

WRITE ON 15



INSIDE STRANGWAYS

Girlhood in the 20's and 50's

STORIES AND POEMS BY MANCHESTER PEOPLE

25p

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This edition of Write On was compiled by Ruth Allinson and Ailsa Cox.

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Introduction

On Wednesday, February 25th, Ray Mott, one of the four paid workers at Commonword, killed himself. Some poems in Ray's memory are printed at the end of this magazine. His death filled us with horror, not only at the loss of human life, but at our own powerlessness in the face of such utter despair. The act of writing, for most people, demands solitude and silence. It drains away time which might have been spent more sociably - and what for? The gap between what's in our heads and what turns up on the page never seems to narrow very much. And at the end of it, who's interested anyway?

The purpose of a worker writer's group is to smash that isolation - to affirm everyone's right both to produce and to be listened to. Ultimately, we can only achieve this freedom by fighting for a world in which no one is put down as "uneducated", in which no one is too tired and demoralised to write; or can't write because they live in houses where no one can be alone.

Seems a lot to ask, doesn't it? Well, just writing a poem won't change things. But at least we can use our work to find possibilities for change. At least we can share some fellowship through it. This issue of Write On brings together many contrasting writers, all with their own way of tackling the outer and the inner world. Some, like Alf Ironmonger and Ada Mason, draw on past working class experience. Others, like Nick Ripley, Ian Thorpe, Kevin Fegan and myself, have explored the tangles between private life and the outer world. Ruth Allinson's Workers of the World and Sammy Tierney's Prison Tale deal directly with the violence and oppression underlying our enlightened society.

All of us are united by our compulsion to write. However much we try to change the world, we have to come back to ourselves. If there is any point in working for anything, it is in the faith that individual lives can change. At the heart of a writer's group there must be trust between one another. We, more than anyone else, ought to know that the admission of private conflicts is not a sign of weakness or a distraction from the struggle. It is the struggle itself.

Ailsa Cox

Tidying Up

Burning toys, just a few
while they're out shopping.

Petroleum plastics
mollify in flames -

Too many to tidy,
too many to mend.

If the tinies caught me,
guiltily dispensing

With thalidomide dolls
and dismembered bears

Screeching they would prise
the ragged corpses from me

And clutch them to their bodies
for intensive care,

Shouting, "Daddy's burning toys
again", followed by

"Can't you leave
their things alone?"

Pragmatically, I thin the ranks -
prune the social organism.

To them a fascist in toyland,
ruthless and totalitarian -

Hurrying a sprouting golly
to char beyond recovery.

The dustbin itself
is not certain riddance -

Deceased, they would be rescued
and secretly reintroduced

At tea parties - And so I
incinerate to fine grey dust

Those plastic dissidents
whose floorstrewn presence
Has become a chore, discardable
playthings of tele-children,
Stuffed wool animals afire,
open bellies of sparkling straw,
As squeaklessly they subside
to blackening carbon.
Disney expressions slurp
and drip; cloth susans extend

Their mutant limbs to soot -
no relics of itretrievable
Identity, exhumed from a trunk
to reminisce, this anonymous
Junk for some one else to clear.
Smoked clockworks and squeaks
Of redundant toys pass unnoticed
as I edge out of the back
Door, and confidently
lower the dustbin lid.

Bob Wood

Bob Wood is a recent arrival at the Commonword workshop. He would have time to write more poetry if he wasn't always tidying up.....

A Memory of Shops

The area where I grew up has gone. Now there is only Wood Street, with gaps here and there left when bulldozers cleared away houses and shops which formed our small community.

Long ago I dreamed that buses were still running along Wood Street. My one prophetic dream. Gone are the streets where my friends and I roamed and played. Gone the rows of houses - with gardens - where I lived. Our house had ivy round the door. Something special I thought!

The shops were a part of my growing-up life; they had character, interest and a bit of mystery. Just a few yards from our backyard gate were three corner shops.

First came Jake's chippy on the right-hand corner. I didn't like going at busy times, as it would often be packed right to the door. Watching my turn, remembering who came after me, did not leave sufficient time for gazing around; the counter being high, I sometimes got overlooked. Occasionally some one would say:

"It's the little wench's turn."

I preferred the chippy when not very busy. Then I could get near the counter, stand on tip-toe and watch potatoes being chopped into chips. I wondered however they missed their fingers.

I was all agog when Jake or a helper went into the other room for potatoes. The dark dreary room conjured up uncanny ideas and weird imaginings. The chippy was part of an old dilapidated building owned by an aged woman we pretended to be a witch.

I enjoyed the grownups gossiping while waiting my turn. Then came my turn. "Three tuppenny mixtures please, one with white chips." Father liked white chips. Very odd, I thought! But he also liked day-old bread, cowheel, pig's trotters and savoury ducks. Fathers liked queer things.

Jake was dark, short and fat; a bit grumpy at times, but he sure made good chips. The warm chippy-smell of his shop felt good, especially on cold winter days. Jake's chippy had

a Mrs.; she was a shadowy figure.

Opposite the chippy, on a corner and up two steps stood Sam Kershaw's grocery. I remember one unlucky day dropping a pot of jam down the steps; staring at the mess, almost in tears, realising that none could be saved. Got off with a lecture from Dad.

Sam Kershaw was a merry looking, stocky man, with a bit of a waddle. Over the years he had become part of his shop - they complimented each other. When he died, some years later, a son-in-law took over. Not the same; he didn't fit. Too tall and lanky!

If no customers were in the shop when I went in, I would watch for Sam Kershaw coming through the door from some mysterious region. Being plumb on a corner, the tiny shop was triangular, with a counter across the wide part, behind which were tins, jars, packets of this, that and the other. Such a variety in so small a space.

When a customer bought coffee, I would watch the coffee-grinder being turned. That fascinated me. I loved the rich smell. Didn't have that kind of coffee at our house. Camp, we had.

Standing on the remaining corner was Holt's fish and vegetables, kept by a large, dark-haired man and his plumpish ordinary wife. But the girls around our few streets - including me - thought her very extraordinary when she had a baby. A baby. And she was forty years old! To us girls, this event had to be the seventh wonder of our age.

Another circumstance at Holt's, which, in those days, I thought mysterious: Mr. or Mrs. had a mother in the front upstairs room. She could not walk; couldn't even get out of bed. This perplexed and puzzled me. I often looked up at her window when passing by. I never saw her. They named the baby Alice. Not long after her birth fresh people arrived at the fish and vegetable shop. I do not remember them.

Next shop down the street - Sammy Oldroyd's herbalist. In memory, as I enter the rather dim interior, I can smell a variety of sweet and savoury herbs hanging from the ceiling. Comfrey, camomile and poppy heads which our father used to boil, for some complaint or other. Pungent-smelling sage and thyme, sweet-smelling rosemary, and ever popular parsley and mint.

He sold Febrifuge, Fenning's fever cure, Epsom salt,

Beecham's pills, laxatives and lung-healers, not forgetting linseed and spanish which Dad also boiled whenever we had a cough.

Sammy Oldroyd couldn't be called fat, just small, solemn and roundish. But he had a moustache and a parrot. Sammy and his parrot were look-alikes. When I went into the shop I expectantly glanced at the parrot, hoping it would talk. It rarely did. Solemn, like it's master.

My friends and I, as we got older, sent younger children into the shop for a pennuth of "round square drops" or "ell-uv-a-lot drops". Thought we were clever.

I bought my first box of powder from Sammy Oldroyd. Phulnana, tuppence a box. Any trouble my sister or I had with periods, round to Sammy's for Indian Brandy. We could buy cough drops such as Victory V gums, Zubes and, my special favourites, those brown, oblong, chlorodine lozenges. I can still feel my fingers in a pocket breaking off bits - a whole one was too much in the mouth. Ooh! they were hot. Lovely!

Sammy Oldroyd, the herb-shop man, was quite special. He sold so many things necessary to our growing-up years - I never mentioned chocolate worm tablets. Sammy Oldroyd had a Mrs.; she was a hazy buxom figure, seldom seen.

The paper shop, as we called it, was owned by Mr. Fielding, a grey-haired, unsmiling man. His wife, a tall, thin, politely uppish woman, frequently served in the shop. She would often say to me: "How is your mother?" Always I replied: "She's all right." My mother had told me to say that whoever asked about her. There were three children at the paper shop, two girls, one boy. Occasionally they played around with the rest of us. We bought evening papers from Fielding's; not Sunday papers as our father had a Sunday "round". We also bought odds and ends such as matches, pencils and crayons - when lucky; comics, but not often; tiny pot dolls with painted black hair, for a penny or tuppence - that would be a treat. I went for a stamp now and again. Mr. Fielding looked more unsmiling than ever when I just asked for a stamp. I bought fancy writing paper, matching envelopes, when writing to my first love. The newsagent's was the least interesting of our shops.

After Fielding's came Clarke's, the butcher's. Nothing exceptional or extraordinary about them; unless the way they

managed not to chop off fingers or thumbs. We girls were interested in the two sons - years older than us, but handsome young men. One dark, one blonde! The blonde, being younger was our favourite. He liked to tease us. Sometimes we went begging for rickers. Not that I could make them rick properly. I went to Clarke's butchers for ice when our mother had haemorrhage.

The biggest shop on the row sold ladies' wear, coats, gowns, skirts, hats, ribbons and laces. Underwear could be bought, silk stocking - real or artificial - also lisle and itchy black woollen. One could get togged out from top to bottom on the never-never. The shop belonged to Mrs. Illingworth, a tall, ample, black-haired woman.

We didn't buy much from this shop except haberdashery and such, but the large bright window acted as a magnet on winter evenings to our small group of girls. Eight o'clock closing in those days. We played guessing games, or chose the various clothes we would buy if we were grown-up. At about the age of seventeen, I bought a tan-coloured coat, with a tie belt, from Illingworth's on tick. Father was very annoyed. I also bought a pale green sleeveless dress, with hand-painted flowers around neck and hem. Straight, low-waisted twenties style. I wore it to the mill dance. A very special buy was a lemon, silky-straw cloche hat. Mrs. Illingworth helped me select a trimming. We decided on a bunch of cherries; I stitched them so they would dangle over the left-side brim. The plain hat became a fetching, eye-catching creation. Not many years later, Mrs. Illingworth left the shop. It became a men's hairdresser's.

Of great interest to the young of our area was the toffee shop, kept by a pleasant-faced, chubby, chatty lady called Mrs. Storey. Her shop window was a jumble of toffees and sweets children love. There were liquorice straps and laces, gobstoppers, turn-overs - supposed to have lucky charms in some of them. We had to be lucky! Also on view, kaff suckers, toffee cigarettes and tobacco, locust and aniseed balls. What choice! With a penny or halfpenny in our hand, we took lots of time. There was always a pile of thin flat oatcakes in the window - don't know who bought them. Mrs. Storey sold bread - Tip-Top - sugar and a few other groceries.

