I usually stay on the M62 and go up the 57 round the back of Liverpool. Must be further this way."

"Plenty of time." It was nine-thirty.

"I want to be there in good time, to get some flowers."

"Roses?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Seasonal."

"Oh, I see. It's just that I always associate roses with Helen. The house and garden were full of them." As I said the words, I felt they were somehow familiar, that I had said them or heard them in some other time and place. It was an uncanny feeling, but it passed quickly as I concerned myself with the possibility of our being late.

Taking Roger's route, we reached Southport at twenty past ten. Fortunately, I remembered my way around and we arrived at the church as two large black cars glided up to the porch.

"Get some red and white roses," I hissed as I got out, "and come straight back with them."

"DO you remember that incident with the bed?"

I looked up from my lemon sorbet. I had become used to eating in near silence, after the last few days with Roger and now with Simon. On the way from the church and as we waited for the food, we had exchanged a few words about our careers but further attempts at conversation had fallen flat. Now Simon was trying again.

"They slept in one bed you know." He giggled. The wine had taken swift effect on someone who was supposed to be used to business lunches.

I tried to think of something to say. "Well?"

"Well... It's...it's not..."

So his humour was directed at me. He was trying to make me angry again. "Natural? — Normal? — Hygienic? — Not what?" I realised my voice was getting too loud and said quietly, "Anyway, what incident?"

"They — er — fell out. The bed collapsed." Simon returned to his cheese and biscuits.

I did remember the 'incident'. It had been one of the few occasions when Simon and I were together at Helen and Lucy's. There as a great commotion in the night and the story was told with hilarity the following morning. Both large women, they heaved with infectious laughter.

"Helen and Lucy had the gift of being able to laugh at themselves," I said. Simon would never be able to, I thought, and I was in danger of losing the gift, if I had ever possessed it.

He wasn't listening, anyway. Waving an American Express card, he was calling for the bill. "Have you to rush off," he asked, "or do you want to pop over to the house?" He was in the process of preparing an inventory of the contents. "There might be some item of sentimental value..."

"Yes, okay. I've to meet Roger in a little while — we'll be over in an hour or so."

"Alright," Simon looked unsure. He could hardly cope with one gay man, but two?...

As I left him pondering and walked along Lord Street, I recalled Simon's reaction to my announcement all those years ago that I was attracted by my own sex.

"Hardly surprising," he had said, "spending all your time with two old women."

I spotted Roger, waiting at our pre-arranged meeting place, surrounded by a bustle of day-trippers.

"If you still want to meet the obnoxious Simon," I said, "we're invited to go and poke around Helen and Lucy's worldly effects."

"Yes. You'll want to go, won't you?" From behind his back, he produced a white rose. "For you." He threaded it into the lapel of my jacket. "I saved it from the bunches I brought to the church."

We walked back to the car and sat holding hands for a while, staring out across the bleak sand that stretched to the horizon. It was good to be together, quiet, touching.

"I went in an antique shop earlier," Roger said. "Stayed there for ages. It wasn't what they had for sale that was interesting, it was them, the old couple who ran the shop. They *knew* each other, and they cared."

"Like Helen and Lucy," I said softly.

"Yes." He nodded.

"What do you know of them?"

"You used to talk about them a lot, when we first met, and —" he paused, unsure whether to go on. "Well, you have the ability to give a great deal of love, if you'd only show it more, and I can't think where else you could have got it."

Roger started the car and I directed him through the town to the small house where Helen and Lucy had lived together for fifty years.

Simon disappeared through the dining room to the kitchen as soon as he had shaken hands with Roger at the front door. I noticed a photograph album at the foot of the stairs and began leafing through it.

"There they are," I said, showing Roger a picture. "The girls." In elegant monochrome, they stood arm in arm, laughing in the sunshine of another summer.

"I'd never have thought of them like that from your description," he said, "but then you never really described them. I expected a pair of thin old maiden aunts. Especially with you calling them 'the girls'. That's dreadfully sexist, you know."

"Sexist family," I said. "Look at Simon."



"Friendly wasn't he? Ran like the wind as soon as we walked in. Probably never been in the same house as two queers before. I bet he's got his back to the wall, wherever he is!"

I laughed. "He's much more of an old maid than they ever were."

