Five Dials

NUMBER 12

The Utterly Broken Britain Issue

Featuring interviews with 42 citizens on the state of the nation

Plus

Tories in East London

Death Duels

Circumcision

Typewriters

Intergenerational Love Affairs

and Dangerous Snakes

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Designed by DEAN ALLEN

In Memoriam Alex Bernstein

On Broken Britain and Nick Dewar

He's dropped it from his speeches now but there was something troubling about the way David Cameron used to say the word 'broken', as in 'broken society', as in 'Let's mend our broken society'. Perhaps it was how he hit that hard 'b', gesturing with both thumbs, stabbing them down as if to depress some Broken Britain buttons. In his speeches he backed up his vision of the current nightmarish society with anecdotes plucked from the disobedient, unruly Yobland beyond the cameras. Stitched into his phrase was an unfortunate evergreen quality, so that if Britain did improve there would always be evidence of its broken-ness somewhere, and since it was such a large and baggy concept you could throw anything into it, so that a dip in road rage would only give more prominence to binge drinking. And who would tell us when the place was fixed? There is Cameron; we see him now after a cross-country cycle ride the length of Great Britain, as he finally stops on the south coast and dismounts. (The support car stops a few feet back.) 'Fixed,' he says softly. The sunlight shines on his face. 'Fixed.'

I don't know about you, but at my house it became a useful phrase – if a bin liner ripped or a DVD skipped or it started to rain: Broken Britain. It's a phrase that fascinates and disturbs in equal parts. Running a magazine is a good excuse to go out and conduct surveys so we decided to put together an 'Utterly Broken Britain' issue. We're not trying for a Sociology degree but we did wander the country and ask people what was so broken about their surroundings and then we thought, Well, what does this broken-ness *really* look like? So we asked for a graphic representation of how broken (or slightly cracked, or whole) Britain is in 2010. As befits a literary magazine, we love words but there has been so much comment from commentators commenting all over the place on Broken Britain that we turned to visuals, crafted by some of our friends at the illustration collective PLATS, as well as Paul Davis, who can always find a beautiful way to draw societal breakdown.

What is Britain like these days? You'll find out inside, although I'll tell you now that one resident views modern Britain as 'a sloth carrying a briefcase of oil'. It's a phrase that has never appeared on the comment page of the *Daily Telegraph*. For our many international readers, consider this a chance to learn something about the state of Britain so that next time you're lured into a conversation with your young cousin who is studying Political Science you can lean back, nod, make a steeple with your fingers and say, 'Interesting point, Tristan, but I'd have to describe Great Britain, as it is today, by using an image I plucked from the noted current affairs journal *Five Dials* – a sloth carrying a briefcase of oil.'

We've also got an excellent bit of reportage from the battleground constituency of Poplar in east London, a poem based on a Joni Mitchell song but written in Scots, some fiction, some Alain de Botton, a memoir on circumcision and an archival excerpt from a book called *Snake Man*, about a man dealing with the life or death moments after receiving a bite from a poisonous snake – a situation that is still remarkably rare, even in this Broken Britain.

THE OTHER DAY, after putting some of the final touches to this issue, I went to play football on a fake grass pitch in west London, when an illustrator turned to me after putting on his boots and complimented *Five Dials*. Then he said, 'You know that Nick Dewar died of cancer recently?' I didn't; I was caught by surprise. It's hard to know how to react, while sitting on a football pitch lacing your shoes, to the death of someone you've never met but whose work enriches and perhaps even defines this magazine. For those of you who have been with us from the beginning, or ever seen one of our pistachio-green calling cards, or been paying any attention to the world of illustration for the past decade, you'll recognize Nick's work. Download our first issue and you'll get a glimpse into his world – his drawings are never messy or unsure; their strong lines originate in an earlier era and at first glance the figures and settings seem to have drifted in from a book of detective fiction – beautiful, mysterious women, men in sharp suits, hotel signs that flash ominously. I remember listening to a speech by David Lynch around the time we were putting together the first issue, and when Lynch's quavering voice started talking about plumbing the depths of the imagination to pull up images I thought of Nick. These sorts of images don't need to make sense because they come from such a strong, secret place. They carry their own mystery. It's there in Nick's work. A man's striped suit liquefies in a pool around his feet, the beam of a woman's torch bends and curves into space, a tree blooms from the bottom of a well-made shoe. 'What does it mean?' people ask when they examine the particular image that is emblazoned on our green cards. Because the name of the magazine is written above it I sometimes feel obliged to fumble for an explanation, something along the lines of, 'Great things grow from unexpected places.' My attempts are often met with a strained smile. I don't know why the drawing appeals. I don't know what it means. I don't have to. Nick's work is important to us because of its 'Why not?' quality. Why not grow a tree from the bottom of a shoe? At *Five Dials*, 'Why not?' is a phrase that is often used – it's the best reason for running a magazine like this and I'm glad that impulse is embodied in the work Nick gave us. If you go to nickdewar.com there is an icon of a postbox, which used to provide a link to his email address. Move your mouse over it now and the numbers 1973–2010 appear; if you click on it a drawing fills your screen that shows a man leaving his desk and his laptop and a smattering of Post-its on the wall of a drab room. He's been caught exiting through a window with foliage edging around the borders into some sort of golden glow. Look closer and you'll see it's not a window at all, but a pad of drawing paper hanging on the wall. We've caught him stepping through.

Here at *Five Dials* we printed Nick's work in black and white but I like this drawing in colour. I like the golden light that pours into the room. There's no explanation about what makes it gold or what lies on the other side of the frame, but I imagine it's a good place for an artist like Nick. After all, why not? —CT

The Fight for Broken Britain

Dan Hancox travels to the Eastern Front

THE FIRST TIME I met prospective Conservative candidate Tim Archer I boarded the Docklands Light Railway at Bank station in the City of London and sailed on the noiseless, driverless vessel into Canary Wharf, the heart of the futures market, where imaginary trading and abstract finance are raised up to be revered in totems of steel and glass. In the shadow of skyscrapers, I followed Archer, a thirty-five-year-old banker, to an Italian deli framed by open shelves of truffle oil. He sat amongst the business lunchers and spoke to me about the strange world of Poplar and Limehouse, a freshly carved constituency straddling east London's polarized extremes, a perfect test-bed for the Conservative Party's urge to heal what is known as 'Broken Britain'.

The Conservatives take 'Broken Britain' very seriously; seriously enough, at least, to appoint a man named James Brokenshire as their Shadow Minister for Crime Reduction. Yet even this commitment to nominative determinism has not silenced complaints that the Tories are manufacturing fear of crime and a 'social recession' to get elected.

In February 2010, the *Economist* decided to interrogate Tory claims that Britain has become a broken society. They found that violent crime had almost halved since 1995, while crime generally fell by an extraordinary 45%. The figures for teenage pregnancies – a favourite of those talking about social decay – remain constant since Labour came to power in 1997; so too do those for teenage abortions.

So when Tory leader David Cameron declaimed in October 2009, 'It's time to mend our broken society', where did he notice the cracks? Constituencies like Poplar and Limehouse are the perfect test-bed for the former 'nasty' party's conversion to social healing. Contested for the first time at this general election, following boundary changes, it's a seat which hyperbolizes Britain's widening national class divide: from the riverside luxury flats feeding Canary Wharf to the estates of Bromley-by-Bow, where 70% of residents live in social housing. Around half of those residents are in social classes D and E – the poorest members of society, mostly unskilled manual workers or those reliant on the state – and one in five were born in Bangladesh. The population turnover rate for Tower Hamlets borough as a whole is nearly 19%; ever since the Romans created the docks here, the area has been underscored by transience. Transience and unassailable Labour electoral success. Until 2004 the Conservatives had never held even a council seat here, let alone a parliamentary one.

On 6 May 2010, Jim Fitzpatrick, a fireman-turned-MP and Minister in Gordon Brown's government to boot, will seek to reassert Labour authority on the new constituency; remarkably, Archer will only need a swing of about 5% to win it for the Conservatives. It would be a tremendous scalp for the Tories in the Labour heartlands, and an indication that the 'broken society' message had cut through to Britain's poorest. For what it may be worth in such an unpredictable election, Archer is narrow favourite with the bookmakers. In the deli he divvies the constituency up into three broad groups – Bangladeshi families (approximately 37%), white working-class families and wealthy young professionals (mostly bankers) who are dotted around Docklands in what he called 'gated communities'. This invocation of the super-rich of Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Aires speaks volumes about how divided British society has become – only four European countries have more unequal distributions of income. In Britain, swanky new-build luxury-apartment blocks are required to contain a certain number of social housing units, yet, Archer says, the two groups rarely interact and the young professionals will move out to the home counties when they're ready to raise families. So, I ask him, if anyone's letting down the idealized East End sense of community in 2010, it's not the 'broken' working-class poor but the bankers – the one group who are instinctive Tory voters? He nods. Theirs is the kind of antisocial behaviour that's never going to warrant an ASBO.

'Everyone says it's the gated blocks that are helping the Conservatives, but these people don't vote,' one of Archer's team, another local councillor, tells me later.

The wealthy transient are often only around for six months, or they're foreign nationals, or they're working from six a.m. to nine p.m. 'As long as the short walk from the tube station or DLR stop to their gated block is clean and crime free, they're fine,' Archer says with more than a touch of frustration. 'That's the limit of their interest in the area.' That's the limit of their engagement, too – a corridor from capsule to hermetically sealed capsule.

Search Hansard for references to the Barley Mow Estate, which sits just north of Canary Wharf, and you will find just one entry, from 1990, in the dying days of the Thatcher premiership. The full parliamentary question reads as follows:

> Ms Gordon:
> To ask the Prime Minister whether she will visit the Barley Mow Estate in Limehouse.
>
> The Prime Minister:
> I have at present no plans to do so.

The Iron Lady may have turned her nose up at it, but Tim Archer can't afford to – the gated blocks are locked off and Limehouse is the most marginal part of the constituency. It's January, it's freezing, it's wet, it's ten a.m. on a Saturday morning – and behind a massive billboard of David Cameron's airbrushed face sits

Westferry DLR station. Under the railway arches the Tory activists begin to gather, hands in pockets, dodging rusty drips and finishing Diet Cokes. By coincidence, the local Labour team are arranging themselves directly opposite. Jim Fitzpatrick and his activists are outnumbered thirteen to five by the Tories. This baker's dozen comprises one woman, a few councillors and a lot of white males between the ages of thirty to fifty. Clipboards are handed out and we shuffle back out into the rain.