Mr. Storey seldom served in the shop. He had fits. The odd time when he came into the shop, not understanding, I

felt scary: afraid he might have a fit while serving me. He walked through the door from a never-to-be-seen inner room, very slow, his thin, pallid face ghostlike. I was glad to get outside with my toffees. The old man died, but Mrs. Storey kept the toffee shop going for many years.

My father had a second family of two children; they patronised the junky-jumble of a shop, even though threatened by their mother. She preferred them to go lower down the street to a posh Sweets and Confectioner's.

These are the shops which most interested me. There were several others. For instance, we bought bread two streets away from Holt's fish and vegetables. Nothing odd or curious there. Except they sold those savoury ducks Dad enjoyed so much. We had them for tea every Monday - one penny each. Haven't eaten one since. They call them faggots now.

Most of our bits and bobs - pins, needles, tape, 'lastic - we bought from a shop on the next corner from Holt's. It was a well-run shop owned by a pleasant, dandified little man. Nothing mysterious there.

It is two or three years since I visited Wood Street. Perhaps the gaps are filled with new flats and houses. I have never been up Wood Street on a bus. Sometimes I go through the town on one; it is strange to me. But I can visit my childhood world whenever I wish. There it all is in my memory; especially my memory of shops.

Ada Mason

Ada Mason was born in Middleton, but has also lived in Edinburgh, Wiltshire and British Columbia. She is a member of the Koochdale military group.

Era of the Teds

You know, it's great being sixteen and allowed to stay out 'til ten. If I miss the last bus home from the dance, and I do every Saturday night, then my mam covers up for me to my dad. HE seems to have gone a bit daft since I grew a 40 inch bust! and you should have heard him carry on about the tight sweaters I wear, and the skirt with the split up the back.. 'hussy' he called me! So I bought a circular skirt out of my wages, I get £3-5-0 now you know, HE wasn't satisfied.. make it easier for the lads! (he said) .. how about our mam's French knickers? How easy can you make it? Oh! we do have some arguments, my dad and me! Well, he doesn't trust anyone. That's what comes of being a policeman I guess. HE says it's the lads he doesn't trust.. That makes two of us! Tho', have you seen them? Boys! all they care about is their long, greasy 'D.A.s' and their combs.

I've got a lad. He stutters and, best of all, he's a Ted. Well.. he calls it 'Edwardian'. Was our dad speechless! an' did I laugh. Not to his face mind.. our dad packs a mighty wallop! Come to call for me, didn't he? All done up in his electric blue drapes and creepers, shoe-string tie an' all.. He looked a right cool cat! Dad didn't talk to me for a week. Oohh.. it was quiet for once.

My two sisters are rats! The things they say I do! Just wait until they want to snog! What is a French kiss or two? Just let him try anything else and he gets one!

I think I'm in love. Well.. I sort of 'go' for him when he wears those jeans that he soaked on himself in the bath, murder they must be! And that leather jacket. Studs on the back and chains on the shoulders that I get my long earrings tangled in. I don't like chewing gum.. but I like the way he chews it. He smokes too, and drinks. I don't do either and he says he won't let me start. Ooohh.. get him! Leather feels cold to snuggle up to tho', so he lets me snuggle under his jacket. It makes me all breathless and 'funny' like. It's hard sometimes to tell him to get his great paws off. When we are engaged he can touch me, but only on top.. I'm a bit proud of

those. They were a bit late coming but they made up for it! Jealous he is, great! I like a man to fight for his bird. Not too much, just sort of ruffle feathers. I don't like to see blood, and he won't dirty his suit. I love the way he combs his hair. Takes ages. It has to be just right you see, and then the front is flicked into a 'Tony Curtis' quiff.. smashing!

Jiving.. we need limbs like elastic! Mind you, our dad says we may as well make love on the dance-floor.. Dirty talk that.. not nice. I made my boy throw away his flick knife and his knuckle dusters. Rough old things. He did it just for me.. love him!

He practices leering, lopsidedly, into the mirror. Watches himself when he talks.. drives my mam up the wall!

We are getting engaged when I'm seventeen and he is eighteen. I want a ring with three stones. It will make my friend, Pam, pig-sick and green. Won't make our dad feel too good neither. Ooohh.. it's smashing to be sixteen in the 'Fifties'..

Joan Batchelor

HOME TRUTHS

Writing group for women.

Fortnightly Tuesdays, at 7.30 p.m.,

Stretford Library.

Contact Joan and Ailsa at Commonword,

tel. 236-2773.



Close Encounter of the Other Kind

During the war, my new baby sister
Was a great disappointment to me..
Mam told me that man Hitler had
'Taken all the spare parts that
Would have made a brother.'

Now, I was five years old and most
Curious to know just what part it was
That Hitler hadn't left enough of to
Make me that long promised brother.

'Show me..' I demanded
Of the little boy next door.
Mind you.. he wasn't daft,
'Show me yours first', he said.

But, he had bathed with his sister,
Did I get a shock! speechless.
Well, no wonder my baby brother
Was but a pitiful sister..

Yet, it was such a tiny worm..
I would have thought Hitler could
Have been a bit more generous..
I felt quite sorry for the boy in the bib,
For I'd seen my dad get out of the bath,
And up against his.. this lad's was a laugh.

Joan Batchelor

Joan Batchelor, ex-fiancee of a Welsh teddy boy, has a book of her poems published by Commonword, and is now running a workshop for 11-18 year olds in Stretford.

Chicago

They were making a film about poverty
in the Chicago thirties:

"I've found the perfect place,"
said the world famous actor-turned-director;
"Moss Side, Manchester, England.

It's renowned for its crime,
its blacks and its housing."

"It'll take a lot of money to fly
the company to England,"
said the Producer.

"Then we'll cut costs elsewhere:
what's the going rate for unemployed
in Manchester?"

"I've heard it's a buyer's market in Moss Side,"
answered the Producer, "40 dollars a day for 5 12-hour shifts."

"Buyer's market, you say?" thought the Director.
"We'll make it 30 dollars a day. We'll need 600 extras."
"Good." The Producer was pleased.

"These 20 million pictures are difficult to budget;
but nobody can say we aren't bringing wealth to the economy
and pleasure to the public."
"And times were hard in Chicago,"
concluded the Director.

Pull the Venetian Blinds

They met on a dual carriageway:
she in her Mercedes Sports,
he with his push-bike and denim shorts.
At the traffic lights he leaned over and proposed marriage.

There are certain beautiful things
in the world
he cannot have.

He said he would like to travel
to Tokyo or Jakarta
so, back on his bike, he pedalled
to the nearest Arndale Centre.

And he thought of all the wonderful sights
in the world
he would never see.

He stopped at the Arndale Centre
to consider the art of shopping:
he stared at baskets, clothes and rings
and a sign saying, "free to enter"

and marvel at the fancy goods
in the world
he could not buy.

He went to do some reading
in the Central Library
where everything was free
but nothing worth having

and he read about the knowledge
in the world
he could not understand.

So he cycled down Aytoun Street
and passed by the Grand Hotel door
to look at all the vacancies
and put his mark at Box B4.

And he looked at all the jobs
in the world
he could not have.

It is easy to put things
out of your mind
just close your eyes
and pull the venetian blinds.

on all the beautiful things
in the world
you cannot have.

Kevin Fegan

Kevin Fegan lives in Stretford. He writes stories, poems and fables.

A Day to Remember

Johnny Dance woke up full of joy. This was his fourteenth birthday. No more school, and his first pair of long trousers.

His father had managed to get him fixed up for a job in the draughtsman's office of the engineering firm where he worked. He crept downstairs in bare feet, being careful to miss the stair which creaked. As he entered the kitchen in the half-light, he could just make out the grey trousers. Smiling to himself, he touched and stroked them before picking them up. Nearly all the lads he knew already wore long pants. As he put his bony legs into them, he couldn't help wondering what they would say when he met them in the cafe. Closing the kitchen door, he lit the gaslight. The mantle spluttered as it warmed until fully heated, its web-like bulb illuminated the kitchen. Looking down at his grey clad legs, he couldn't get over the sheer pleasure of the creases.

His reverie was interrupted by his father's voice: "Is that you down there, Johnny? Do you know what time it is? What the bloody hell are you up to!" From his mother and father's room, he heard his mother's voice: "Don't shout at the lad. It's his birthday. I suppose he was too excited, that's why he got up so early."

The kitchen door opened. His father, holding his trousers in a bunch at the waist, stood looking at him. "Well lad, now you've woke the bloody house up, you'd better put a pan on the stove for a cuppa."

Johnny walked into the scullery.

His father's voice followed him: "Bloody four o'clock. I'll be meeting myself going to bed at this rate."

He brewed the tea, pouring three cups.

His father put sugar and milk into one of the cups, saying, "You'd better take this up to your ma."

Johnny, carrying the cup so he wouldn't spill any, tapped quietly on his mother's door. "I've brought you a cup of tea, Mam."

His mother's heavy frame rose from the bed. There was the

scratch of a match being struck as she lit the candle at her bedside. "Come here, lets have a look at you. My, but you look so grown up. . . . They're not too tight under the crutch, are they?"

Johnny shook his head. "No Mam, they fit a treat. As he was walking out of the room, her parting shot was, "Look after them. It'll be a long time before you get another pair. Besides, they're not paid for yet." He wished she hadn't said that last sentence; it made him feel as though he wanted to take them off and chuck them on her bed, telling her to send them back, but he didn't. Sitting at the wooden table, drinking his tea, he listened to the coughing coming from the scullery where his father was; sounds of phlegm being spat into the sink and a tap turned on full - the rush of water going down the plug-hole. His mind was full of the day. What would the job be like? Would he be able to do it? The waiting - God, why can't it be five o'clock in the afternoon, then all the questions would be answered.

His father came from the scullery, the neck of his shirt tucked in, whilst he wiped away the remains of the shaving soap. "Get my boiler suit from behind the cellar door, will you, lad." Johnny put his cup on the table. Opening the cellar, he reached behind, bringing forth a pair of greasy overalls. As he handed them to his father, his father said, "There'll be none of these for you, my lad, if you work hard in that office, so don't forget now, do as you're told and you'll soon learn."

It was surprising how fast the time seemed to go after his father left at seven, saying, "they", whoever "they" were, "would think he'd shit the bed". His mother had come down and was now fussing with his tie.

"Aw Mam, it's all right. I'd better go. I don't want to be late."

Flicking a piece of fluff from his lapel, she said, "You've bags of time. Don't you think I should go with you?"

The mere thought of being led by the hand to his new job filled Johnny with a kind of panic. "No Mam," he answered quickly. "Oh no, you'll have them thinking I'm a baby or something."

His mother smiled as she handed him a packet of sandwiches. "All right, Johnny. I just thought you'd like me to, that's all."

Johnny left the house. All the way down the street, he could feel his mother's eyes. He turned, gave one final wave, and turned the corner. At last he was finally on his own.