Looking back at the picture, Roger said: "That's Lucy, I suppose, so the tall beautiful one must be Helen."

"That's right. Even to the last, you know, her white hair had a tinge of gold. She was very striking as a young woman. Had lots of admirers."

"But never married."

"No." I smiled. "That quite appalled the family. They never forgave her for working and living with her sister instead of producing pretty babies."

"What work did they do?"

"Helen was in a bookshop. Lucy had jobs in offices when she wasn't nursing sick relatives."

I looked at the squat figure, standing next to her attractive sister. Lucy had always seemed to me to be like some motherly bird with her large beaky nose and benign character.

"I wish I could have met them." Roger looked at me regretfully.

"Yes. We should have come..." It wouldn't do to dwell on it, so I said, "Come on — let me show you the house."

The upstairs rooms had been stripped almost bare and I could remember little about them. Even the room I had used held no ghost of a memory. Yet I could feel them, Helen and Lucy, watching over us and over the house.

"They were very broadminded," I said. "I remember us watching a play once on television about a girl who's pregnant and the father has disappeared. Very nineteen-sixties it was. I was a bit embarrassed watching with them. Anyway, the girl meets another bloke and they get on well, but he turns out to be gay..."

"Sounds like *A taste of honey*."

"Could be. No, that was set in Salford wasn't it? This was in London. But the point was, all the characters were so sad. And Lucy said, 'Why don't they ever show the good side of things? She can have her baby without that pathetic man who helped her make it hanging around. And she's got a man friend who's able to love other men. It's a pity more men don't.'"

"And it's a pity more people don't think like Lucy," Roger said. We had come back downstairs and were about to go into the dining room. A clink of crockery came from the kitchen. Simon was probably counting plates, but the sound reminded me of the well-organised way the girls used to prepare meals.

"Teamwork," I said.

"Eh?"

"Teamwork. That's what Helen and Lucy practised. They knew what each was good at — like making jam or doing the housework or keeping the household accounts. Lucy did that of course, she was the practical office-trained one."

Roger said something about Helen being artistic, but by now I was standing in the dining room, looking at the picture that hung over the sideboard.

It had fascinated me every time I looked at it when I was young. It was years since I had seen it. On my last visit I had sat in the lounge the whole time.

Roger followed me into the dining room.

"That picture," I said.

A meadow covered the foreground. At its edge was a red-brick wall with an arched doorway. The wooden door stood slightly open, invitingly. When I was very young, I would worry that one day I might find the door closed, so whenever I went to see Helen and Lucy I would run to the picture to make sure it was still open. I had the idea that a young handsome man, perhaps an angel, was standing behind the door, holding it open.

"It is rather haunting," said Roger. "Do you think Simon will let you take it?"

"I once asked Helen where the doorway led," I told him, "She said, 'It is the door into the rose garden'. I didn't understand then, because their garden always had roses in and there were no doors into it like that."

"Do you understand now?"

"I think so..."

"They wanted you to have it – the picture." Roger handed me a letter.

"Where did you get this?" It was one of the last letters I had ever received from Lucy, to which I had never replied. I had forgotten its contents.

I sat down at the table and Roger stood with his hand resting on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought it was all over between us earlier in the week. I nearly walked out yesterday. While I was looking for some of my things, I found your old letters. I wish you'd shown me them. And I wish you'd remember what the girls taught you."

I looked at the six-year-old letter. It contained a humorous account of family news, and of Lucy's argument with the Conservative candidate at the election. After signing it, Lucy had written: "P.S. Helen says to tell you that the door into the rose garden is always open and will be yours one day."

Helen's message had meant little to me then but Roger's understanding made it clear now. From the flower in my button-hole came the scent of the rose garden.



### AMBER Di Williams

Something about that month –  
May, the uncurling leaves,  
grass waiting for rain –  
we sat in the top flat  
that would have been your studio.  
Empty easel,  
you hadn't painted  
for more than a year.  
You said quietly,  
your voice like the gentle touch  
of a cold hand –  
it was as if there was only one woman  
thinking and talking,  
not two of us,  
one breath between us,  
yet you were forty,

I was just over twenty and  
surprised that one mature  
could still find it hard –  
"A word block," you said.  
I too could not work then –  
too many hurdles of daily survival,  
women's cries to answer,  
rights and wrongs,  
decisions pending  
before the green light  
to any clear way ahead.