On the Barley Mow Estate, things don't seem broken. Half drowned by the British winter, perhaps, but not broken. The staircases are clean, painted an Art Deco white, the gardens are lively, well kept, adorned with trees and bushes and fresh paving. It's low-rise, it's pretty – and it's seemingly deserted. Councillor Ahmed Hussein is allocated to call upon any flat occupied by someone with an Asian-sounding name. Sabrina, a trainee solicitor, speaks five languages and seems to know everyone in Tower Hamlets. We run into a Labour councillor for Bromley-by-Bow in the street at one point, who it turns out is Sabrina's uncle. Everyone stops to chat; he and Tim exchange awkward words. 'This is . . . the politics,' he says in broken English, which Tim repeats with a bemused smile. The activists and politicians are everywhere, but the electorate are staying inside; hardly anyone answers the door.

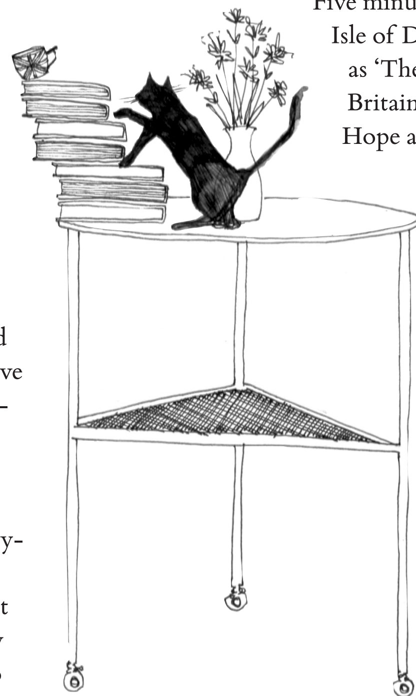
'I may be poor, but I am a Conservative,' says one of the first people both to open the door and keep it open – a woman in her fifties wearing pink fluffy slippers. She's got the kind of resilience that would make her an icon for working-class Toryism. Her mum died last year, her husband left her, her dad's deaf, she's a cancer survivor and her son's in a wheelchair, so she had to get rid of the piranha tank, because he kept bumping into it. There's still a sign reading BEWARE OF THE FISH on the front door. Sabrina does a lot of sympathetic nodding. 'Well, let us know if there's anything we can do for you,' she offers brightly at the end, taking down contact details.

At the next door we discover that Labour have been canvassing this block already, an hour or so earlier. 'Why do you all come at once?' a middle-aged man named Hugh asks. He knows Archer already from his involvement in the Limehouse Community Forum. He gestures to the Tory leaflet: 'This fear of crime thing you're pushing – it's too much populism.' They nod attentively – Hugh's views are clearly important, influential.

After a few hours, time is called on the day's campaigning and we retire to one of the activist's houses for lunch, with its thick white carpets, immaculate upholstery, mantelpiece trinkets and cut glass, veggie lasagne, roaring central heating and woolly jumpers. The rain still hasn't eased off, the whole of Docklands is liquid; outside, through French windows with a riverside view, the Thames merges with the sky into an infinite battleship-grey.

Next time I hit the streets, only a month later, sodden winter has changed to blinding spring sunshine. Mediterranean men sit outside Mediterranean cafes on Burdett Road, as bustling school kids of all hues carry their library books to swimming lessons, sashaying happily past an idle pair of police officers. The cracks aren't showing in this part of Broken Britain.

Around the corner on West India Dock Road the David Cameron poster outside Westferry DLR has been replaced with another Conservative billboard, reading, 'I've never voted Tory before, but we've got to mend our broken society' over a picture of Danielle from Brighton, a cheery-looking thirty-something black woman. The sunlight reflecting off Canary Wharf behind it is so bright you can't read the words on the poster. Finance overpowers everything in this part of the world.



Walking south towards the Isle of Dogs, the atmosphere intensifies from sparse commuter-land to the churn of commerce and construction. In the foothills directly beneath Canary Wharf and its neighbouring towers, it's impossible to walk more than twenty paces without accidentally trespassing, buying something, or running head-first into a cement mixer. If you're not careful you're suddenly in Credit Suisse's PRIVATE car park, with two hoggish security guards bearing down on you. 'I'm lost!' you cry. Which you are.

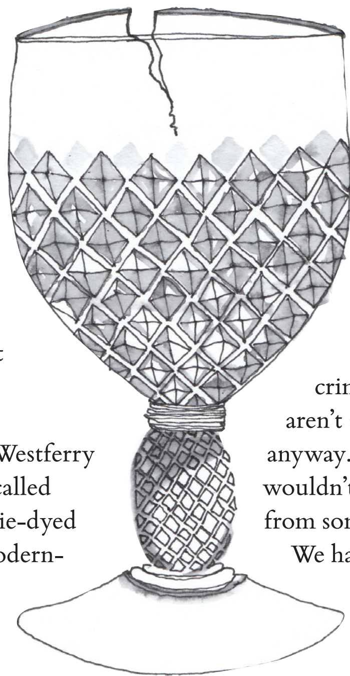
Britain's empire was constructed via London's docks – it has been the conduit for British wealth since the Romans took a look at the Thames and decided something could be made of this septic isle. But as always happens at the arrival points for vast sums of money, the glittering haul is adorned with a local halo of grime, crime and insobriety. Violence, drunkenness and prostitution were commonplace in the area historically – especially in the less salubrious districts of Wapping, Silvertown and the Isle of Dogs.

Things are calmer now. The Second City of Canary Wharf is a life-size artist's impression, rendered in three dimensions; free from clutter, free from litter – and free from heavy explosives, you presume, if the police presence is anything to go by.

Five minutes away, in a part of the Isle of Dogs that used to be known as 'The Land of Plenty' during Britain's colonial heyday, the Hope and Anchor sits boarded up, unloved, its business presumably swallowed by the two-storey Thai restaurant next door. The architecture on the island is mostly a mixture of eighties super-high-rise flats like Topmast Point (twenty-one storeys and over six hundred dwellings) and five- or six-storey new-build compromises. One such block is called The Quarterdeck, with a curved blue roof to add to the nautical theme. Outside it children play happily, making their own entertainment; it's not just the seagulls: it really feels like a seaside town.

Halfway down the promontory lies Millwall Outer Dock, a sort of inland lake bordered by houses and warehouses. Chained-up canoes sit stacked by its side, buildings lie dormant, one light in every ten turned on. The spring gloaming casts

a beautifully dim light over the water as dusk falls, and to my amazement the only sound is a very distant murmur of traffic and the somnolent squawking of seagulls – literally hundreds of them – drifting off to sleep on the water. Not one person passes me in half an hour sitting by its shore. For a place teeming with the ghosts of empire, hard labour, hard liquor, sailors and prostitutes, it's almost unbearably tranquil. This Britain isn't broken: it's just quiet to the point of being unsettling.



Back on the main drag, Westferry Road, a converted church called The Space is hosting both tie-dyed 'Psychic Readings' and a modern-classical performance by the unassumingly named Metapraxis Ensemble. Next to it sits a real, non-converted house of worship, St Edmund of Abingdon church, which seems like a good place to ask about social collapse. If there's one group other than the Tories that's always ready to tell us how badly we're behaving, it's the Catholic Church.

Inside, the parish underlings are over-cautious, seemingly scared of what they might let slip out. 'We're not allowed to talk politics,' they say. 'No comment,' they say. 'The Dean of Tower Hamlets will be here in a minute for the service …' one priest tells me, teasing, before shaking his head. 'But … but he'll tell you the same thing. We can't talk about politics.' Two seconds later Father Peter Harris, Dean of Tower Hamlets, strides confidently through the door and, brilliantly, he has not read the memo and launches into a detailed, heavily editorialized social history of the Isle of Dogs.

'These days, it's a strange place, but it's fascinating. All the way around the edge you've got new wealth; in the top right you've got a large Asian community; in the middle you've got a spine of big council blocks. They used to say "no blacks, no dogs, no Irish" round here, and some of the older parishioners, Irish Catholics, do say to me, "Oh, the council is so corrupt, it's just Asians helping each other out."' He raises an eyebrow a little and laughs. 'But if you go back to the sixties you had the Irish mafia running the council. So I just give them a wry smile and tell them, "Well, you've had your turn."

'There are pockets of real poverty here even now though, mothers without shoes and so on – meanwhile you have something like a third of Britain's gross domestic product passing through Canary Wharf.' We talk about crime on the estates – things aren't so bad, he says. Not lately, anyway. 'Two years ago the police wouldn't even answer 999 calls from some estates on the island. We had to get Jim Fitzpatrick to come in and give them a kick up the backside.'

Back on West India Dock Road, the Oporto pub has acquired a score of post-work drinkers, and I join a few regulars at the bar. It's a locals' pub where cockney is still an accent, rather than 'an area in London where criminals live', as Alan Partridge memorably put it.

When I ask about the election they give weary-faced sighs and make they're-all-the-same noises. Eventually, once the quiet anger has been worked through, they concede they'll definitely all vote. 'You have to vote, otherwise what's the point?' asks a man called, simply, 'Sumo'. What's the point of what? I ask. 'Democracy!' says Sumo. 'You've got no right to complain otherwise. Another lot will get in, but it won't make a blind bit of difference. We're in a global recession – it doesn't matter who's in charge, we're screwed anyway. It really wouldn't have mattered who was leading the country in the last two years – if the Asian economies aren't recovering, ours won't either.'

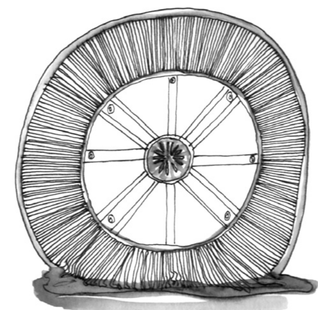
Incredibly, for a pub directly facing it, not one of them has even noticed the Conservatives' 'broken society' billboard – the barmaid and landlord included.

'You see kids walking to school in the morning and nine out of ten of them have fags hanging out their mouths already,' says Vicky, leaning on her beer taps. She points to a decline in levels of respect from young people, even since her relatively recent adolescence. 'School ties hanging round their ankles, giving it all the YES BRUV, ALL RIGHT BRUV,' she mimicks lairily, waving her hands. Beyond the pre-election slogans, there is no expectation that any party has even noticed the problem, the estates, let alone that they will do anything about it. And what could be done to bring school ties up from around kids' ankles?

Epigrams don't win elections – and in any case probably alienate more people – but I did encounter one phrase, in the Museum of Docklands next to Canary Wharf, that neatly sums up Poplar and Limehouse. It was the title of an 1885 W.L. Wyllie etching depicting river workers shovelling coal against a backdrop of distant trade ships: *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide*. Whichever way the tide flows in the election, some things will never change. We have always been a little broken.