The journey from his home to his new job had taken him twenty minutes. He looked across the tracks of the railway to the clock on the distant town hall. Half past eight. He wasn't due until nine o'clock. He was conscious of a dryness in his mouth, and just for a split second felt like running back the way he'd come.

Breathing in a deep lungfull of air, he pushed open the double doors to the office. Once inside, he could hear the sounds of the workshop. He stood in a small foyer, wondering what to do next. When a gruff voice from behind a glass partition said, "Yes? Can I help you son?", the suddenness caught him on the hop, "Er, I'm er.. starting work today, I'm to see a Mr Chambers at nine o'clock", the voice took on a kinder tone, "Oh! Mr Chambers is it, well you're a little early for him, I'll tell you what, sit on one of those chairs there and when he comes in I'll tell him you're here". Johnny sat down, he wished now that he hadn't come so early.

Every few minutes Johnny would get up, walk over to the partition window and ask the time. The man sitting there would tell him to go back and wait. The office workers began to arrive. As a new face came through the door Johnny would look in the direction of the partition, but every time he did, he was met by a shake of the head. Finally a small, fat man came through the doors. "Good morning Mr Chambers sir, this young fellow has been waiting to see you, says he's to start this morning." Johnny leapt to his feet, the fat man stood looking at him. "Ah! you must be George's son, come with me."

Johnny was led through an office which reminded him of a classroom, the only difference was the desks were like easels and there were no chairs. At the end of the long room was a small office with large glass windows and on the door a name plate saying, 'Mr Chambers. Manager'. Inside was a desk and two chairs, one behind the desk was leather upholstered, the one in front was straight backed, wooden with a leather seat. "Sit down and tell me your name. Is this your first job?" Johnny sat in the chair, "Yes sir, I've just left school". "Well now, your duties will be to brew up for the men, and go on any errands they may want, until we find out what kind of

lad you are". The look on Johnny's face prompted Mr Chambers to continue, "Of course, in the meantime I'll have somebody teach you some of the rudimentary things about draughtmanship, now if you'll just wait there a moment I'll get our other young apprentice to show you around". He left Johnny in the office and walked out, Johnny heard him shout, "Herbert". A voice answered, "Yes Mr Chambers?" He returned with a tall, fair haired lad a few years older than Johnny. "I want you to show Dance here what his duties are. Take him around with you, and remember you're here to work. Now, off you go."

Johnny followed the youth out of the office, down a passage way to a room with shelf-like boxes all along one side, each one numbered and filled with rolls of paper. "What's your name youngster? mine's Harry, Harry Herbert". He held out his hand. Johnny shook hands with him shyly, "Johnny Dance, my dad works in the machine shop". "Oh! I know Old George, he's one of the best.. your dad". Johnny felt a glow of warm friendship towards him when he said that about his father. Harry pulled out a packet of five Woodbines. "Do you smoke?" He offered the packet to Johnny. "No, I'm only fourteen." Harry laughed, "O.K. but if you do, don't get caught smoking in here 'cause this is where all the design plans are kept." He lit one of the Woodbines and sat on a box. When he'd finished smoking and had put out the cigarette end, he stood up, "Come on kid, it's time to start work."

They walked back in the long room which now had a man at each of the easel type desks, at each one Harry introduced Johnny. They collected cups and mugs on a tray as they went along. Outside the room, near the foyer where Johnny had sat earlier, was a small kitchen with a big tank and a gas jet. Harry lit the jet and pushed it under the tank, "You wash those cups while I get the tea, will you kid?" Johnny took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and started to wash the cups. Harry in the meantime was putting tea out of a packet into a muslin clothe, the sort butchers have wrapped around lamb when it's delivered to their shops. Johnny mentally counted the spoonfulls Harry put into the clothe. "What do you do with that now?" he asked. Harry looked up from what he was doing, "Watch!" He tied a piece of string around the gathered muslin which made it like a small bag. Then he lifted the top off the tank and dropped it in, trapping the end of the string with the

top of the tank. "Now we just wait until it's boiled and 'Hey presto' we pour the tea!" As he said this, he turned on a small tap at the bottom of the tank. From a cupboard he brought out a cup and saucer, "This is Chambers, it's special so for Christ's sake don't break it."

Johnny had never seen such a thin cup in his life, it was like the kind of cup he imagined the queen would drink out of. Seeing how Johnny looked at the cup, Harry picked it up, "Here look at this", he held the cup to the light. There in the bottom was a woman's face, when he took it down from the light the face was gone. "That's what's known as bone china". Johnny couldn't wait to get home so he could tell his mam.

While they waited for the tank to boil, Harry put a small tray with a cloth on it, a bowl of sugar, a jug of milk and Mr Chambers special cup. "This is for his lordship, I'll take this in first, before we give the other's theirs, otherwise he'll have a bloody long face all day."

The tea having been given out to the men, Harry and Johnny sat in the kitchen drinking from two large mugs. Harry took out a note book. "When we have finished our tea we'll go 'round for the orders for dinner". He showed Johnny how to list the names with what the men required written alongside each name, saying, "Make sure you get the right money from them, one or two of them will do you if they can". He flicked the pages of the book, Johnny saw more names, with figures alongside them. "What are those names for?" he asked.

"Oh! I wouldn't bother about those yet, wait until you've been here a week or two and then I'll show you what that's for".

The morning seemed to go so fast. Between the two of them. They had been to the shops and completed their morning's work.

They sat in the dusty back room where the design drawings were, to eat their sandwiches.

"Harry, do you think it would be alright if I went to see my dad?" Harry, his mouth full of sausage sandwich mumbled, "Sure, if you hang on a bit, until we've finished eating, I'll take you down".

Ten minutes later Harry stood up. "Right, youngster, let's go and see how the other half earn their corn." Johnny followed him through a maze of passages, down a flight of wooden stairs into the workshop.

The size of the machines standing like soldiers in lines had Johnny looking this way and that as they passed between them.

In a corner, at the far end of this draughty place, was a line of benches with tools scattered on them. A number of men drinking tea from cans and eating their sandwiches with hands black from their work, sat on boxes. Harry called out, "Hey George! I've brought you a visitor". At first Johnny had trouble recognising his father, for all the men looked alike, all black faced. His dad got up. "Hello son, how are you getting on? are you settling in alright?" Johnny felt his face going red.. "Yes dad". Harry said, "You don't have to worry George, I'll look after him OK." Johnny's dad spoke, "Alright you young bugger, but don't be teaching him any of your bloody tricks." To change the subject Johnny said, "Which one of these do you work on dad?" pointing at the machines. "Come here, I'll show you". His father walked over to the largest machine on the line. "What's it called?"

"Well son, this is a milling machine. Would you like to see how it works?"

Johnny nodded his head. His father pressed a button. There was a rumbling noise and a slapping as the belts on the shaft started the machine moving up and down. Each time it moved a blade cut some metal off a block. Then the men started to shout, "Turn that bleeding thing off George and come and sit down a bit. Jesus, you must love it!" Johnny's dad pushed another button and the machine stopped. "Well now, what did you think of that?" Johnny didn't answer, he was thinking of how his father had said, all those times at home, 'I want you in a cleaner job than mine.' And at that moment he understood why.

From somewhere a bell sounded. Harry said, "Come on Johnny, let's get back."

The afternoon was much like the morning, with one or two exceptions. Harry had been given a job helping one of the draughtsmen while Johnny went messages and brewed tea.

It was just after the break at three fifteen, that Johnny's day was dramatically altered. He had just finished washing the cups and tea urn when Harry dashed into the small kitchen. "Quick kid, Mr Chambers wants you."

Johnny wiped his hands, put on his jacket, straightened his tie and hurried after the almost running figure of Harry.

Mr Chambers was standing in the doorway of his office as Johnny approached. All the men in the long room stood silently watching. Johnny couldn't think what it was he had done to

warrant such stares.

"Come in son," said Mr Chambers putting an arm on Johnny's shoulder. "Sit down, I've some bad news for you". Johnny sat puzzled. "Your father has had an accident, they've taken him to the hospital. I have asked one of the men to take you home, so you can tell your mother. I'm sorry lad". Then, as an after-thought added, "It would have to happen on your first day." Johnny had trouble taking in what was being said. He stood up, the room spun and darkness enveloped him.

When he came to, several people were fussing around him. He looked down at his new trousers, there was a wet patch where it looked like he had wet himself. Then the full realization of what had happened became clear. His father.

As he struggled to his feet, Mr Chambers called to one of the men, "Take the boy home will you please Mr Johnson?" The man came over, putting his arm around Johnny led him out of the office, through the foyer to a small car standing by the curb.

In just a few minutes they pulled up outside Johnny's home. Mr Johnson helped Johnny from the car and up the steps. His legs still felt very shakey. "Will your mum be in youngster?" he said as he rattled the knocker on the letterbox. "I think so". It was then the door opened.

Johnny's mother's face was full of concern on seeing her son with this strange man. "What's happened? You're not hurt are you?" Johnny shook his head from side to side, tears rolled down his face, "No mam, it's dad, he's been taken to hospital. He had an accident at work."

His mother gave a cry of anguish as she reeled back, "Oh God". Johnny and Mr Johnson quickly caught her arms or she would have collapsed. "Get your mam's coat lad, I'll run you to the hospital." Johnny brought his mother's coat and helped her put it on. She seemed to pull herself together. "Thank you, I don't even know your name." "This is Mr Johnson, he works at the office mam", said Johnny as they got into the car.

At the hospital, Mr Johnson, Mrs Dance and Johnny sat in the tiled alleyway waiting for the doctor. A nurse who they had seen when they entered told them his father was being operated on.

Mrs Dance nervously twisted the small handkerchief in her hands, while Johnny, white-faced, sat staring at the white walls. Mr Johnson rose from his seat. "I'd better phone the

works to let them know what's happening', he said.

When he returned with a weak smile on his face he said, "I got through and Mr Chambers said it is alright for me to stay, they are very concerned Missus, and hope George will be alright."

Johnny's mother spoke for the first time since they had entered the hospital, "Oh! yes, I'm sorry I wasn't thinking, you could have got yourself into trouble bringing us here". As she finished speaking, a white-coated man with a mask dangling from his face approached them. "Mrs Dance?" Johnny's mother stood up. "I'm terribly sorry, we did all we could. I'm afraid your husband never recovered".

The scream echoed down the long corridor as Johnny's mother collapsed. The doctor and Mr Johnson picked her up, sitting her on one of the chairs. One of the nurses brought a cup of tea which, with trembling hands she drank, her tears dropping into the cup. Johnny stood by her side, his arm around her shoulder, while his tears fell from the end of his nose.

When Mrs Dance had recovered some composure, Mr Johnson drove Johnny and her back to their house and would not leave until Johnny brought in a neighbour to sit with her.

Mr Johnson said he was sure that they would understand if Johnny stayed home, but his mother, who was not so sure, insisted Johnny go back with him as this was his first day.