I look through that year's diary,  
find a phrase, "Forever Amber".  
The waiting, holding each other gently.  
I wonder if you are working,  
whether or not your day job  
has been 'rationalised'  
or if you chose to take retirement,  
if your painting  
or what you wanted to do  
finally came to you  
as you deserved.

## POSTSCRIPT Tommy Barclay

The Recipe:

Take one or two beautiful youths;

A pinch of illicit pleasure;

Stir in some violence;

Blend with a sprinkling of Noble Thoughts;

Season well with sex;

Add guilt and/or depression to taste;

Bring to the boil, and simmer indefinitely.

Serve, with names changed occasionally.

And there you have it – Gay Writing. File under Fiction.

An exaggeration, of course. But can gay writing reach into real life and even change things? Should it in fact do so? Or should it just settle down and become yet another section in the bookshop, like a new product on the supermarket shelves? I believe there are just so many areas into which gay writing should go that the old methods of ghetto-ising it will have to be well and truly ditched. The times are exciting, or frightening, depending on where you stand. And we are standing now. Gay writing is not going to go away, it is here to stay and can only get better. Come on in and help.

## THE WRITERS

**TOMMY BARCLAY** was born in Glasgow but lives now at Leigh in Lancashire. He works in a carpet mill and as well as writing for *Mancunian Gay* and Northern Gay Writers, spends his spare time reading or listening to music. Among the things he dislikes are meat, fish, tobacco, alcohol, politicians and 'the sharp elbows of the upwardly-mobile middle class'.

**MIKE BINYON** has been involved in the Northern Gay Writers' workshop since 1982. He worked for four years as a computer operator with a large oil company but is now unemployed and lives on the top floor of a tower block in Wythenshawe, South Manchester. And most of Mike's contributions to this collection are taken from his own experiences.

### IAN BRIDDON

Does my poetry stimulate other gay men? I hope so. It is certainly written with this aim in mind. The poems exist to emphasise the beauty and strength of gay love, whether it be fleeting or otherwise. Perhaps a measure of useful cynicism creeps in occasionally; I hope this too incites and keeps the reader on his mettle. I would have my poetry bring new visions of gay love to the reader. Maybe I succeed.

**SIMON CURRY** uses poetry as a release for his anger and frustration at society with its restrictions on individual ways of life. Though he has written, on and off, since childhood, it is only recently that his work has become more serious. He hopes his work arouses more than a passing thought in the minds of his readers and that it may encourage them to try to change things.

**RAY EDE** joined Northern Gay Writers in 1982, soon after its formation. He found the experience of discussing work by other gay writers beneficial and believes this helped to give direction to his own writing. At present he is working on a novel which he prefers to describe as one which features gay characters rather than a 'gay novel'. He is married and much of his writing examines relationships involving women and gay men.

**IAN EVERTON's** involvement in the Gay Movement goes back to 1971, when he started Sheffield CHE. His disillusion with the movement following the collapse of Leeds Gay Liberation Front resulted in his novel 'Alienation' (published by Gay Men's Press). The disregard many gay men still show towards one another has brought further disillusion, which is reflected in what little of his current work is gay writing.

**JOHN GOWLING** lives and works in Manchester and was instrumental in setting up Northern Gay Writers. His gay novella called 'Marshall's Big Score' is published by Commonword.

### ELAINE OKORO

I tend to psycho-analyse myself. I ask myself, 'What shall I do? Where do I go? What shall I wear?' Then I think, 'Why do I think these thoughts?' So that's what I write about. And I think, God, there's got to be somebody out there like me. Somebody that reads all my crap thoughts, and I thank God there is.

### DI WILLIAMS

Writing takes different forms for me, depending on, for example, the length of time it's been turning round in my head before crystallising as a song, poem, story, etc. I have been an intermittent diarist most of my life. If I read from this at any two points in time, I find different pictures of me,

orienting to different lovers, with different versions of my destiny in life. But it would be pointless to label or pigeonhole them as two separate personalities. I am an evolving person, responding to what I perceive, especially the glaring contrasts society sets up, enough to have to write.