'So, what are they saying, Britain's broken, is it?' Vicky finally asks from behind the bar, her pitch raising in tandem with her incredulity. 'What does that even mean? That there are scrubby estates full of single mothers? Oh *well*, thank *god* they spotted it!' There is laughter around the bar. 'Tell us something we don't know.'

Walking back to Westferry DLR, via the 'broken society' billboard, I pass commuters power-walking heedlessly underneath, as the cloudless night sky turns cold. The march of progress may be relentless, but it pays to stop and look up once in a while. ◊



The Line of Beauty

Brenda Walker on the restorative powers of Alan Hollinghurst

I HAVE A TASTE for cold weather. That's easy to say when you live, as I do, in a warm seaside city, but I like the way the face numbs in severe northern hemisphere cold, the way a coat blows open in the wind. The exhilarating bite of the air, the possibility of snow. Snow changes everything. The air warms beforehand – and afterwards, if the fall is heavy enough, even a great city can almost be hushed.

A New York winter some twelve years ago gave me a passion for the cold. The whole city was white and silver and watercolour-brown. Lean squirrels rushed and paused, rushed and paused, over crusts of old snow. Cigar smoke seemed to pool and remain in the air and I walked through these pools of smoky masculine breath long after the men who made them had ducked inside.

Chemotherapy is a little like a private winter. It brings its own weather, independent of the clouds or sunshine outside the hospital. But not all winters are pleasurable, full of interesting scenes for the traveller – some are simply bitter. During treatment, teeth chatter, sound travels differently and the body must learn to wait, to endure. It's an icy climate, chemotherapy, and it's difficult to carry a living story out of that grey place, to set it down in light and warmth, and hope that it might hold together.

By the time I'd had my fourth episode of chemotherapy I'd lost my hair and my illness was visible and public. During my recovery from surgery the seriousness of my medical situation could be concealed, but twelve weeks on I was unmistakably suffering from cancer. In the oncologist's waiting room, many of us were as bald as monks and we felt a particular kinship, a solidarity that set us apart from the newly diagnosed and from those who had finished their treatment and were there for a check-up. Our faces were pale, with none of the fine surface hair that goes unnoticed until it's gone. Light fell with strange clarity on our bare flesh, and this light seemed oddly familiar to me. Then I remembered the distinctness of women's eyelids in portraits by Jan van Eyck and suddenly, even though we all looked deathly ill, we seemed to carry a Flemish light within us, something foreign, northern, bare and bright and cold, something deeply out of place in Australia. In the street, people stared; we were so thin we were almost fashionable, in a corpse-bride kind of way.

I had the first chemotherapy episode in an outpatients ward: a room with polished wooden flooring and tall windows overlooking a park. There were vast, end-of-the-day armchairs, fresh cake and chicken sandwiches, but no books or TV. It was companionable. Young men with younger wives at their sides boasted about the size of their tumours. At this stage I was curious as well as nervous, I noticed everything. The slide of the cannula into my vein. The machine that delivered the drugs, which made a fluttering noise like the wings of waterbirds striking the surface of a lake at take-off. I felt fine. Then I was seized with cold, my hearing dimmed, the ordinary world receded. Or it came in close and this closeness felt dangerous. A few hours later, I started to be sick.

As I worked my way through the six treatments, I grew familiar with these symptoms, which were accompanied by an odd sense of paranoia. This seems to be common. I heard a singer who once had cancer describe how she expected to die every time the cannula was settled in her arm, every time the drugs began to thread through the plastic tubing. And I've read one perfect brief description of the effects of chemotherapy, by the American writer Joyce Wadler: 'I feel thick-headed, as if someone has hit me on the head with a sledge-hammer wrapped in a towel, but at the same time I'm anxious and speedy.'

Wadler describes the strange mixture of overexcitement and flat depression, the dull and jittery mood, the bad sleep. Everyone knows about hair loss and nausea, but mouth ulcers? A shredding of the walls of the tongue, making speech difficult?

I was so sick after my first treatment that I stayed overnight in hospital for the next five, while the fluttery machine washed saline through my veins. Someone came with a big silver space blanket when my teeth started to chatter. This was the pattern: one night in hospital, three weeks to recover, then a resigned return. I felt, childishly, that I was paying a terrible price for recovery; I felt that I was being punished.

My travel bag, the one with the space for a book under the zip, was starting to look rubbed around the edges, like the bag of a politician with a country constituency, or a mine worker on a fly-in, fly-out contract. One of the books I took to my chemo treatments was Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, a novel strong enough to hold the attention of a person sitting upright in a hospital bed, waiting for a difficult night to fall. For a night of this kind you need a populous, witty but serious book, like *The Line of Beauty*. A good-sized book, in terms of characters and pages, is what's required, since the night will be long and the book shouldn't end too soon.

Hollinghurst's novel takes us into a world you see on the front pages of broadsheets and tabloids, the world of British politics, and shows the way the popular press deals with privacy, including the publication of a diagnosis of AIDS. A gay man living provisionally in the household of a conservative politician has a grim insight into death. 'He stared out of the window and after a minute found Henry James's phrase about the death of Poe peering back at him. What was it? *The extremity of personal absence had just overtaken him*. The words, which once sounded arch and even facetious, were suddenly terrible to him, capacious, wise and hard. He understood for the first time that they'd been written by someone whose life had been walked through, time and again, by death.'

'Personal absence' is such an elegant, dispassionate way to describe death, but if you think about it, the phrase is crushingly extreme. And death – as distinct from fantasies of murder and criminal investigation – walked through the lives of people with much greater immediacy in the nineteenth century, when the dying were nursed at home. There was almost a cult of mourning: physical relics such as hair were commonly retained, sketches were sometimes made of the dead. The wearing

of black for an extended period was ritually observed in well-ordered households.

In our times we tend to focus on aberrant death, the basis of so much of our entertainment. Not that this was absent in the nineteenth century; we are the inheritors of Poe's detective stories, the forerunners of the investigative dramas we enjoy now. Today, of course, we also have forensics and the case-by-case resolution of individual deaths, creating the illusion that mortality is a problem that can be solved.

When I was very low – after the first few sessions of chemotherapy, after the routine was established but before the end was in sight – my high-school boyfriend tracked down my phone number and began to call from the other side of the country. His voice was a little indistinct but still recognizable, and suddenly I was fifteen again, filling a bucket with blackberries pulled from canes that bent over cold shallow water, or sitting on a gravestone in a country cemetery, wearing an op-shop dress while he took black-and-white photos with an important-looking camera. I was a long way from the hospital, wrapped in memory and a familiar voice.

How is it possible to submit to all this? To sit with the other Flemish faces in the oncologist's waiting room, to settle into a hospital bed with a book, then lay the book down to push up a sleeve when the nurse arrives with the drugs and the machine, and turn calmly aside? You need to have confidence in the medicine, but it's also possible because the mind turns everything into a story.

Each phone call from a friend, each medical visit reinforced this. 'How have you been?' the kind oncologist would ask casually, from behind her desk. And the previous three weeks of partial recovery – a lurid, shattered jumble of sudden shocks, unpleasant sensations and events – lined up neatly in the form of a story that someone else was listening to, with interest.

I wasn't a perfect patient. 'How can you do this?' I asked the oncologist before my fourth treatment. I was in the mood for complaint.

'I can do this,' she answered sensibly, 'because I'm going to save your life.'

THE YOUNG MEN in the outpatients room made themselves heroes of tales of misdiagnosis or difficult surgery. They were happy because they had control of a story, and in a terrible way they were happy because they weren't about to run out of material, not yet, not with a cannula in their arm, different from every other cannula. There was the drama of insertion and fresh dialogue with the nurse; they were amassing new material as they spoke.

What will happen next? we ask ourselves, often dreamily, all through our lives. Let's go to the hospital. Let's find out what happens next.

Nobody accepts that it might be death. In *Anna Karenina*, Anna's little son Seryozha is told that his mother is dead. It's a lie, and he protects himself from it in the only way he can. 'He did not believe in death generally, and in her death in particular . . .' He's right about his mother and he does see her, briefly, again, which must encourage his conviction. 'He did not believe that those he loved could die, above all that he himself could die.' We all have a little of Seryozha within us.

I have a postcard of Mount Fuji tucked into the back of a book. The mountain is photographed from an angle that renders it deep blue, almost the same colour as the sky. I read somewhere that when the Europeans who first climbed Mount Fuji saw the view they forgot what it had cost them to get to the top – some of them unlaced their boots to find that their toenails had floated off in little ponds of blood.

On the back of the postcard a Japanese woman I knew when I was a student has written: 'I'm going to be all right. I wish I could visit you.' I let myself believe, for a time, that she was going to survive advanced bone cancer.

When I was going through chemotherapy I felt that I wore my life lightly, and oddly enough this was a great relief. My life was charged with narrative meaning but it was also so unimportant. I was thin, in more ways than one. I felt free to go. I didn't want to, I had my son and my work, but I felt that if I chose to loosen my grip on them I could easily slip away. It didn't necessarily feel sad.

Perhaps I'm romanticizing this. Perhaps I spent too much of my adolescence sitting cross-legged on gravestones. But when I think of that time in treatment it has a wintry glitter; my face was like the face of a stranger in the mirror and I was strangely glad to be clear of my ordinary, comfortable self. What I didn't enjoy was the means of escape. ◊

Thirty-eight Typewriters

ERNEST HEMINGWAY said, 'There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.'

But what do writers bleed over now? Gone, sadly, are the days of the typewriter – and with them the often wonderful names their manufacturers bestowed on them.

Here are thirty-eight of our favourites:

The Royal Aristocrat
The Voss DeLuxe
The Remie Scout
The Olivetti Lettera 22
The Olympia SM-3
The Royal Quiet DeLuxe
The Torpedo 18
The Royal Mustang
The Smith-Corona Super G
The Underwood Ace
The Cole Steel
The Escort 33
The Erika 5
The Hermes 3000
The Bing 2
The Remington Streamliner
The Olivetti Valentine
The Wellington 2 Thrust Action
The Remington Noiseless
The Columbia Bar-Lock
The Groma Kolibri
The Granville Automatic
The Fitch
The Peerless
The Postal 5
The Helios-Klimax
The Century 10
The Marx Dial
The Monica No. 1
The Japy 5
The Tip Tip
The Mercedes Superba
The Klein-Urania
The Halberg Traveller
The American Visible
The Imperial Good Companion
The Tower Skywriter
The Generation 3000

—SP

A Nation Speaks

What is Britain? A rug? A mouldy book? A game of Tetris?