When they returned, Mr Chambers was visibly shocked at the news of his father's death, and told Johnny he should not have come back. He had Harry brew a cup of tea for him, but when Harry brought it in, he gave it to Johnny. It was in his special cup. To Johnny this was a sign of Mr Chambers kindness.

After he had drank the tea, Mr Chambers told Harry to accompany Johnny home. On the way Johnny said, "What are we going to do? Mam depended on my dad's wages". Once more tears flowed from his eyes. Harry stopped. Taking out his note-book he said, "Right youngster! It's now you'll have to learn how to make some money. See these names? Well, every one of these has a bet on the horses, and I take the bets to the bookies." Johnny looked puzzled, he continued. "The bookie gives me two bob in every pound, and I get a tanner off everyone I take a bet for. Well now, I'm going to let you do it, and if you use your head you can make double what you'll get as

wages". He handed the book to Johnny. "I'll show you how it's done until you get used to it." Johnny took the book saying, "Why Harry?" Harry ruffled his hair, "I like you that's why, and Old George was one of the best".

Johnny said quietly, "This is one birthday I'll never forget!"

Alf Ironmonger

Alf Ironmonger writes lots of stories, based on experiences from his life, but also laced with his own vivid imagination.

The Flitting

We were leaving Dad - my mum and me,
I as a child - could never see,
The reason why we had to leave,
No use to question - just to grieve.
A man was hired with cart and horse,
To carry the goods - a matter of course,
And I could ride the cart on top,
To show him where the horse should stop.

Pacified - my crying ceased,
To ride behind this handsome beast,
I felt so proud - my head was high,
As off we went neath clear blue sky.

Furniture piled so high and straight,
No thought of what would be my fate,
As on we went along Stockport Road,
Horse not troubled by his load.

And then it happened - God above!
The tram bell clanged - the horse he shied,
The old man swore - I nearly died,
As up the Town Hall steps we clattered,
The old man now - quite clearly shattered.

Mum's furniture lay round about,
He'd get her tongue - and me a clout,
For wasn't I 'horse mad' she said,
Her face screwed up and now quite red.

I'd be her ruin - she made that clear,
Let's hope that in another year
You'll learn some sense - grow up at last,
You're like your dad - off showings past.

I must have been but all of five,
And couldn't see - still don't - that I,
Had caused the horse to run and bolt,
Up town hall steps in quick revolt.

Geraldine Dean

Geraldine Dean is 49, lives in Moston, and has been "writing in verse.....purely for my own pleasure for years.

Invigilation

December 1980

In the gymnasium
Under net and pulley
The atmosphere is quite uncanny -
There is not a sound
Although there are at least
A hundred people here.
On the wall clock, the minute hand
Mercilessly makes its round.
In row upon row serried
Banks of adolescents
Diligently write away.
What is this has come to pass?
Whence comes this blind
Obedience to the rules?
Some there are I swear
Who hardly ever write in class!

And after all this is a sham -
These C.S.E.'s and G.C.E.'s
Only mock the real thing which
Traumatically will seal
Their fate next summer
When the square pegs will,
By and large and on the whole,
Be fitted into each square hole -
But nothing here today's for real,

A cough, rustle of paper,
The scratch of a pen
Disturbs the silence
Every now and then.

I am cold and bored,
Huddled in my coat.
Still half an hour to go
If you give or take
A minute. I stare around,
Hand out required paper,
Scribble these lines and await
Impatiently the coffee break.....

I gaze to where the flaking
Paint of eggshell blue
Creates fantastic islands
On the distant wall
Next to a phantom net
Of huge proportions where
The light casts shadows -
Ropes and bars are elongated, tall.

Ruth Allinson

Workers of the World

We toil in paddy fields
And till the ground,
We pick the fruit,
We carry the water
And the miles are long.

We are ignorant,
But we know about need.
We are builders of India,
Child prostitutes in Brazil:
Our children die.

We are half the world,
Its poorest workers,
Our wages a pittance,
Our possessions derisory.
We are WOMEN.....

"Women are 50% of the world's population, put in two thirds of the world's working hours, receive 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of world property."

From "Some little known facts about women", published by Oxfam, December 1980.

Ruth Allinson

Ruth Allinson teaches languages in a Rochdale comprehensive, and is a member of Home Truths.

Purchase of the Toiler

Two horses pull the plough and the ploughman
It was a compulsion
not to be bought, but to take me over
I picked it up
carefully handled it

I was in its spell
unsolicited, the woman said
for me, she could knock it down to two quid

It does not have any beauty
but some allure
its message is plain
the toiler says there will always be some one
grafting excessively
for others to lounge, necessarily

Rob Cochrane



Theory of Surplus

It was the bleakest kind of February when Michael arrived at the furthest of the outlying towns. Although the time for heavy snow had passed, the sky remained a torpid grey colour, and thin, icy flakes scraped his skin above the collar of his army greatcoat. No one had come to meet him at the station. He sat on a bench for a while, scanning the sulky faces of the citizenry. War, famine and revolution had scarcely touched these small outposts, in comparison with the suffering in the capital and the wider countryside, yet the people seemed mean and resentful, as if they felt themselves deprived. They had no interest to spare on strangers.

At last, he took himself to the station master's office, or rather the station master's house. It was a small, ugly building, constructed in the ornate style favoured towards the end of the old regime. Inside, there was more evidence of fussy bourgeois comforts - dusty chinaware, framed certificates yellowing lace. The station master even wore an old style uniform, complete with the imperial long service medal.

"A soldier, eh!" the old man exclaimed. "We've not seen many of them in these parts. Come to keep us in order, have you? We're all loyal comrades here - mind you, I could point out a few that might be worth watching....."

"I'm here on reconstruction work," Michael explained. "The party sent me to help implement the educational reforms. I understand you have a school here?"

"What use would we have for schools with our bellies empty?"

"The famine ended a long time ago."

"The school's shut. None of us has got time for schooling now. In fact, I don't even remember where the building was."

"But there is a school, which I am to occupy. A letter was sent -"

"Vera!"

"The central committee is determined to liberate the minds of our people. Freedom from physical hunger isn't enough.

We have to build new hope where we've torn down the old structures of despair. Otherwise, what point is there in making a revolution? We'll only be turning our people into the bourgeoisie we despised. I thought that was clear. I thought that members of the local party were in sympathy with the reforms, and would be waiting for me at the station. But if there's no one here who understands what I'm trying to do.."

"We're all good party members in this town, comrade..... Vera! Make some tea! We have an important cadre from the city here."

Poor girl, she obviously had a hard time waiting on this old parasite in his decaying station house. She flew from the shadows like a bright bird, with her dark hair smoothed tight across her small head.

"School?" she said. "Did you say you were looking for the school?"

"This gentleman is on important party business, Vera, nothing for your ears."

"Your father says there is no school."

"Of course there is! Don't you remember? The big wooden house near the cemetery - that was always the school."

"Years ago, maybe....."

"Not that long ago. Before the war. I went there myself."

"Can you show me?" asked Michael.

"Now?" She looked fearfully at her father.

"I want to get going straight away."

Vera led him along the bare streets, wrapped up in her ragged scarves. "So you fought in the revolution?" she said.

He disliked the attention his army coat brought him.

"What's it like to kill for your beliefs?"

"It's a duty," he told her. "I took no pleasure in it. Years ago, when I first became a revolutionary, I might have felt something. I would've enjoyed my revenge on those who sucked all joy from the people's lives, who condemned my brothers and sisters to death in a miserable cellar, and sent me an orphan into the world. But that first anger soon turned to secret study, to arrest, exile and imprisonment, to underground organisation and the severest self-discipline. When the moment came that I'd spent my life preparing for, I still felt nothing special - the death of the old rulers, the declaration of a republic, none of this has given me real satisfaction. We've achieved nothing yet, and no new sacrifices have been asked of us."

"What a hard life you must've had. All I've ever known is this town. My life's been dedicated to nothing beyond the brewing of tea."

When they reached the school, they found the building not boarded up or burnt down, as Vera feared, but simply abandoned. They burst the door open with very little effort. Inside, everywhere was furred over with dust; and most of the fittings appeared badly damaged.

"Whatever are you going to do?" she said.

"I'm going to open the school in the morning," he answered.

He began at once to wipe over the furniture with his handkerchief and to arrange the chairs in straight lines. Vera found the stove, and set to chopping up broken furniture for firewood. Most of it was not as damaged as first appeared; Michael had several times to stop her from breaking up chairs that might be re-usable. Once the school had warmed up, things seemed much more promising. There was certainly enough for a beginning.

The cupboards were full of damp-smelling books. Michael looked through them all; he had never got over that first reverence, when he discovered what hammers and nails for the mind they were. He had been in places where literature was smuggled as eagerly as cigarettes. Most of what was here was garbage. Yet even the flabby imperial versions of history and geography interested him. He forgot all about Vera, till he heard her come fluttering across the bare boards with a broom.

"What a difference it'll make when we've got a proper school again!" she exclaimed. "I loved this place when I came here. We had a teacher - the sort of woman that never appeared here before. An emancipated woman. She lived all alone, but she'd travelled the world, and she'd suddenly stop us in the middle of our grammar or our multiplication tables to tell us stories of her life.....I don't know what she was, whether she would have agreed with what you people are doing. I don't know what became of her; she just disappeared one day, and nobody ever mentioned her again. Oh, I can't wait till the morning!"

Her hair had fallen loose across her face.

"How long have we been here?" he wondered, noticing that the room was quite dark. "You ought to go home before your father misses you."

"I won't go till everything's ready."

"You'll tire yourself out," he said, putting his arm round

her for pity. "All this work for this apathetic little town."

She smiled up at him confidently. Her young face was so trusting, it cut into his heart to return her gaze. "They won't be apathetic," she said. "They'll all come when they hear about your wonderful ideas....."

"The party's ideas," he corrected her.

"Everyone used to listen when the other teacher was here. Everyone wants to learn about new possibilities."

"No," he said. "Listen, Vera, I've been going from town to town carrying out this educational programme all year. What do I find? Most people don't even distinguish between us and the old regime. They let government fall on them like the weather. They don't believe they can ever take control of it. Knowledge only brings frustration. Every village has a story about the bright boy who committed suicide, entered an asylum or was blown up making bombs for the terrorists. Knowledge is too dangerous. They don't want it."

"Then there's those who're with us - the party members - timeservers every one of them, in the parts I've visited. Although, there are a few who have genuinely found faith in the scientific principles of socialism, but who have no real love for it. It doesn't move their hearts to imagine tyranny overthrown. All they have is pride in the five year plan."

"You don't really think that!" Vera cried. "You're testing me. How could you carry on if you believed all that?"

"Poor little Vera." Standing there with cobwebs in her hair, she seemed to him the embodiment of hope. Suddenly, he wanted to grab her to himself. It was clear to him now what desire had brought them both out on this simple-minded mission. And why not, if both of them wanted it?