### **NORTHERN GAY WRITERS**

NORTHERN GAY WRITERS is a group of lesbians and gay men from across the North of England, and based in Manchester, which meets to explore and encourage the creative writing of its members. The group aims to overcome the isolation that gay writers experience, and to publish work collectively.

NORTHERN GAY WRITERS forms part of COMMONWORD, an organisation of writers' workshops and a community publisher in Manchester. COMMONWORD aims to help redress the imbalance in literature and to provide opportunities for working class, gay, black and women writers to meet, discuss and publish their work.

### **COMMUNITY WRITING**

COMMONWORD IS A MANCHESTER-BASED WRITING AND PUBLISHING PROJECT set up in 1976 with the aim of encouraging working class writing and getting it into print. Since then we have established four thriving writers' workshops; the 'Monday Night Group' (which is open to anyone), Womanswrite (for women writers), Northern Gay Writers and Peoples Writing Group.

## **WORKSHOPS**

We hold regular writers workshops at which people meet to read, discuss and develop their work with each other. In addition to the workshops listed above, we do some work with other writers' groups and community groups in the Manchester area.

INTERESTED? COME AND JOIN US. . .

MONDAY NIGHT GROUP is open to all. It gives everyone the chance to read their work and enjoy that of others, in a friendly context of constructive discussion.

Every Monday

Commonword Office:

7.30 p.m.

61 Bloom St., (2nd Floor)

WOMANWRITE is, as its name suggests, a group for women writers; all women are welcome to come and share a woman's point of view of writing and exchange experiences and ideas.

Every Tuesday

Manchester Area Resources

11 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Centre meeting room,

61 Bloom Street.,

(Ground Floor)

NORTHERN GAY WRITERS bring together lesbians and gay men who write. The group aims to overcome the isolation that gay writers often experience, and to publish work collectively.

The group may be contacted by phone or letter via the Commonword office.

PEOPLES WRITING GROUP is a group of mainly black and local Moss Side people who meet every Wednesday.

Every Wednesday

Storytelling Room, B.E.S.T.

4.30 p.m. - 6.30 p.m.

Greenheys Centre,

Lloyd Street, Moss Side.

## **COMMUNITY PUBLISHING**

The material we publish derives from the groups (whether our own or from other local writers' groups); by involving the writers themselves in helping to produce their own work as a publication, we aim to open up the hidden processes of writing, reading and publishing to everyone.

Commonword aims to publish a variety of writing by writers who would otherwise be unheard or unknown, including working class, women, gay and black writers.

The writing varies from stories and poems to autobiography and mixed collections. Some of the books are written in a serious vein about today's problems and conflicts, others take a more light-hearted and humorous view.

## **WANT A GOOD READ**

For a taste of the kind of writing we publish visit your local bookshop, and ask for COMMONWORD PUBLICATIONS which can easily be found in the Community Writing Section.

COMMONWORD writers reflect on the experiences of ordinary people in a direct and accessible language of their own.

COMMONWORD aims to offer a vital and radical alternative to the established literature of the large-scale publishers.

So if you want to be informed, educated and entertained, read the voice of the silenced – but now vocal – majority.

**READ COMMONWORD.**

You can get a free copy of our latest publications list, which lists a wide range of titles, by sending a stamped addressed envelope (size A5 or bigger) to:

COMMONWORD,  
61 BLOOM STREET,  
MANCHESTER. M1 3LY

**TURNING POINTS**  
**AN EXCITING NEW COLLECTION OF STORIES**  
**AND POEMS BY NORTHERN GAY WRITERS**

**TURNING POINTS**

*On a rock overlooking a tranquil fjord a boy sits....*

*A heterosexual attempts a pick-up in a gay bar....*

*A social worker 'on the front line' searches for meaning in his life....*

Characters drawn by lesbians and gay men approach turning points – moments of radical change – in their thoughts, relationships and lives, leading to a raising of consciousness.

Reading and sharing their experiences may be  
your Turning Point.

*"The times are exciting, or frightening, depending on where you stand. And we are standing now. Gay writing is not going to go away, it is here to stay and can only get better. Come on in and help."*

ISBN 0 946745 20 X



COMMONWORD

£2.95

61 BLOOM ST MANCHESTER M1 3LY TEL (061) 236 2773