We travelled around the UK, did a little door-stepping, made a few calls, and asked Britons the following three questions. Answers below.

1. Do you think that Britain is a) broken, b) slightly cracked or c) not broken at all?
2. What could Britain be compared to right now?
3. What could be done to fix it?

Jean Harding, 79, retired, Garston

1. Slightly cracked.
2. A cracked teacup.
3. Glue it together.

Zarmena Javed Khan, 23, student and Admissions Assistant, Hatfield

1. Broken.
2. A beautiful, intricately woven rug, with people's dirty shoe-prints all over it.
3. Keep people away from Britain who don't contribute positively to its health. Welcome those who want to help.

Bryan Fitzsimons, 24, student, York

1. No, it isn't broken. The image of a 'Broken Britain' suggests that at one point construction was complete.
2. Britain was built by cowboys who never really finished the job, leaving us with draughts and exposed brick-work. I don't think we've really got the stomach to gut the place and start again. We'll just try to do the odd bit of rewiring on Sundays before *The X-Factor* results.
3. I don't really think anything needs fix-ing. It's still 'under construction'.

Ruby McGuigan, 20, student, Sheffield

1. No more broken than it has always been.
2. A jigsaw of the Queen. Not a really hard one though, like, 500 pieces.
3. Something, anything, that doesn't involve David Cameron and his mas-sive forehead. Seriously, get a fringe or something.

Sonny Malhotra, 23, photographer, London

1. I'm not sure it was ever fixed. Is any country truly perfect and pristine? Sure, Britain has had its share of prob-lems recently, but has life ever been that different? From year nought: the Romans roughed us up for a while; then we had a massive civil war; then some more civil war and a plague; then lots more civil war with some famine thrown in; then we spent lots of money on men fighting in the Mid-dle East; then there were some more famines and more war; skip over lots more Horsemen of the Apocalypse to modern history and we have two world wars, several smaller wars and some economic downturns. It's life as normal in the Britain Household.
2. Britain is a secondhand Skoda in a sec-ondhand Skoda dealership, in a world populated by secondhand Skodas driven by people who like to pretend that they once owned a Ferrari.
3. Nothing will 'fix' Britain. It will just continue to be. It'll get better for some people and worse for others.

Doreen Mason, 67, retired, Watford

1. Slightly cracked.
2. A sad, downtrodden old man.
3. A firm government willing to work towards giving us back our pride.

Beth Craggs, 23, graphic designer, St Monans

1. I don't believe Britain is broken, or at least, not if that implies that at one point it was 'working'; in fact, I think that it's probably better than it has ever been. Greater levels of oppor-tunity for a variety of people means there are fewer obstacles in the way of the British people's ambitions. Of course, we still have a very long way to go before we're the egalitarian, squeaky-clean meritocracy I'd like us to be, but it's because we have so few other problems that we're even worried about such an abstract ques-tion as 'Is Britain broken?' If we as a country were instead regularly dealing with questions like 'How can we make sure British children can get at least a primary level of education?', then addressing a question like 'Is Britain broken?' would be a long way down our list of priorities.
2. An old and valuable pocket watch; it works as it was intended to, but that still means that it needs to be regularly wound up.
3. I don't believe it needs fixing, but a good place to start with improvements would be to implement proportional representation in general elections, to invest heavily in urban regeneration and failing schools, and to rehash maternity leave laws to reduce the potential for gender discrimination in the workplace.

Rob Walker, 26, communications strate-gist, London

1. Slightly cracked.
2. One of those canteen dish meals where all the foods are separated and you have to mix them yourself.
3. I think integration of racial differences and cultures; a strong teaching of Brit-ish history in schools would help make people understand who they are and who others are.

Oliver Meek, 32, Totleigh Barton Centre director, Devon

1. Not broken at all.
2. N/A.
3. Nothing.

Russel McLean, 29, bookseller, Dundee

1. Slightly cracked. I think we're fixable. Or at least I hope so.
2. A book that has been left in a cupboard too long and gone mouldy.
3. Less of the culture of blaming other people. It's about attitude.

Rachel Ramsey, 25, student, location not given

1. Britain is broken but not in a way that means it's a desperate, crumbling heap of rocks. Instead, I see the British public as a relatively cohesive whole that has distanced itself, if not broken apart, from its government. While the public can never be completely unified in their views about what makes for an ideal society, or even why the government has become so alienated from the rest of the island, it does seem to agree on some salient issues which could unify the public and the government once more. Take, for example, the British reaction to Barack Obama's race for the US presidency. If nothing else, Obama's autobiography's ranking in the UK book charts suggested that British people recognized the need for a powerful and progressive leader, and perhaps realized the stark contrast between who the American public were voting for and what we had voted for some years ago. Americans were promised change and motion while we remain stationary, surrounded by what now appears to be an illegal war, by the notion that we are shareholders in banks which, despite Alistair Darling's promises, and despite their systematic failings which brought the country to its knees, will continue to reward their employees with significant bonuses, by cuts in higher education which undermine the government's position that universities will be crucial in our economic recovery … the list goes on. In sum, the British people are quite rightly asking, 'How the fuck did we end up here?' We are skint, yet lining the pockets of a tiny group of the population. And nobody seems to want to tell the truth about why we ended up in Iraq.
2. A saucer which has had the indented area (the bit that holds the cup) knocked out.
3. It's difficult to pinpoint what could be done to glue these two pieces back together. In order to reach any sense of closure over the economic crisis, the public should first be told what caused it. A sense of general ignorance presides over the whole issue, and nobody – myself included – really seems to understand why it happened or what role the UK banks played in it. By breaking down that barrier, progress can be made in restoring our faith in the banking industry. After that, we need to understand the decision-making process behind the bailouts, what conditions were attached to the bailouts and whether those conditions have been upheld. Finally, we should be told when we can expect the rewards Darling promised us for saving the banks. In response to our feelings of alienation from the government, the kneejerk reaction is, of course, to vote for a Conservative government. If anything is pointedly not the answer, it's that.

Lewis Hill, 29, marketing executive, London

1. Slightly cracked.
2. A game of Tetris where you have put a crucial piece in the wrong way and you can't stop the next piece coming.
3. Put quality of life at the centre of every political, economic and moral decision. End the ridiculous obsession with the working class.

Jo-Anne Rowney, 22, student, Brighton

1. Slightly cracked.
2. Fractured arm.
3. Respect, tolerance, action.

Peter Bloxham, 24, software trainer, Staines

1. That depends heavily on what sort of society we want. For certain people, it is working in exactly the way it's supposed to.
2. Britain is a television showing an advert for a £7 cup of coffee, available with 0% APR.
3. Close the VIP room.

Anna Cardona, 39, export officer, location not given

1. Slightly cracked.
2. A broken seashell. We should leave our comfort zone (the seashell), forget our prejudices and follow our intuition to conceive a new life free from the vagaries of banks, firms, multinationals and markets.
3. I advocate for a spiritual change. We can live with less. Less is more.

Jenni Canwell, 23, tape librarian, London

1. Slightly cracked. Broken is a bit extreme. We still have a fairly good economy and society despite what the media has sensationalized. Some people are worse off than others, but it'd be so boring if everyone lived in harmony all the time.
2. An incomplete puzzle, with the pieces a bit muddled.
3. Education reforms to make higher education more accessible. And they need to sort out immigration because it's a bloody joke.

Gill Gorman, 66, retired, Garston

1. Slightly cracked.
2. A cracked hen's egg.
3. Everyone should talk and write about the good things about our country. Focus on those instead of all the bad things – those are in the minority anyway.

Clare Adams, 25, artist, Hemel Hempstead

1. Broken. With the expenses scandal, unelected leaders and the war crimes of Tony Blair hanging over us, British democracy is well and truly bust. The needs and voices of Britain are becoming overlooked with our two-party system; big business comes first these days. If ID cards become the norm then, for me, Britain is in the scrapyard.
2. Sloth with a briefcase full of oil.
3. An end to two-party politics.

Tom Darlington, 26, marketing executive, London

1. Slightly cracked. We still enjoy a better quality of life than a great number of countries around the world, both in terms of wealth and personal freedoms. Whilst the idea of ID cards may be unacceptable to some, we live in a different age. Threats from terrorism are at the greatest level since the end of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. It amuses me that people who object to ID cards are often giving away much more information to companies such as Google, Tesco and so on, but their power is never considered. I am more concerned by rising train fares than I am by ID cards or a DNA register.

2. A flat tyre; still capable of functioning, but in need of reinvigoration.
3. As with most western societies we have become fat and bloated on easily available credit. Banks offer credit because the consumer demands it. It's not acceptable to simply blame those in charge. As a wider group of individuals we have to think about what contribution we can make to improving our own lives.

Betty Lambert, 84, retired, Abbots Langley
1. Broken. My identity has been stolen. I am English, but I am not allowed to be called English. I can be Scottish, Irish, Welsh, but not English. It is demoralizing.
2. A shattered glass.
3. Reward effort, punish wrongdoers, make parenting popular and teach children right and wrong. Return to standards; the government should lead by example.

Rebecca Woodhead, age not given, novelist, Cotswolds
1. Not broken at all.
2. Britain is broken in the same way that a butterfly is a broken caterpillar.
3. See above. Britain is not broken, so no need to fix it.

Jeff Goad, 26, support worker, Wigan
1. Slightly cracked.
2. A nuclear power station.
3. Legalize ganja, it might mellow all the pissheads and earn a bit of tax money. Make areas look nicer by planting more trees. Give benefits in vouchers rather than money. Allow guerrilla gardening and give children more places to hang out. This country kicks ass, although it's a little overpopulated.

Beverley Caddick, 22, student and lecturer in Law, Liverpool
1. Broken.
2. Alex Ferguson's broken heart at not being in the Champions League.
3. New government. With no expense 'mishaps'. Is that possible?

Daniel Paul, 27, mechanic, St Albans
1. Very broken at the moment.
2. The Cutty Sark; something that could be great, a burnt-out hulk being desperately patched up just to stay in existence.
3. God knows. I'm strangely optimistic about the future, though.

Sue Avery, 60, retired, Hertfordshire
1. Slightly cracked.
2. An earthquake fissure with earth-moving machines in the background.
3. Good government run by people of real conviction and ability. The best brains are not going into politics, which is very worrying.

Charlotte Gibling, 21, student, Lincoln
1. Slightly cracked.
2. A battered old vase that has been badly patched up with Sellotape and glue.
3. Perhaps a greater respect for different age groups (especially the elderly) reflected in the NHS and the education system. Help offered to those who need it, without them having to fill out hundreds of forms in order to get noticed at all.