Their lovemaking was swift and greedy - afterwards, he thought he had been too greedy. In his haste, he had trampled pleasure to death. It made him uneasy, the way she lay on his greatcoat, looking at him as if she could tell he had felt nothing.

"This transaction is unfair, Vera," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Shall I put it mathematically?"

She said nothing.

"I'm a stranger here. I've nothing to offer you. You've given me - a lot - for nothing in return."

He thought about his wife in the capital - one of the

women's section's staunchest campaigners. Free love was one of the many new ideas that abounded in the post-revolution revolutionary atmosphere. There had been many long, earnest discussions in Michael's party cell. Perhaps, like Vera, she was putting those ideas into practice.

"If I give you a lot, it's because I've got plenty to spare," she told him. "When a man's got money, he buys drinks for his friends who're out of work. I've been saving up a long time. There's no inequality if you have no love to give me."

"You're so young.....You don't even know me. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"I'm twenty-seven."

As old as that. She looked little more than a child.

"I'm a widow. My husband died in the war, my baby from typhus."

"Then I have taken advantage of you." He dressed quickly. "You'd better go home before your father gets suspicious."

"I don't care what he says. I'll stay the night if you like."

He glanced at the white slip of light that was her body on the greatcoat. A child. There were no lines at all around those watchful eyes. He couldn't look at her.

Vera rose and dressed herself. "I'll be back in the morning with some breakfast," she told him on her way out. "Then we can open the school at once. People will soon hear of it."

How he dreaded her return with the soft, white, bourgeois bread that would fill his fighter's stomach. He avoided her by going out to find slates and chalk - half-heartedly, for he hoped for quick failure on this last assignment. He had been away from the city and his comrades for too long.

But she was right. There was a steady trickle of the curious and the shiftless into the school. Who knew where they came from? They stood around silently, waiting for him to begin. By the end of the morning, there were enough to start teaching; within a week, he was able to announce a full programme of literacy teaching, ideological education and the training of teachers.

"Do you think I could learn to be a teacher?" Vera asked.

"You might," he replied coldly, "if you learn to overcome your petit bourgeois sentimentality."

No matter how much he humiliated her in front of the others, those eyes still stuck lovingly to him. Occasionally, he would falter in mid-speech, remembering that amongst his pupils was

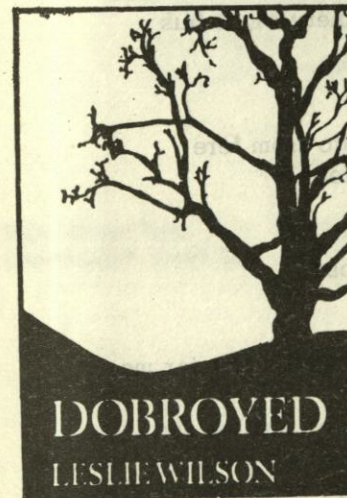
one who had seen him exposed in the infantility of orgasm and in his self-traitorous doubts against both party and people.

She made none of the scenes he feared she would make, when it was obvious he wished she would go away. Only one time, when he was peering over her shoulder at her work, did she say: "I made no demands on you. I only wanted to give."

However much he would've liked to lose Vera, he had to admit that she did better than any of the others. She knew each principle of the party by heart, and could repeat every one of its orthodox arguments. Rote-learning, he told himself. She had no real belief in what had made the party invincible. But when his time in the township came to a close, he had no choice but to hand over to her the responsibility for the completion of the educational programme.

All this was many years ago. Today, Vera is an important official in the Ministry of the Interior. Michael perished early, in one of the first of the purges. As for his wife, there is no record of what became of her.

Ailsa Cox



DOBROYED is the story of one year in an approved school. It is the result of years of struggle by the author to put down as honestly and accurately as possible his experiences there and to overcome his lack of spelling and conventional grammar. Throughout the book there is an accumulation of details and impressions that build into a picture of one difficult year in the life of a teenaged lad. It is a story that is full of tragedies and of joys. The manner in which it is told offers us a rare insight into the way in which institutions such as juvenile courts, approved schools and the care system are actually experienced.

DOBROYED - an autobiographical novel. Published by Commonword at £1-20

Owd Jim

"Did I ever tell ya kid", said owd Jim, looking grim,
"About the time I tried to commit suicide?
Wife left me, United lost cup, Tories got in - God forbid
An' t'top it all it were a city fan she buggered off with!"

"Aye laddie t'was on banks of river Irwell I stood
Gazing into that murky looking mud
Then I said to mysel' Jim make it worthwhile
Go out in dignity an' in style.
You see kid I couldn't see mysel' one bit
Floating about in all that shit".

"So t'was off to railway lines in sheer desparation
Somehow I arrived at Newt'neath station
And bumped into Joe Smythe, railway poet,
Who convinced me so poetically not to do it,
But after reading his book
I wished I had- I cursed my luck."

"So back on owdham road without much ado an' fuss
I decided to throw mysel' under ninety eight bus
But typical of my destiny an' fate
The bloody thing turned up late!"

" Well laddie, I thowt where do I go from 'ere
T'Arndale centre to set mysel' on feer?
Or throw mysel' off C.I.S.
But there agen just think of mess,
What about gas oven or an over-dose
Plastic bag o'er 'ead I suppose".

"Then I thowt a'well, sod it! Hari-Karl's not fer me,
Theres plenty more fish in t'sea
An' there's sure to be, a little tiddler left fer me
An' I can put up wi' tories policies of no sense an' reason
As fer bloody United - theres always next bloody season!"

Bring Back the Tea Ladies

Well, vending machine
I'll get you next time
You robbing swine
You, with your clever, clumsy
Fumbling, mechanical automaton hands.
Have done it again!
Upending my tea
Deliberately, disobeying and ignoring
My fingertipped commands
Seven pee down the bloody chute
But you couldn't give a hoot
You robbing, rip-off robot
Oversized tin-can.
I'll kick you, I'll shake you
I've a good mind throw you
To the ground.
But you'd just lie there, so smug,
Holding onto my seven pee
Almost laughing at me.
But, I'll get you next time
You swine
I'll get you next time.....

Dave Prestbury

*Dave Prestbury gets his tea from ICL computers and is in the
Commonword Roadshow.*

Bring Sleeping Partners

The old double bed wuz way past its prime.
After forty odd years
it'd well served its time.
"I think we'll 'ave twin beds,"
she sez t' th'old man,
"Somethin' more modern -
like them there divans.
Thi'll make a nice change love -
Wot d'yer say?"
'E sez, "I'm sayin' nowt
cos thi'll 'ave thi own way."
And She Did.

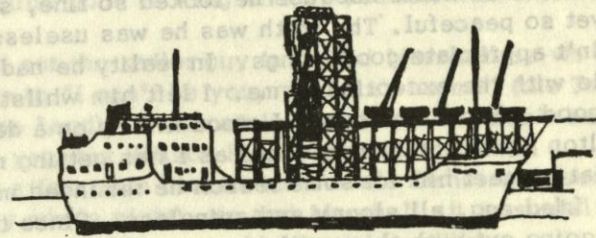
Well! thi look proper posh in 'er bedroom!
Fair set thi room up a treat,
But though 'er new bed is quite comfy
there's somethin' doesn't seem right.
She feels so alone in the darkness
as if there's nobody near.
She knows the old man 'asn't left 'er
'Cos that's 'is snorin' she 'ears.

She lies there tossin' an' turnin'
an' she thinks of the day they were wed,
An' as 'ow thiv never bin parted
sharin' that old double bed.

She gets up an' creeps in beside 'im
an' she sighs as she cuddles up tight.
'E turns an' puts 'is arm round 'er.
"Goodnight lass," 'e chuckles,
"Goodnight."

Frances Higson

Marshall's Big Score



THE DOCK.

Birkenhead, what a beautiful place to be leaving. That attic flat which one way looked over Birkenhead Park, the lights of Liverpool and the river- and through the back windows I could see the forest hill rising up and stopped by a beautiful old windmill and a Victorian domed space observatory.

That last day before the celebration I had wandered round my almost empty flat and closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around me and once more I saw that red shooting star fall down over the hill in an arc then crash into the black Irish Sea.

I also saw one of my mysteriously favourite images as I remembered a huge tanker going through the locks of the East Fleet and back into the deep water channel. The violent vibrations of her engines as she towered above the waiting cars and wagons, the men up above on her decks looked like small matchsticks looking down on us, their last sights of land. Then the foamy eruptions of her threshing oily wake, again beyond the durability of the ear. And then just silence as she slipped away along the deep water channel into the sea.

I had to leave Birkenhead. My friends in London could not understand why I stuck it here.....no one of a like-mind.... no gay lib....just a very middle class branch of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, some members of which dreaded the

proposed opening of a gay bar in dockland for fear it'd be full of dockers. Solicitors and cordon-blue chefs were not my scene at all. It seemed I was washed up in Birkenhead.

Yes, that afternoon.....Eddie had driven the works van round the side of the big old house. I used to go out with Eddie when he was on the trawlers. I suppose he was straight once. Everyone liked Eddie because he looked so fine, so masculine and yet so peaceful. The truth was he was useless at it and couldn't appreciate good things. In reality he had hurt a lot of people with the exception of me. I left him whilst the going was good. About a year ago I stood him up on a date at Hamilton Square Station because as I was getting ready to leave the flat to meet him for some reason he reminded me of a greasy white fried egg, all sloppy and spineless. Since then he's been going out with this really nice guy Mark, from Childwall Valley.

Today Eddie and Mark have come to collect the remains of my furniture I couldn't send back to Manchester.....a fridge, two carpets, a gas fire and kitchen table. They'll do for their new bedsit at Kirby. If Mark can settle with Eddie then they're welcome to my new furniture.

Tonight we are going celebrating down Sadie's Bar in Liverpool, by way of saying thanks for the furniture, and then in a couple of days I'll be on the Crossville Express to London. Later that night.....

Do you know I have never felt so relaxed in a gay bar for years. After all I AM going places.....chance and excitement is not left in the hands of this night alone. I feel great, I feel as though I look confident and good-looking with all my friends around me saying goodbye and warning me about London with "Drink the wine but don't drink the water." Seems I feel I am the star of the show.

You know, on your last night anywhere there's always a few loose ends you'd like to tie up. I mean: why over all of those years did I never score with that particular person. I must go and annoy Franklin. I'm sure he'll have a dance to Martha Reeves' sexy "Dancing Slow".

But no, one of his five affairs is watching. So I spark off a conversation about sex roles to be bitchy. I'm sure he screws all five of them, unless one or two of them screw him, now that would be fun and gossip. Remember it's my last night. I can do anything.

The DJ is playing "Hey, little boy with the red shoes on, bet you can barefoot all night long", to which the Marvelettes are singing. And I see no point in not enlarging present company. Remember I still have three wishes left, so I include in our conversation: (a) a guy I've been chasing for ages but who scores with nothing less than Jaguars and Daimlers; and (b) this quite good looking African seaman with whom he is arguing.

I find out the sailor guy is called Marshall as we dance hip to hip to "I can't be you, you can't be me" (the Temptations Law of the Land). Fortunately John Travolta hasn't been invented yet, but Wilson Pickett has, thank God.

After a few such dances and Abba's Dancing Queen (which ruined my whole night); me and Marshall sit in social company with Mark and Eddie, my old friends from Kirby.

An old flame of mine, Kenny, keeps giving Marshall cold looks to which Marshall keeps taking his hand off my knee, ready for fight or flight.

But Kenny eases up and comes and sits with us. Then me, Kenny and Mark get up to dance with a Supremes number which collides into Martha's Jimmy Mack. The three gay sisters get working on the dancing floor like Martha Reeves, Roberta Flack and Mary Wilson (of Supremes fame) respectively, whilst the men: Marshall and Eddie get to know each other.

I gather Eddie is saying what a goody guy I am, about my body, my cooking and how nice behind closed doors; but I keep a watchful eye, pretending to eye up Marshall but watching Eddie is doing no bullshitting or web-spinning.

By closing time Kenny has scored with a Norwegian seaman, which for him is just no trouble considering his good looks. It's just another night on the town to him. I reckon I'm about to score with Marshall so I ask Eddie and Mark if me and Marshall can share a taxi back to their place on account of there being no furniture at mine.

We all sit in the back of one of those big Metropolitan taxi's. It whisks up through Scotland Road to Walton then up towards the East Lancashire Road, then around the endless main road crescents of Kirby. The countless multi-storey blocks each look identical.

Strangely nothing happens between me and Marshall on that first night because I am tired. He asked me have I ever slept with a blackman before, and I say yes. But Marshall

was more persistent in the morning, before he had to leave early to do some jobs on the ship.

Before he leaves we agree to meet later that day in the Lisbon Bar and I don't believe he'll turn up, but he is ready there waiting for me when I arrive ten minutes early. I can't believe my eyes; some one should actually arrive on time and be waiting for me on a date.

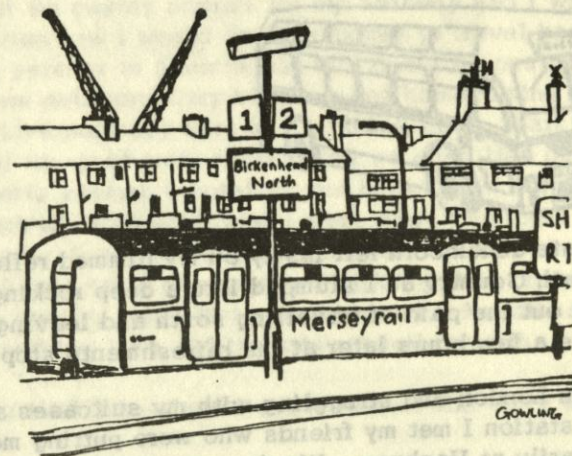
It was a hot scorcher summer night and we had a few drinks in the Lisbon, then went to Paco's but we didn't hang around for the after-hours clubs to open. Marshall knew I was London bound at the end of the weekend, and so we decided to get back to my place early. For me I just imagined this would be the end of things, that I would go to London and that would be it.

We caught the Merseyrail subway from James Street under the river to Birkenhead Park. Then walked up Manor Hill to my flat. The Saturday evening was restful. It was about eight-thirty, beautiful trees, soft tired birds singing. I was looking for foxes in the hedgerows. The houses are all snowcemmed semi-detached and Marshall said: "I bet there's not many black people live here."

We dreamed over the earth footpath between the girls' school hockey field and the ivyed barn and swung through the iron kissing gate into Shrewsbury Road. Outside our house my American neighbours were working on their huge fibre glass motor yacht which towered above our front garden.

We crept up the stairs of our house to my empty flat and my bedroom where there was just a mattress and a few old sheets and unwanted blankets. That night lived every minute, every second. I cannot describe what it is like to fall in love and to sincerely be loved, only that I was conscious of every moment of the ecstasy. The moon rose above the open window, the peacocks in the garden opposite cried, the trees shimmered, ships hooted on the river. For once I never heard police car, fire engine or ambulance. I had fell, well and truly and deeply.

The next morning I gave Marshall my forwarding address in London and we walked back down the hill to the station. The copper beeches on Manor Hill were wet and shiny as if they had been stained overnight. Birkenhead Park lay vast around us, heavy with dew, ready to witness the new romance; no more sadness or autumn. The ducks quacked on the lakes as though they'd just been born.



The Birkenhead Underground.

And on the subway station as the train delayed we found more words to seal our fate. The air doors of the train opened for Marshall to take leave of me and I jammed the door with my foot and pulled him out of glance of the passengers, all going to Mass; and gave him one long kiss. And if you ever get kissed like that you'll know that you are never going to be free for life. The door started fidgeting weakly then I could hear the hydraulics of the train run down. Now all the doors of the train had re-opened to the station and we had to wait till the engine ticked over slowly for the brake pressure to be up again.

I gave him one last squeeze of my hand. I'll never forget the mangled mark the door rubber left on my hand as Marshall and the train thundered off down the Mersey Tunnel.

And yet, as I had boarded the bus for London, my thoughts were still on Marshall. It seemed as the old express coach pulled out from aside the ferry station that I was giving up a beautiful chance of romance for another yet quite uncertain future.

And so the battle was yet losing as the bus sped along the Rockferry bypass to Ellesmere Port, the last stop before the motorway south. The suspension bridge over the Mersey



sandflats at Runcorn fell lastly on my dimmed reflections of the North Country as I slumped into a deep rocking coach sleep to blot out the pain of travelling south and leaving my homes. I awoke a few hours later at the refreshments stop at Watford Gap.

Once in London and struggling with my suitcases at Victoria coach station I met my friends who were putting me up temporarily at Hackney. We descended into the hot summer underground railway to burrow our way to my new abode, a flat shared with five others over a Chinese take-away in the middle of a busy traffic filter.

If the reflections are flat they were numbed by the ever-present longing for Marshall who wrote to my new address two weeks later. And he was hot on the trail. He said he would visit me in Hackney and in fact he did. The re-union was a celubrious occasion with champagne and fruit and roast chicken and all else which made every passing moment without Marshall unbearable.

Maybe this is the wrong time to talk about my London adventures since my writing is so encumbered with the romance with which I surrounded Marshall at the time. However I came to move out of my Hackney lodgings to live in a gay squat round the corner which was attacked by a breakaway group from the National Party. The fascists tried to break the squat door with a scaffold pole and we boarded up every window till we realised the battle would not be won until we defended the squat from the outside.

We set up motor patrols parked in the street late at night. All the left wing groups and community folk in the district helped us. And one night we caught one lad throwing a bottle at the house and chased him to where he lived. The battle then collapsed as we could readily identify one of their gang.

But just as I was offered a job in a bookshop at Angel, Marshall sent me twenty pounds for my birthday and I wrote back telling him how I would use the money to travel back to stay with my parents in Manchester so I could be near him.

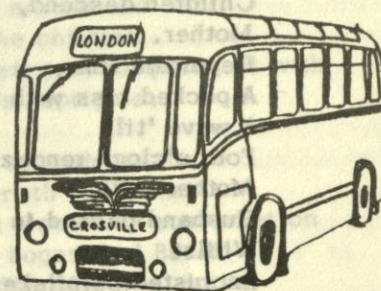
And so we celebrated my birthday and homecoming in high style in the Liverpool gay bars and clubs - Eddie, Mark and Kenny and all the gang were there. And we even lied our way into the Atlantic seamen's hotel for our honeymoon night.

All through the following year I went down Liverpool from Manchester every weekend to meet Marshall's ship. And Marshall had even tried to marry an English girl in order to stay in this country, much to my disapproval. Needless to say, I scotched the idea and the attempt fell through.

A later spring (1977) is where I could resume the story some other time.

John Gowling

Followers of John's stories will be pleased to hear another is appearing in the forthcoming Commonword short stories book, with work by Joan Batchelor, Ruth Allinson, Ian Thorpe, Alf Ironmonger, Phil Boyd, Ailsa Cox and Ada Mason.



GOWLING.

Happy Families

HAPPY FAMILIES: EXERCISE ONE

Morning

Clock -
shattered morning,
Wife,
Wife,
Wife.
Blankets parted,
Wash,
Change to mother's clothes.
Down-
Stairs,
Breakfast routine.
Mother,
Mother,
Mother.
Children descend,
Mother.
Departure time,
A packed kiss with the lunch,
A wave 'till
Four o'clock rendezvous,
Mother still,
Husband packed in car,
Whilst
Encrusted cornflakes
Wait;
To be mothered off.

HAPPY FAMILIES: EXERCISE TWO

Ring a Ring o'Roses

She tried roses to make a circular posy,
She tried to avoid an overseen crown of thorns.

He tried her finger with a ribbon of gold,
She tried soap to loosen the noose.

He tried bricks for the family circumference,
She tried Pledge to remove coffee rings.

He tried to enjoy playing hoop la for the children,
She tried to stop reading Family Circle.

He tried sizing her finger for an eternity ring,
She tried ringing doorbells for sanctuary.

HAPPY FAMILIES: EXERCISE THREE

A Night with the Boys

Night has wrapped around and
She has wrapped the children
Sealing each in their own compartment with
Separate kiss and sleeptights.

Through the living room door, the
Fire's constant warmth is all that
Greets her, whilst a one way conversation
Flickers, between Bogart and Bacall
From the corner. She sits in a chair,
Beside the controlled flames, to
Dumbly watch the black and white romance,
Almost as if it were a repeated memory
Before two hospital visits had coloured the picture.
The movie ends, and the TV's pining is silenced,
As she waits.

The gate squeals open,
Night-cat noisily, he stops and
Notes the job he won't get round to
While putting a sodden finger to his mouth with
Loud shush. The garden's stare is dumb.
His hand moves to rummage, pocket deep,
Keys are retrieved with plum found
Satisfaction, the search for the lock begins.

Inside he talks of darts and cups,
She of the children and flu,
Then he goes to the toilet and
She to the kitchen.

The milk boils, so she pours the
Frothed liquid, spattering the pot sides,
But the cups are not full
So the empty pan is tilted
In hope of a few last drops.

His white strained face explodes,
Cheeks bellowing as bitter strewn vomit
Splashes the basin's sides, until
His stomach has drained, leaving
Air to gulp emptily over their
Years together.

Nick Ripley

Nick Ripley is a drama student and a prolific poet.

An imaginary conversation with the manager of Safeways

"I'm sorry sir" said the helpful person. "I don't understand what you mean."

"What do you mean, you don't understand what I mean" I said exasperated. "It's quite simple. I don't want my potatoes washed. I want them dirty."

"I see sir" he said, though I could obviously see he didn't. "But that means you'd have to wash them yourself".

"That's right", I said wearily. "But I do anyway, because when you say clean potatoes, you don't actually mean clean potatoes. What you mean is potatoes that aren't quite as dirty as they might have been".