Vicky Godber, 23, childminder, Borehamwood
1. Broken. Too much going on at the moment! Normally the news is all, like, 'a coach crashed into a ditch' but it's all politics at the moment – the MP scandal, the Iraq hearing and the recession. There's too much that needs to be fixed.
2. A broken window in a house with jobless people all around.
3. No idea, because truly I don't think David Cameron could do much of a better job. They all seem to be on the same track. They say they're so different but they're not. Something radical needs to be done to shake the whole thing up. People vote, but it's half-hearted and nobody does their research. Nobody finds out about any other parties, they just vote for the same one they did the year before.

Ryan Cox, 27, restaurant owner, Abingdon
1. Broken.
2. Quicksand.
3. A change of government.

Pat Stuart, 74, retired, location not given
1. Slightly cracked. That crack will widen without quick action.
2. Two ships. One without a captain and the other with all the crew in place sailing well.
3. Strong leadership, not just from government but from within our social and educational institutions. Every ship needs to have a reliable captain.

Louise McMahon, 24, teacher, Berkhamsted
1. Cracked. But majorly rather than slightly cracked. It's seriously damaged, but I don't think it's completely broken. These problems are reparable.
2. One of our potholed roads. Generally sound but there are areas that are rough, cracked and in some places have enormous gaping holes.
3. Working in an educational environment, it is scary to see the type of children being produced by the present target-driven culture. Schools are scared of slips in results, which can trigger an Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills] visit and affect their places in the league tables. This then has a knock-on impact on the numbers of students applying, which affects the amount of money the school receives. Deadlines are being extended, redrafts of work produced. Failure isn't an option. Students aren't aware of deadlines, and shirk their responsibility to actually sit there and do some work. If they do badly, it isn't their fault – it is that of the school. Sadly, this is a culture encouraged by most parents now. The move back towards producing well-rounded students rather than just ticking a box needs to be made.

Jane Wheeler, 56, retired, Surrey
1. Broken.
2. A footballer kicking another player intentionally, showing a lack of respect; wanting to achieve, but not by fair means.

3. Go back to a moral code of conduct so we respect and help one another.

Lisa Clague, 22, unemployed, Ainsdale
1. I think Britain is slightly cracked due to the economic problems of the last few years and what many consider to be an unstable government. People seem to have forgotten what community means and there appears to be a large amount of antisocial behaviour in certain areas, which is causing disruption to many.
2. It could be comparable to a teenager who has lost their way between the innocence of youth and the maturity of adulthood – the idea being that Britain is simply going through a bad 'phase' and will eventually turn out okay.
3. In order to 'fix' the country, more effort needs to be made to help communities interact with each other. Many people are critical of immigration, yet do not personally know anyone who is in that situation.

Billy Grant, 22, student, Warwick
1. Slightly cracked.
2. An object balancing on the edge of a table.
3. Improve education, motivation and work rates.

Natalie, 22, unemployed, Liverpool
1. Broken.
2. A bicycle with no brakes heading for disaster.
3. Focus on young people. Increase the number of youth centres or sporting activities for younger children to keep them off the streets. Place less emphasis on sending people to university and encourage more vocational learning options.

Clint, 50, chemist, East Riding
1. The problem is one of identity. Britain doesn't really exist anymore, with devolution in Scotland, Wales and, to a lesser extent, in Northern Ireland. This makes the concept of Britain defunct. We live in a society where people in these devolved areas have more say, more influence and more access to their politicians. This gives them a greater sense of national purpose. Until England gets its own devolution we will remain an unequal partner.
2. Britain could be compared to a CCTV camera. Everyone can see what is wrong but no one's prepared to do anything about it.
3. My first priority (ideally) would be to have a republic with an elected second house and a written constitution with inalienable rights for all citizens.

Rachel Wood, 20, student, Darwen
1. It is broken due to disinterest in politics. My school in Blackburn (private, good school) did not study politics or even have extra classes to teach us how the country was run. As a result I came out of school and college with little understanding of the governance of the country.
2. A shattered glass.
3. Make politics compulsory in the curriculum or have separate classes, for example 'life skills' where politics could be taught.

Sarah Rees, 'just the right side of 50', bookseller, Mumbles
1. Slightly cracked.
2. A chipped wine glass.
3. For people to be fair with one another.

Nicole Fuller, 24, occupation not given, Birmingham
1. Britain as a whole is slightly cracked, with the middle and upper classes only just becoming aware of how deep the cracks run. The working class, on the other hand, is at breaking point. Racial tensions, the economic downturn and political unrest are all causing a potentially volatile mood within the lower classes that only needs a small spark to ignite and become much worse. These tensions are played out daily on Birmingham's streets with gangs of whites and Asians fighting, throwing stones and attacking each other with weapons, even on Saturday afternoons as people are shopping. The police have no powers to stop the trouble.
2. A volcano.
3. I think it's too late.

Owen Robarts, 26, occupation not given, Manchester
1. Broken.
2. Smashed like a pane of glass.
3. Reintroduce community so that groups won't fear each other and hopefully people won't feel the need to be violent to show how 'hard' they are.

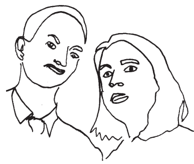
Elizabeth Norman, 22, student, Darwen
1. I'd say maybe slightly broken, no more than many other countries. Obviously we have our problems, but the idea of calling our society completely broken just seems really wrong to me if we compare it with other nations like Zimbabwe.
2. I'd say it has cracks, not big ones but the kind you have in your car windscreen that get a little bigger the longer you leave them. It would take a lot of wear and tear for it to shatter completely.
3. Politicians working together instead of point-scoring off each other, and also just making more people politically aware from a younger age – perhaps even teaching it as a compulsory lesson in schools. A lot of the problems in our society come about from people being unhappy with the government, but if people had a greater knowledge of how the system works then they would have a better idea of what they were actually voting for. Then perhaps there wouldn't be the problem of this BNP [British National Party] and UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party] culture that there seems to be today. All you have to do is look at how political parties play up to this fear of immigration by highlighting how their policies could go wrong, and so on. But they could work at actually fixing the irrational fear of such issues by pointing out how beneficial immigration can be to the economy for creating jobs.

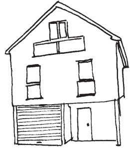
Eleanor Sherman, 23, personal assistant, Thame
1. Broken.
2. A customer service desk.
3. Lib Dems, maybe . . . hopefully.

Mary, age not given, retired and a volunteer, Falmouth
1. Not at all.
2. A complete and untorn map.
3. Kindness. ◊

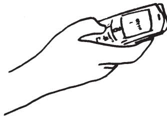
Broken Britain

10 days from John O'Groats to Lands End.
In every nook and every cranny,
Britain is broke.





NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL MOVED IN NEXT DOOR
DAY 1
John O'Groats Gazette

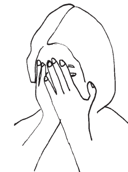


TEXT TRAUMA FOR HEADTEACHER
DAY 2
Inverness Times

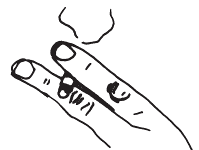
ADDICTS STEAL CHARITY BOX IN BROAD DAYLIGHT
DAY 3
Fort William Courier

TEENAGERS RUN WILD AFTER AUDITIONS FOR DANCE SHOW
DAY 4
Carlisle Observer

15 YEAR OLD BOY BECOMES FATHER FOR THE SECOND TIME
DAY 5
Burnley Echo

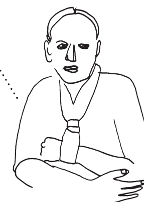


BENEFITS CHEATS ON BOOZE CRUISE SHAME
DAY 6
Wolverhampton Citizen



SMOKERS FORCE LOCAL NHS TRUST INTO DEBIT
DAY 7
Cheltenham Express

SHAME AS MAJORITY OF 3 YEAR OLDS CAN'T WRITE THEIR OWN NAMES
DAY 8
Bude Post

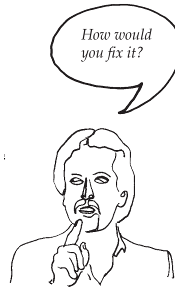


FALSE CLAIM OF INCAPACITY BENEFITS A SYMBOL OF OUR TIMES - JUDGE SAYS
DAY 9
Glastonbury Star

PUBLIC WANT A STOP TO THIS BROKEN RECORD
DAY 10
Lands' End Evening Telegraph

Jeremy asks

Audience member replies



Noel asks

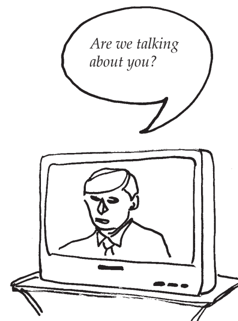
Ben from Rugby replies

Nicky asks

Lorraine calling from Derbyshire replies

Mumsnet asks

Mumsnet replies



The media asks

The people reply

The Stream

by Colin Elford

THE FROST worked overnight, coating the countryside in jewels, each encrusted in its own icy tomb. Muddied russet leaves formed a frozen carpet underfoot and sent up a crisp complaint with each step. Stacked in layers by the winter winds, the leaves were joined by a thin film of frosted ice, once a seam of moisture from the drizzle of a passing cloud.

Above the frozen path, a pair of cock blackbirds rose from the ground and faced each other, enraged and territorial, only a feather's-width apart. They flew up a few feet, then fell back to earth as spiteful as a pair of bantam cocks, blind with battle and too busy to notice a stranger in their territory. Above, a pied wagtail looked down on the foray while swinging back and forth on the electric wires, just a bobbing flick, flick, flick of black-and-white.

Before mounting the stile ahead I stopped and rubbed the overnight stubble on my chin, suddenly awake and tickled by the sharp north-easterly. The weak winter sun offered no warmth; the gold leaf it spread on the opposite bank barely cast light onto the tussocky grass of the path. Blue haze and shadow painted the bottom of the valley. Across on the distant bank, buck and doe rabbits frolicked in courtship in the enclosed glades between the clusters of gorse. On the ground around my feet, woolly tufts of blue-grey hair torn from the coat of a rival coney lay scattered, as soft to the touch as a baby.

The top layer of cloud was as white as an Arctic snow scene and from this vantage point it felt as though I could reach out and stroke it. The sun slipped behind a pressure ridge of virgin snow and was gone.

The track continued across the field. Grey rocks covered in greyer lichens erupted from the soil – ankle-high gravestones for unobservant walkers – and terraces of pasture and down, moulded like waves, rolled down to the valley floor.