"Half a loaf is better than none at all" he said cheerfully and I suspected that he wanted to change the conversation to bread. "...And you must appreciate, sir," he added just to ram home his point "because all..... most" he winced and I grinned "Most of the dirt is removed, you aren't paying for any waste".

"So what you're saying" I summarised "is that you go to the expense of washing my potatoes so that I can save money."

"That's it, more or less, sir," he smiled all teeth and breathed a sigh of relief that I had finally succumbed to his impeccable Logic.

"...And if you hadn't gone to this expense, for which, of course, I'm not charged" I continued "You would feel duty bound to charge me for the dirt you hadn't removed".

"Really, sir" he protested vigorously "You're twisting my words. And what's the matter with clean potatoes anyway?" he demanded impatiently.

"I want to feel the dirt between my finger nails" I said "I want to imagine my potatoes growing in the ground, not in your plastic bags."

"Most of our customers" he said, eyeing me with unnerving curiosity "Find the plastic bags convenient".

"They don't have much choice" I observed drily "And while we're still on the subject, I only want four potatoes. I don't want a ten pound bag"

"We do have five and three pound bags" he said, and smiled as wide as the cracked grin on the badge of his lapel.

"You've sold out" I informed him "I suppose that's another free service to save me the expense of buying waste"

By now he had gone completely to pieces. "I'll tell you what" he moaned, his helpful smile replaced by a hopeless grimace.

"I'll take four potatoes out of this bag, and I personally will find some dirt to wipe them in"

"That's not the point" I said quietly. "I want to imagine my potatoes being picked out of the soil the tractor has ploughed up. I want to remember what it feels like to have your back breaking for ten hours a day and blistering in the sun. Or picking between showers because you need the money so badly, with your feet slipping in the mud, and your arms aching because the ground is so heavy, and your fingers sore from the grit that gets inside your gloves. I don't want you to wash all that away and then pretend you did it to save me money".

He was almost reduced to tears. "I'll tell you what" he said bravely choking back a sob in his throat. "I'll give them to you, free, gratis, for nothing, a whole bag of potatoes. Only please, will you get out of my shop". But it was too late. There had been a run on potatoes that evening and they'd all been carried off behind his back.

I left the helpful people's shop empty handed. Opposite me I saw a news stand across which had been pasted the latest headline. It read:

**WORLD SHORTAGE OF PREWASHED POTATOES: 3 MILLION
IRISH FACE STARVATION.**

Phil Boyd

Ex potato picker Phil has had work published in Commonverse, Voices and in previous Write On's.

The Monsall Blues

So once again I'm back in here.
That means no whisky and no beer.
The old ticker kicked and laid me low,
And so to Monsall I had to go.

The nurses are on the rounds again, with medicine to give.
They say drink up then my lad, that's if you want to live.
Without my Bell's whisky, is it worthwhile?
Well, I suppose it is, so I'll just have to smile.

It's now six o'clock and it's quiet all around,
So they wake you up from a sleep that's so sound,
Then they give you a pill to get you to sleep.
Isn't that enough to send you right off the deep?

Andy Wilson

Andy Wilson is now out of Monsall and living in Levenshulme.

Ode to Sheffield

Sheffield, place of civic pride, where parks
Provide an extension of their countryside,
The public holidays have carried home
The hillsides piece by piece
Into the picture of their daily lives.

From factories they faced
The guns of keepers. They dared
To trespass where the wild fowl
Waited to be shot for
The big man's entertainment.

Together they have built a home
Of their dark peak. The one that
Shines when the wind is high
And laps its rough tongue over
The surface of the reservoirs.

Let the people drink their water
Keep low the price of visiting
Their valleys where it flows like families
Up the stairs of buses on bank holidays
From where the steel is made.

Sarah Ward

Sarah Ward is a member of Pome Truths.

The Old Inevitable Prison Tale

It's a large one-roomed workshop with work benches running the length of it. At each end of it, there lordly, sits a screw, watching. In the vast space between them nearly two hundred cons are working, a babble of voices and a sea of faces. The screws sit on tall wooden chairs which are screwed onto small wooden stages, so the screws may see all yet remain seated. The screws are really bored; watching is what they do, all day every day. The stage that holds the chair throne-like is painted blue, the paint is old and chipped. The chair that holds the screw lord-like is varnished brown, the varnish is old and chipped. The wall behind and to the left of the screw is old and chipped by the passing of thousands of lost people all marking time in the no-mans-land of prison life. The screw however, is not old, and the only chipped thing about him is the one he has on his shoulder. He's extremely bored, he hates his job, hates the senior officer seated opposite him, two hundred people away, but most of all he hates the cons.

His name is Harry Oblong. He's young and strong, clean cut. His uniform immaculate, his cap badge, buckle and buttons gleam like his eyes, which shine like polished ball bearings. He's an unfeeling, stone-hearted bastard, you can ask his wife. She sees him as an empty uniform that struts and swaggers far too much. Nobody likes Harry very much, he is so full of what he affectionately calls 'the service'. That dedication cost him his humanity. Even his workmates hate him, but he doesn't notice at all. He passes his day in spite and malevolence, watching.

A form detaches itself from the busy but silent workbench. Officer Oblong's voice booms out across the space between him and Jamaican Joey.

"Where d'ya think you're going sunblessed?"
Joey takes a masculine, prideful stance, there is plain defiance in his eyes and in the set of his jaw. He is on the short side, but of powerful, muscular build. His face is well lived in with

faint tracers of old scars he got from having rock-fights in Jamaica as a kid. He looks very handy, which is what he is, and he doesn't like being talked down to, but he's on the last four months of a two year sentence and he can do without trouble. Still, he can't bring himself to answer the taunting voice of he up above. His body is trembling with self-control. Oblong takes Joey's silence for stupidity and his trembling for fear. A cynical grimace twists his thin lips.

"Well are you fucking deaf or daft?"
Joey's breathing hard now and he has to struggle to keep control.

"I asked you where you're going, you black bastard, are you going to answer me or stand there like an idiot?" By now the entire workshop is watching with silent intensity.

After what seemed an eternity, Joey answered with downcast eyes. "I was just going to the toilet boss." An obscene triumphant look flashed across Oblong's cruel face.

"Well, in future, Sambo, you don't move from your place of work without asking me first. Do you understand?" He emphasised the last word slowly, one syllable at a time as though he was talking to a backward child.

"Yeah boss", Joey answered, all the while he could feel fury running in murderous currents through the hard flesh of his body.

"Well, go on then, and don't play with yourself." Joey walked away, and Oblong felt childishly triumphant, and told his wife all about it later. She felt really disgusted to hear him describe Joey as a 'surly, black bastard'. She really hated him and made up her mind there and then to leave him, the first chance she got.

Oblong was on sleeping in duty all of the following week, and a week without sex would leave him with the temperament of a bear with a sore arse. 'Somebody better watch out', he told himself.

By the end of that week he was snarling and spitting bullets. When he got home after that last shift, his wife wasn't home. He wasn't unduly worried, perhaps she was shopping or visiting relatives. It was Saturday so he backed a few horses and went for a drink. He went to the prison officers social club as the nasty screws can only drink with their own kind for fear of reprisals from ex-cons. He arrived home at four that afternoon, the worse for drink. In fact, stoned out of his crust. His wife wasn't there. He was more than a little annoyed. He stormed

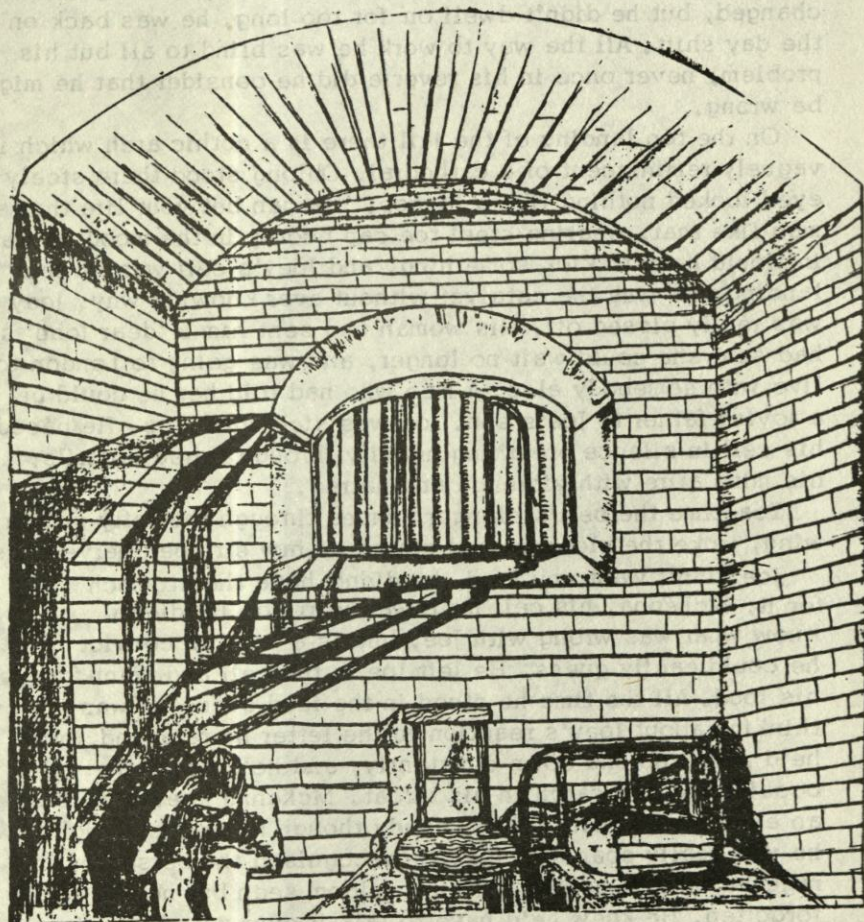
through the house shouting her name and banging doors. It still didn't dawn on him that she was gone. He fell into a sodden sleep. He awoke at four that morning cold and aching in every joint, he realised then that she had gone. He checked all the wardrobes and confirmed his fears. He went to bed with a troubled mind. Sunday morning he felt terrible, nothing had changed, but he didn't dwell on for too long, he was back on the day shift. All the way to work he was blind to all but his problem, never once in his reverie did he consider that he might be wrong.

On the top landing of the jail there is a gothic arch which is vaguely reminiscent of a cathedral. Oblong stood there steely eyed looked nothing like a Bishop. You can bet your life that a man like that, wearing steel toe cap boots, in the mood he was in would have to kick something, and Joey's cell was on that landing. He was the catalyst without ever knowing why. Joey was really pissed off. His woman had sent him a 'dear John' she had said she could wait no longer, and was going to London to live with somebody else. A man who had told her he could be a loving father to Joe's son. Joe was sick with rage. He paced his cell in silence breathing heavily through flared nostrils, his mind afire with violence and hatred.

Tea-time the bell's clangor echoed through the lofty prison wing, woke the sleepers and grated on raw stripped nerve ends.

Joe didn't want any food, he didn't have the stomach for it, McKenna, his cell mate was worried. He didn't know what was wrong with Joe, but as a veteran convict he could easily guess. He left Joe in the cell and went for his food. All the time he stood in the food queue he was thinking about Joey's reaction to the letter he received, how he'd paced up and down constantly, and he'd heard the occasional sob catch in his throat. McKenna knew it to be an explosive situation and, handy though he was in a fight, he was really scared of Joe. He recognised the berserker's rage in Joe's demeanor. A thing seldom seen but never forgotten. He knew he'd have to talk it over with Joe before things got out of hand. He also knew he'd have to take care because Joe might take exception to meddling of any description, and may even take McKenna's head off. He found himself at his cell surging with adrenalin super-charged with fear.

The food was the same slop they had eaten the previous Sunday and had been every preceding Sunday by thousands



of men for the past ninety years with barely any variation at all, but McKenna didn't complain, he ate it all without tasting any, all the while he ate he watched Joe, who was sat on his bunk with his head in his hands, out of the corner of his eye. His 'meal' finished, he rolled a cigarette and held his tin out to Joe, who didn't notice until he tapped it lightly on the iron bed head. He took it without a word and rolled up mechanically whilst looking straight ahead.

McKenna spoke, "D'ya wanna talk about it Joe?"

Joe looked up startled, as if he'd thought himself alone. "Talk about what?" McKenna was wired through with agitation, "Whatever it is that's bugging ya". Joe turned to face the wall again. There was a sigh of apathy in his voice, "No, I don't wanna talk about it". "Well I just thought maybe I could help you."

Joe turned to look at him, and there was a definite breaking point in his voice. "Unless ya got the key to that fuckin' gate out there you can't help me." McKenna just nodded, he knew he could take it no further, so he lay on his bed and read his book.

Exactly one hour after tea, Oblong began unlocking for slop out. He had a go at just about everybody he could, with the exception of Billy Markham (who was known as the animal, and wouldn't think twice about throwing a screw off the top landing) and then he came to Joe's cell.

"Slop out, leave your tea trays by the door."

Joe didn't hear him, he was still on his bunk with his face in his hands.

"Hey! Black Beauty! slop out". There was a savage stinging taunt in his voice which went completely unnoticed by Joe. Seeing his words had no effect he raised his voice, "Shape yourself you stupid black bastard!" Joe couldn't fail to hear that. He looked up at Oblong as though he'd noticed something nasty stuck to his shoe, but he said nothing, picked up his pot and took it to the ablutions. On his return he was surprised to find Oblong still there.

"Where's your tea-tray, Sambo? You haven't ate it have you?" There was a savage tone to his voice. McKenna knew it was going to go off, when you've seen it as often as he you learned to read all the signs. The air was heavy with static charged tension. Joe squared up to Oblong, he'd had enough.

"I didn't get no tea. It's fuckin' shit anyway."

"What did you say, nigger?"

"I said it's fuckin' shit anyway, white trash!"

Oblong went quite hysterical shouting, "What did you call me?" and tried to push Joe into his cell, he'd have stood more chance with a brick wall. Then Joe hit him. His fist didn't move more than six inches, Oblong went sprawling against the hand-rail and nearly over it. He rushed Joe then, flailing like a windmill. Joe gave him a couple of buffeting blows that started blood flowing and constellations behind his eyes. He knew he had no chance at hand to hand. Backing away he drew his truncheon, an eighteen inch penis of black ebony. The first blow glanced off Joe's skull and smashed his right ear. Joe was still standing. More in fear than hatred, Oblong dealt repeated blows to Joe's head until Joe went down, his head was red ruin. He was free from all his troubles then. Oblong stood there, gasping like a steam engine. The other screws came running up then, and knelt down checking Joey's pulse etc.

Oblong was hysterical. "Look what the bastard did to me!" His voice was a high pitched whine. "Just look what he did." He was pointing to one of several bruises, and the blood on his shirt front. McKenna looked at him with a mixture of pity and contempt. He walked one step to the table and picked up the crumpled letter. But he'd seen it all before. He shook his head sadly. Yes, he'd seen it so many times that it ceased to make sense. Poor Joey.

He was still alive, just a little scrambled upstairs, forgot his name sometimes, things like that, but he'd be released eventually to play a useful part in society. Oblong was suspended on full pay for three months until the board, formed by prison commissioners to investigate those who administer to the prison, concluded that 'the officer used justifiable means to subdue a violent prisoner'.

Sammy Tierney

Sammy Tierney lives in Fallowfield. His poetry is as strong and telling as his stories, which he illustrates himself.

Defininitions of a Cell

a small room, as in a prison or monastery; a small cavity; the simplest unit in the structure of living matter; a division of a voltaic or galvanic battery; a small room, as in a prison, where the simplest units in the structures of a Mr. J. Kelly and a Mr. L. Towers were murdered.

Nick Ripley

Mister Macho

Mister Macho

All thumb in waistband aggressiveness
and effected vulgarity,
beer-bellying his way through life
being one of the boys
like he always has been.

He was the one

in Junior school

who could piss over the rail

in the bikesheds.

He was the one

in Secondary school

who carried a frenchie in his blazer pocket
and said

"They're all the same with a bag over their heads"

although he didn't find out

'til years later.

Mister Macho,

has no tender feelings.

Men are hard, men are cool,

men mustn't lose face

in front of their mates.

So he plays games of status,

matching the best of them

pint for pint,

boast for boast.

Mister Macho

likes his women well padded,

marshmallow-thighed and melon breasted,

he loves

to fix his lips on nipples

like split radishes

and remember the safety and comfort of mama.

Ian Thorpe

For Ray

Ray Mort one of the four part-time workers at the Commonword Workshop office killed himself in February. He had felt deeply depressed and isolated since the break up of his marriage some months ago. Ray was a plumber before becoming a mature student and training as a teacher. He had one daughter. He joined Commonword three or four years ago first as a writer and later as a worker. In particular he was associated with the formation of the Rochdale Writers' Group and was working on their first publication up until the time of his death. Everybody who worked at Commonword, or who knew Ray through his involvement in the different writers' group has been profoundly shocked by his suicide. We all feel the hurt in different ways and will all have different memories of him. An obituary could never do justice to these feelings. The note Ray left affirmed his belief in the worker-writer movement and in the work that remains to be done. What brought Ray to Commonword were his plays and the hope that he would find a place to share his writing and his belief that working people have the creativity and the right to express themselves. His work at Commonword was directed towards bringing working class writers together out of their isolation to find a common confidence in our ability to work out our own futures. This link between our own individual writings and lives, and the writing and lives of a group of people similar to ourselves was central to Ray's commitment to Commonword. Speaking at Ray's funeral, Greg Wilkinson, talked not only about Ray's work here, but also about his attempts to found what he called "The Funhouse" in Rochdale. This would have been a place for people of all ages to meet and express themselves through physical activities, through the arts, through meeting. Greg drew a parallel between Ray's beliefs and the age-old idea of loving ones neighbour as oneself. It seems to me now that the tragedy of Ray's death and of his life is that while he brought so many other people together, he was never able to ask for or receive as much in return.

Phil Boyd

We have decided to print the following two poems in memory of Ray. The first expresses ideas which Ray felt very deeply, the second is a poem by Joan Batchelor which meant a lot to him.

Joiner's Son

How dare you write
You joiner's son
You would-be joiner of words.
Disjointed
Sawn-off phrases
Nailed to patterns
Made by your 'betters'
Eyes-glued to the shapes
Turned by those
Who would turn us away
From the things that matter
What terrible chatter
Nonsensical patter
A waste of good paper
A waste of good wood
That should have been used
To make a barrel
To carry beer
Or make a chair
Or light a fire.....

Or is it such a waste of time?
For you who dared to change the world
Green as fresh-cut timber
You may be now
But now has passed
And tomorrow you'll be seasoned
And be beautiful
With your multitude of colours
Brown, white, black, red
You'll write and be read
You joiner's son
Write on.

Sol Garson

Sad And Hurt Are They

Lies are such lonely dreams,
how sad to need invent that which one wants
in order to feel a shadow achievement.
There are so many lies.....bitter, outraged,
disappointed and a longing that is so strong
it becomes a blossoming reality.

Oh, how sad is a liar and how hurt,
that they hurt others more.....
and are left with hate bitter in the mouth
and are surrounded by disgust and a deepening pity.
Who feels pity for the scarred?
Or kindly disposed towards the tormented?
Already there is doubt cast,
no smoke without fire.....
It takes bravery unrecorded to smile
and allow the liar his moment of black glory.

The scarred are not unsightly, the scars are internal,
who sees my scars but me? Yet they are eternal.
I have been altered subtly, cruelly, harmfully,
yet I have learned a tolerance and serenely
which I may never have had, had not a liar made me victim.
Let others find me as I am, shrouded in mystery.
I talk yet tell nothing, I smile without laughter,
I think deep and with pity and compassion
for the liar in all his butterfly existence.

How lonely are the empty lies of a lover,
how tormented now their days,
and nights full of dread and fear,
they do not love, neither do they gain love,
an empty life, empty heart and soul.....
How cold is their hurt beside my burning scars.
May the grace of God be with them at this hour,
and may I find the strength of inner feeling to forgive.

Joan Batchelor

Strong Brew

The thing that makes my fella mad
is making his tea with tea bags.
He'll swear and he'll cuss,
get in a right stew,
says it takes proper tea
to make a good brew.
This problem is solved
now, you see.
Here's what I do
when I make a brew -
Put a spoonful of tea in the pot
Just for him,
And pop in a tea bag for me.

Frances Higson

MEETINGS:

Commonword workshop, every Monday at 61, Bloom St. from 7.30. Newcomers welcome.

Rochdale writers' group, every Wednesday at 7.30 in the Balderstone Community School, Victoria Av. Contact Bill Healey, 29-54836.

Home Truths women's group, alternate Tuesdays from 7.30 at the library, Kingsway, Stretford. Contact Joan and Ailsa at Commonword.

Mum's the Word! writing group for women, 11.00-1.00, every Thursday, at the Slade Lane Neighbourhood Centre, Longsight. Contact Ailsa

The Write Crowd, group for 11-18 year olds, Fridays, 7.00 to 9.30 p.m. at the Firwood Community Centre, Stretford. Contact Joan.

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We hold regular workshop meetings, at which writers and would-be writers get together to read and discuss their own work. We publish books and booklets of this work, and we organise live readings.

For details of writers' groups, see the inside back cover. New members are always welcome. There are people in the office during the day to talk about your writing, arrange a reading for your group or help you start a writers' group.

COMMONWORD is a member of the Federation of Worker Writers. For details, contact Mike Kearney, 69, Heaton Rd., Newcastle NE6 1SA. Tel. 0632 761351.

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