In a narrow thicket a squabble erupted, breaking the stillness of the morning. A tiding of magpies surrounded a lone buzzard who was resting too close to their future territories, and they pecked at their hunched victim, shrieking abuse. The buzzard was outnumbered but determined to stay put, so he clumsily raised a bared wing at his attackers in protest. Overhead a gang of rooks added to the noise in drawn-out raspy calls, each tone unique to the caller. They dropped as a group to investigate the raging argument, swooping over the magpies' position, but instead of joining in the disturbance they lifted, thinking better of the situation once the buzzard noticed, rising fast and high as one body and leaving the sky quieter than when they'd arrived. In time the magpies were joined by several of the local bird population, all raising their annoyance at this large outsider. Undeterred, and still as a rock, the buzzard remained.

I left the neighbours arguing and picked my way down the slope towards the valley bottom. To my right, running from just beneath the ridge of the slope, was a strip of over-grazed rush and heavily trampled ground. The cattle's hoof prints trapped pools of still water; the sodden ground was marked with these ringed tracks that carved a soft inscription on the hillside, a chain of raised tufts attracting the available light. The hillside shimmered as I walked past. In the damp ground of the valley I spooked a snipe that exploded into the sky from a frozen hoof indent, twisting and jinking into the grey, then vanishing in all but sound.

A young stream came down through the valley, laying the grass flat as it flowed. It started in a crease in the grass, but its slow momentum built along the route of my journey. When it was ankle-deep the water flowed under a stock fence, over submerged pastoral grasses, and cascaded over an occasional raised hoof print. It was as splendid as the pushy effort of any waterfall. Side channels widened into miniature lakes and then widened again, searching for light and reflecting the gift back with the glare of a mirror.

The young trickle skirted and slid and reached a narrow cut, shaped from the past movement of water over its stony bottom. Here the water was as clear as any chalk stream; it sent out a soothing sound, it babbled and spoke, and then cascaded into a channel running alongside some thorny vegetation. Its soft music changed in tone. The water passed through the hedge, hidden behind a thorn shield of wild rose and bramble; the guard of dry barbs was as sharp as talons. Once hidden, the stream song changed and gave out the groan of an injured animal. I paused, listening to each sound, the odd unusual crackle and guttural moan. Peering into the gloom of the hedge I saw a small sandbar where the washed-up debris gathered, a mix of dried bramble sticks and leaves. On leaving the hedge the stream reappeared and gained more strength. Where once it flowed around small boulders of rock, now it scaled and glided over the peaks, its music loud and constant. Crowfoot plants anchored on the edges of its sandbars, while further downstream rotting leaf litter, brought on the current, clung to its banks. The thrust of the stream released a mass of froth and at times the water let out a shriek: the surface rippled in pulsing rings. It sounded like a fast-running tap.

The chest feathers of a blackbird, its life cut short by a hungry raptor, swayed on the edge of the stream. A single feather clung to a dry strand of last season's goose grass, half in and half out of the water, caught between two worlds. Orange berries and drowned haws were swept along the sandy bed of the stream and rolled over the stones, to be caught by waving arms of underwater vegetation. No longer quiet, the stream showed its newfound strength, passing deep holes with ease, diving over and under stones, massing around a large, stubborn rock, stirring the waves and rippling the surface. At times it bubbled with sheer enjoyment: was it laughing now at the maelstrom, glorying in the whirlpools and fish-scale ripples it sent spiralling across its surface?

The stream's pace was slowed by a fallen fence across its path that created an island of dirty froth, and sections of this island peeled off as bubbles into the revolving rhythm of water, each floating towards one another, clinging together like shipwrecked sailors, growing larger

as a cell. Together they circled, caught in the whirlpool; the smaller ones exploded, regenerating the growing central bubble with every sacrifice. This selfless ceremony continued until the last remaining sphere grew to a clear dome, the perfect fish-eye, and then popped to let the process of birth begin all over again.

Once past the fallen fencepost the stream found its own course, crossing crevices, spreading over shallows, widening and narrowing as the land permitted. As the valley levelled, the song of the stream grew quiet and once again birdsong sounded over the noise of the water. It coursed over the roots of an ancient and scarred russet hawthorn and a cock chaffinch pinked from the bare branches. Swelling buds on the limbs waited for the first signs of spring.

Near the tree the edges of the stream had been disturbed by thirsty cattle crushing the sides, leaving them badly trodden and misshaped. Each half-moon track between the cattle-cropped rushes slowed down the progress of the stream, diverting the flow and sending seeping fingers of water into dead-end channels. Within a central channel a blood-red stem, softened by the water, caught a batch of quivering bubbles more delicate than a chandelier.

Other than the chirring of a greenfinch in the distant scrub, there was no sound. A horse-tail swished, breaking the surface of the water with ripples, as the stream glided under a raft of small sticks lodged into the side of the bank. Past the single plank that made for a bridge, the ground softened beneath my feet and the stream was barely audible. It drifted into a moist furrow and seeped into the ground to some unknown underground pathway, as though it wanted to leave unnoticed, slipping away like an old relative, not wanting to be a hindrance; so different to its shape as a young trickle, quiet and reserved, and to its adolescent noise and confidence, running quick over obstacles with strength. When the wrong path could lead to stagnancy, as the stream widened was there a wisdom in its flowing water? Nearing its task it slowed, quiet and ready to return to its waiting mother, through secret ancestral cracks in some cave wall, dripping down to be reborn again. ◊

Stephen Vizinczey

On sex, morons, literature, and how love affairs might just save our society

He is a short, well-groomed man with a large, white-toothed smile. We sit in his study in a flat near Earl's Court, surrounded by the books he returns to as often as possible. A musician, he says, practises the works of the great. A writer should read Balzac as often as possible.

It's hard to imagine Vizinczey's career path as an effective template for a young writer – an exiled Hungarian gets shipped to Italy and then Canada after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and decides to self-publish a novel celebrating older women. He distributes In Praise of Older Women *himself until somehow – thanks in no small part to its title – its notoriety takes over. Eventually the lead character of this* bildungsroman *is played by Tom Berenger in one of the two film adaptations. First published in 1965, the book was finally reissued in Penguin Classics in 2010.*

Vizinczey drinks a cup of coffee and speaks about the title. 'It did not make the book popular with some women,' he says. 'I remember when I was at the French book fair years ago. A woman who looked to be in her forties was inspecting the cover. 'Are you interested?' I asked her. She said: 'I am too young for this.'

STEPHEN VIZINCZEY: Years ago, after I had moved from Canada to England, I was on the David Frost show with Barbara Cartland [novelist] and Dennis Norden [comedy writer]. Norden loved the book and defended it and Barbara Cartland abused me for half an hour.

5D: What did she say?
SV: How horrible the book was – shocking, immoral and terrible.

5D: Why did she find it immoral?
SV: Because sex is a diverse subject. It is very difficult to write objectively about sex. Men put in all the complaints and all the hurt women have caused them and women write about all the horrible things men do. Most books connected with sex are really about the war between the sexes. My book is different. For some reason I think I can write objectively about sex.

Also it is a happy book about sex. Most people lead an unhappy sex life, so they just don't think it's important. If people don't want to deal with something they say it's not important or it's not something to write about. Phony sex books sell wonderfully because they don't touch people. But if you write a book that hits home and touches people then you are in trouble. I really didn't know what it was to be hated before I wrote my book. I got a lot of fan mail, but I also got a lot of hate mail.

5D: What makes a book phony when it comes to sex?
SV: The reader will know when you write truthfully about any subject. Anything that is untrue does not connect with people's experiences, so readers are not touched. A book works when the readers can put their own experience in it.

A text is like a music score; it is just notes on the paper. The reader is the musician. The reader creates the music. If the book is good, the reader's reaction is built into the book and their mind is engaged. It's a very funny thing and I don't know how I do it when I do it. Most of the time I don't do it, so I throw away more than ninety per cent of what I write. That's why I publish so few books. If the writing is not true, the reader is just an onlooker. If you write truthfully about anything, the reader is part of the scene.

5D: Why do you think readers want to enter into this particular piece of music? Do they want to live through these love affairs with you?
SV: They respond to something. Anybody who has had a happy sex life loves the book.

Literature answers two questions: Do you remember? And do you know? All literature is summed up by these two questions.

5D: So the book leads people to remember the good love affairs?
SV: Yes, they remember their happy experiences. Or even a bad experience if they survived it and it didn't make them twisted. This book is not for the twisted.

5D: Do you think older women were different back when you were young?
SV: No. I hate this notion that human nature has changed. We haven't changed a fucking thing in thousands of years. The worries might change, the pretensions might change, but human beings have felt and talked the same way for tens of thousands of years. There will be change eventually if we become illiterate and totally visual and forget reading. In that case, in ten or twenty thousand years, a different kind of human being will appear.

5D: But older people now are made to look younger with different surgeries. Older women – women who would have been the same age as your characters – are pressured to look different now.
SV: No. This is the media image. It may apply to famous actresses but not ordinary people. Friends of mine are not like this at all. This is the media world that doesn't apply to over ninety per cent of the population.

There is one difference. Stupid people are much more affected these days. So if you're a stupid man or woman, you are very much affected by this type of thing. You try to be a model, or behave like one. But the people affected are the morons. Morons are always morons one way or another.

5D: Yours isn't a book about one-night stands. It's about love affairs.
SV: Sex without connection is destructive. It doesn't have to be love but there has to be an affection. You have to like that person.

5D: Is a person missing out if they have a love affair with someone their own age?
SV: It depends. I know of lasting love affairs of people of the same age. They get along very well. The most important thing is that you fit. You need to have the same heartbeat, the same nervous system to get along with anybody. That can happen at any age, but it rarely happens between young people. Kids get together, but neither of them knows anything. Love is a serious business of learning about yourself and learning about the other person. There is no way to get it right when you are 17 or 18.

The nerve of the book is how two people get together, regardless of age. It is

about the moment of courage. You need courage. The important thing about sex is courage. There is no greater hurt than being rejected.

5D: What does an older person bring to a relationship with a young person?
SV: Friendship and affection and knowledge. The biggest tragedy of our society is the separation of the generations.

I saw in the *Daily Mail* that fathers do not talk to their sons. This intergenerational conflict is a vicious thing. The young say the previous generation took too much. The older generation blames the youth for social decay.

The greatest social impact of connections between the young and the old is that the young learn their experiences. They have a notion of the previous generation and know of their optimism and their struggles. They begin to learn how the world worked.

5D: Do you think we'd be better off if there were more love affairs between generations?
SV: It is the essential part of any civilization. Without that bond, you will have a broken society. That's why we have a broken society.

If you think someone from a previous generation is your enemy because she ate up your future and that's why you don't have a home, then you have a broken society. It breaks the family, the friendship, and, most importantly, the love.

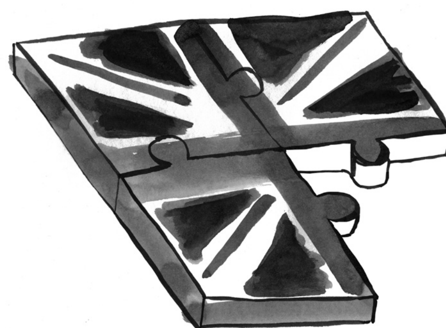
My book is not quite an autobiography, but I have always loved older women. I had a forty-year-old lover when I was fourteen. She was an expert in English literature and poetry. She had travelled around the world. It was an education.

5D: And what do you remember about that particular love affair?
SV: She was wonderful. Older women taste and smell good. I had a sixty-two year-old girlfriend and she was one of the best. Nothing is lost in the wrinkles. You can have great sex at sixty, but a lot of people lose confidence. You can have great sex when you are older. I'm soon going to be seventy-seven and I'm having the best sex of my life. Much better than when I was 20. It's much slower but it gives me confidence.

This idea of confidence embodied by sex has a profound effect. This particular book was banned in South Africa and all over the Soviet Union.

5D: Was that because of the sexual content or because of what you write about political oppression?
SV: The two cannot be separated. Anybody who oppresses doesn't want a person to rely on the self. Joy gives you strength, so joy is never celebrated in an oppressive society. No regime likes it when you have strength in yourself.

I was very lucky in love. I was loved and I loved, so I was never a slave. The powerful know this: they want you to respect medals and titles but when you find joy in love you have the confidence to turn away from those surface displays of power.



There was a wonderful Italian cartoonist who drew the great politicians of his time naked. They all had tiny penises. Their power disappeared.

5D: You left Hungary because of the revolution and ended up in North America. What effect did the move have on you?
SV: The experience of changing languages was hard. I didn't want to leave Hungary. I went to Italy but it wasn't a big change. But when I went to Canada I was in a totally different world and I was scared to death. There was a time when I thought I had dreamt my past.

When I arrived in Montreal, Beethoven's violin concerto was on the radio and between the second and third movements they had a Coca-Cola ad. I thought it would be front-page news the next day because it was so fantastic. But it wasn't and that's when I felt scared to death. I thought there was no way I would ever make it in that country.

I thought I was crazy, but then I read Stendhal again and thought they were crazy. That's another very important thing about books. They will never save the world but they reassure you that you're not alone. In time I realized the Canadians are absolutely the same as Hungarians. They had the same human problems and intelligence. The more intelligent a person is, the less it matters where they come from. The biggest difference between people is the level of intelligence.

What I hated about Toronto was that the art sections were about some pop singer, Elvis Presley or whoever. When I came to England in 1966 I was very glad to see that the review sections were about writers. Serious things. But it's changing. It's now like North America used to be twenty or thirty years ago. The popular morons are on top, so we are again in the position where writers are not visible. And when you are not visible you get scared.

The horrible thing about stupid people is this: anything they don't know they think is unimportant. Stupid people know everything. Anything they don't know doesn't matter.

5D: What's wrong with entertainment?
SV: All the great writers gave you a good time but the main point is to nourish your soul and to tie you to the rest of mankind.

When you read a great writer you are reading a kindred spirit and a kindred mind. They put into words something which is only half formed in your own mind. They can clarify what you're thinking. That's why it is so important.

5D: Do you honestly feel something important is slipping away?
SV: No it will never slip away. It's like mathematics. People say they don't understand algebra, or that algebra does not have mass appeal, but that doesn't alter the fact it has absolute significance. It keeps the world going. If no one understood algebra the world would just end. I am happy to say the same is true with literature. ◊

POEM

TOD

James Robertson

efter 'Coyote' by Joni Mitchell

I dinna blame ye, Tod –
Hoo could I blame ye for bein yersel?
For haein that hell-mend-ye attitude
While hoormaisters weigh oot pokes o kiss n tell
While doom merchants buy and sell futures in naethin
And kirkmen fecht ower whit's sand and whit's stane
Ye're aff rinnin through the here and noo
Makkin the widds and the hills yer ain
Sometimes I'll catch ye in the car's heidlichts
The quick yella glent o yer arrogant ee
Sometimes ye're crushed at the side o the road
But even deid ye show anither life tae me
Seein ye there is somehow a guid sign
It means ye've nae plans yet tae retire
It tells me we're niver dune till we're cauld
And we're niver cauld till we canna shine
Lit up wi the licht o ambition's slow, slow fire

I wis niver wild like you were
Reason and commonsense aye held me back
The logic o law and the scent o fear
The safety in numbers o the howlin pack
We were yince cousins back there in the hauf-licht
You and me, aye and the auld wolf tae
But he's lang awa and I'm hoose-trained noo
Hame-drauchtit – though I ken fine weel whaur I'm frae
Sae that leas yersel, oot o order, ootside
That faur oot it seems ye hardly exist
A fitpad, a felon, a thief in the nicht
A shift in the trees, a shape in the mist
Aw Tod, look at me, I'm chowin ma lip
Slaiverin tae get ayont the jaggy wire
Dreamin o jinkin the boondary fence
Claucht atween icy prudence's grip
And the lick o the licht o ambition's slow, slow fire

They used tae cry ye vermin, Tod
Till the PC crew got yer name aff that leet
They'd award ye a social worker and rights
If only ye'd settle and gie up meat
But ye're nae Tam Paine on liberty
The notion o that's niver crossed yer mind
It's yer instincts drive ye, drive ye, drive ye
Heedless o ony borderline
Fermers want yer guts for nicky-tams
Faithers want yer tail hung oot tae dry
Ye're a flittin shadda at the hen-hoose door
Ye're a silhouette on the mune-bricht sky
Sometimes I smell ye at the neb o day
The bowf o yer pish and yer dug-desire
It hings in the air like a memory
A switherin proof o existence or mibbe
The drift o the ash o ambition's slow, slow fire

I looked oot the windae o a breengin train
Efter bein up aw nicht, efter bein doun in Lunnon
And I saw ye, Tod, through the blearit gless
Lowpin and flingin in the new blue dawn
And yer tail wis a bleeze, a fireflaucht
A wallopin wild reid banner o flame
And I wis that fou o envy
And I wis that fou o shame
Thinkin on aw the dangerous joys
That micht hae been mine if I'd had yer heat
Yer gallusness or jist yer poise
I wis gaun back tae a grey, grey room
Tae anither windae I'd look though frae inside
But noo I think that wee glimpse o yer freedom
And the fierce flash o yer unkent pride
Wis the lunt tae some kinna funeral pyre
Some consummation even
Or the spark that set me burnin
Burnin wi the licht o ambition's slow, slow fire

Living In Snip

A parent's choice. By Jeremy Gavron

So this fellow is walking down the street and he sees a shop with a hat in the window. Now he's wanted to get a new hat for ages so he goes into the shop and after calling for a while this old man with a white beard comes out from the back. 'Can I help you?' the old man asks. 'I'm looking for a hat,' the customer says. 'Hats we don't sell,' the old man replies. So the customer asks what he does sell, and the old man explains that he is a mohel, *a Jewish ritual circumciser. 'Well, why do you have a hat in your window then?' the customer asks. The old man holds out his hands. 'What would you like me to have in the window?'*

THE FIRST CIRCUMCISION I ever attended – other than my own which, as I was eight days old at the time, I do not remember (though there are some who would argue that I still carry the psychic as well as the physical scars) – was the *brit milah*, or covenant of circumcision, of the son of an old friend. It was done in my friend's sitting room. The boy was carried in on a pillow and handed to his grandfather, who had been honoured with the role of *sandek*, or holder of the boy during the cut. There were sixty or seventy friends and relatives in the room, the men in suits, the women dressed up as if for a cocktail party, glasses of champagne in hand, though as the moment drew closer Judy and I edged out into the hall, which was where we were when the baby's grandmother stormed out, red-faced, holding something in front of her. 'Naughty little boy,' she announced. 'He pooed in the *mohel*'s hand.'

The occasion had a special delicacy for Judy and me, as we were expecting our first child. For our friends, as for most Jews, circumcision wasn't even a matter for consideration. It was one of those things, like having a *bar mitzvah*, or going to synagogue on Yom Kippur, that most Jews do without question. But Judy and I came from secular, and in my case one could say profane, backgrounds. Although my parents had married in synagogue and my brother and I had been circumcised (by the famous Rabbi Jacob Snowman, no less, who also did Prince Charles), my father had subsequently distanced himself from his Jewish upbringing and neither my brother nor I had been offered *bar mitzvahs* or been taken to synagogue on Yom Kippur or at any other time. We did have a copy of the Bible in the house, but my father kept it on a high shelf, where other parents might have kept books by Henry Miller or Anaïs Nin, and took it down only to mock it by reading out the names of Noah's sons ('Ham – hah!') or claiming that in the copy he had as a boy if you turned over several pages at once it read, 'Cain was sick . . . and the lot fell on Abel.' My father hadn't rejected Jewishness entirely, but for me, growing up Jewish meant the boxes of avocados that arrived each year from Israel, where my father's more Jewish brother lived, and an affinity for the Marx Brothers and that great comedy recording *The Two Thousand Year Old Man*, in which Mel Brooks plays a two-thousand-year-old manufacturer of Jewish stars ('As soon as religion came in I was one of the first in that') put out of business by the cross.

My older brother already had two sons, neither circumcised. His wife wasn't Jewish, but he insisted that their choice had nothing to do with rejecting Jewish tradition – they had given both boys Old Testament names – but was a rational decision not to subject their infant sons to unnecessary surgery and distress. In private my brother would also demonstrate another reason. Taking your hand, he would run a finger first across the back of your hand and then across your palm. The former was what it felt like if you were circumcised, he said, the latter if you'd been spared the cut – though how he could know the difference he did not say.

But Judy and I were both Jewish and though we too, in the nervous state of the newly expectant parent, baulked at the prospect of instructing someone to take a knife to our child, we could not quite embrace my brother's certainty. Jewish circumcision goes back, if not actually to Abraham, then two-and-a-half thousand years to the writing of Genesis, which tells of the covenant God made with Abraham to be God of his descendants as long as they circumcised their sons. Both Judy and I were descended from Eastern European Jews who had lived in close religious communities and had been circumcising their sons for hundreds, quite possibly thousands, of years. In the shower I looked down at myself and tried to imagine what it would be like to have a son with a foreskin. Uncircumcised penises had always seemed to me somehow foreign, the other, almost – well – almost unbecoming.

And yet what was this identity with which, if we chose to circumcise him, we would be marking our son? The north London Jewish culture that my father had reacted so viscerally against, and which I myself often found so cloying and hypocritical? The state of Israel, the Jewish state, whose ideals I had watched over my lifetime being warped by fear and aggression? Judy and I had also recently watched the film *Europa Europa* in which a Jewish boy fends off death by joining the Hitler Youth and is constantly at threat of betrayal by his lack of a foreskin. We thought of the German Jews so secure in their Germanness until the rise of Nazism. Did we really want to mark our child out for the next holocaust? Dipping, a little guiltily, into the Bible I found a passage in Deuteronomy that talked about the importance of circumcising the 'foreskin of the heart' as well as the penis. Couldn't we do only the foreskin of our son's heart, impress on him his origins without carving them into his skin?

At least, we decided, we should find out what the medical consensus was on circumcision. What were the risks and benefits? Would our child feel any pain? But a medical consensus, it turned out, was not so easy to discover. There were plenty of papers on circumcision but all of them seemed to be written by either Professor X of the B'nai B'rith Jewish Hospital or Dr Y of the Genital Integrity Society. On the one hand we could comfort ourselves with studies showing that circumcision reduced the risk of urinary tract infections in babies, and of penile cancer and sexually transmitted diseases in adults. But on the other hand we read of cases of severe bleeding, of penile necrosis, of rare but not unknown slips

of the knife that in the past had led to at least one Jewish boy being raised as a girl.

Our research also uncovered a whole world of psychological and legal study into the question of circumcision. In the literature of the genital integrity movement we read that by 'encoding a boy's pleasure centre with violence in his first few days, parents are fundamentally changing his whole outlook on life.' In America there had been instances of men suing their parents for the loss of their foreskin and it was, apparently, not uncommon for men to have their foreskins reconstructed surgically or to systematically stretch the skin that remained, a process known as 'tugging'.

By now Judy was well into her pregnancy and we had started attending a National Childbirth Trust class. By chance the class that was most convenient for us to go to was run by an Orthodox Jewish woman and was attended entirely by Jews. The first evening there had been one non-Jewish couple but the next week they did not appear and though we were a little surprised to find ourselves being taught about childbirth by an Orthodox Jewish woman in a wig we reassured ourselves that with eight children of her own she had plenty of experience. The NCT is also an entirely secular organization. Originally named the Natural Childbirth Trust, it was set up to demystify and promote a non-interventionist approach to childbirth. Every Tuesday we would learn about the dangers of pethidine and epidurals and practise breathing techniques and natural birthing positions.

Reassured by this we decided one evening, during the mid-lesson break, when we ate kosher biscuits and talked about people we knew in common, to bring up our doubts about circumcision. Here, we thought, we had found a community that would understand both sides of our dilemma. It was as if we had unleashed a litter of squealing piglets. There was a collective intake of breath and then an outpouring of indignation. Did we not know the health benefits? The better hygiene? 'If it's good enough for the Royal Family it's good enough for my son,' one woman said, folding her arms defensively across her prominent, accusatory belly. We appealed to our teacher, but she was busy eating a kosher biscuit and adjusting her wig.

Finally Judy's labour began. We lived close to a large teaching hospital and we set off on foot, carrying the beanbag Judy had been advised to use in our NCT class. Halfway there Judy had a contraction and squatted over the beanbag on the pavement, much to the amusement of our local drunk, who squatted next to her and breathed his fiery breath at her until she told him where to go. The labour turned out to be rather longer and more complicated than anticipated in our class, and in the end Judy succumbed to drugs and an epidural. We had seen off a couple of midwives and were finally taken in hand by a reassuringly competent Nigerian midwife. Judy was now free of pain and resting as the synthetic hormones she had been given took effect. The midwife sat with her, holding her hand and sympathizing over the need for intervention and the loss of an entirely natural birth. As these things do, the conversation turned to circumcision. Here, finally, we felt, we had found an objective opinion. But, no – our midwife, it turned out, was the equivalent of a *mohel* for the Nigerian community in London. It was with a great deal of relief, as well as delight, that I looked between the legs of the baby the midwife eased out of Judy an hour or two later and saw that she was a girl.

As it turned out, our second child was also a girl. My brother and his wife had one more son, whom they called Moses, and did not circumcise. My two younger sisters have also had five children between them, three girls and two boys, neither of whom have, as yet, been circumcised. One of my sisters is married to a non-Jewish man, and there was little discussion about circumcision, but the other has a Jewish husband and there has been considerable debate, if as yet no action, over what to do with the last and only fully Jewish grandson in our family. My father, who has in his old age become milder towards Jewishness, smiles benignly when the subject comes up and tells his joke about the *mohel* or remembers the insult he once received from a Jewish cabbie whom he failed to tip generously enough. My brother-in-law's father, however, is a survivor of Theresienstadt concentration camp and finds the presence of the offending part of his grandson more painful. But then little Noah is not yet two years old and Abraham wasn't done until he was ninety. ◊

HELP PAGES

The Agony Uncle

Alain de Botton will make your life better

I'm not a violent man usually, but the other night, as I was walking home from a night spent in a bar with my girlfriend, two young men started whistling at my girlfriend and calling me 'shortie' and 'mummy's boy'. I was so annoyed by their taunting that I'm afraid to say I got into a fight with them. They'd offended my honour and I didn't want to look shameful in front of my girlfriend. Unfortunately, I ended up in hospital with a broken lip and now really regret the whole incident. But what is one supposed to do in such situations? I guess in the olden days, one could challenge people to a duel! But is that really the answer? —Peter, Bath

From its origins in Renaissance Italy until its end in the First World War, the practice of duelling claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of men across Europe. During the seventeenth century, in Spain alone, it was responsible for five thousand deaths. Visitors to the country were told to take extra care when addressing locals, lest they offend their honour and end up in a grave. 'Duels happen every day in Spain,' declared one character in a Calderón play.

Though duels were at times sparked by matters of objective importance, the majority had their origins in small, even petty questions of honour. In Paris in 1678, one man killed another who had said his apartment was ugly. In Florence in 1702, one literary man killed a cousin

who had accused him of not understanding Dante. In France under the regency of Philippe d'Orléans, two officers of the guard fought in Paris on the Quai des Tuileries about the ownership of an Angora cat.

Duelling (and fighting generally) symbolizes an extreme rejection of the idea that our worth is our business, something we decide and do not revise according to the shifting judgements of our audience. For the dueller, what other people think of him is the critical factor in settling what he may think of himself. He cannot continue to be acceptable in his own eyes if those around him find him evil or dishonourable, a coward or a failure, a fool or a mummy's boy. So dependent is his self-image on the views of others that it would be preferable to die by a bullet or end up in hospital with a broken lip rather than to allow unfavourable ideas about him to remain lodged in the public mind.

Even those who do not directly pick up guns or swords in response to insult may share the mindset of the duellist; the belief that one's degree of virtue or shame is primarily determined by how much one is honoured or calumnied by others; and that one consequently has a duty to respond to infringements of honour by reasserting one's good name, usually through violence to oneself or others. Entire societies have made the maintenance of 'honour' the primordial task of every adult male and female, laying out a code of what a noble life requires. In traditional Spanish communities, in order to possess *honra*, a man was expected to be physically brave, sexually potent, predatory towards women before he was married and loyal thereafter, able to look after his family financially and authoritative enough with his wife to ensure that she did not sleep with or exchange flirtatious banter with other men. Female *honra*, meanwhile, depended on being sexually modest, demure in public, fertile and devoted to children. Dishonour flowed not only from one's own infringements of the code, it also occurred whenever one failed to respond with sufficient vigour to an insult, an *injuria*, from someone else. If one was ridiculed in the market square, or given an offensive look in the street, it was imperative that one seek vengeance or one's inaction would prove that the offenders had been right in their accusations.

Other countries have harboured similar notions of honour to those of the Spanish. In traditional Greek society, honour was called *tīmē* and required of men machismo and money, and of women coyness and a maternal instinct. In Muslim communities, honour or *sharaf* was thought so important that it might require a man to kill his own sister if she had been raped and hence spoilt the good name of her family. In Hindu communities, honour or *izzat* depended on the possession of property for men and sexual purity for women. Loss of *izzat* (through bankruptcy for men, or for women through sexual misconduct) was viewed as more terrifying than death.

Modern, multiethnic Western societies may no longer have such clearly defined honour codes, the word 'honour' itself may have grown anachronistic; and yet the pressure to be seen by others to follow prescribed patterns of behaviour has lost little of its hold on individuals' sense of priorities. Though duelling may have declined, a computer programmer from Chichester is no less free of the requirements of an honour code than a hero in a revenge tragedy by Lope de Vega. Modern societies retain daunting ideas of what is required in order for someone to be viewed as a 'real' man or woman rather than a dishonoured one, what the Spanish termed a *deshonradas*, a category whose contemporary connotations may best be captured by the chillingly contemptuous word 'loser'. To fail to reach certain professional goals, to be thrown out of work and so be left unable to provide for one's family or not to be able to protect one's girlfriend may constitute as much of a violation of the modern honour code, and prove as shameful in its effects, as anything that might have befallen a member of a traditional community who had flouted the rules governing *honra, tīmē, sharaf* or *izzat*.

A central alternative to duelling and fighting – and an honour-based view of oneself – is offered by philosophy. Having once watched Socrates being insulted in the market place, a passerby asked him, 'Don't you mind being called names?' 'Why? Do you think I should resent it if an ass had kicked me?' replied Socrates; a characteristic attitude for philosophers. Philosophy suggests that before listening to what people say about you, whether positive or negative, you should first decide whether or not it is true; if true, it should be listened to, if false, it can be rejected harmlessly with a laugh or a shrug of the shoulders.

In his *Meditations* (AD 167), the emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius, living in the turbulent world of Roman politics, repeatedly reminded himself to submit any views he heard about his character or achievements to rational study before allowing them to affect his self-conception. 'Your decency does not depend on the testimony of someone else,' the philosopher–Emperor asserted, thereby directly challenging his society's faith in a reputation-based assessment of people: 'Will any man despise me? Let him see to it. But I will see to it that I may not be found doing or saying anything that deserves to be despised.' Instead of taking all negative opinions about him equally seriously, he would first ask himself if there was any truth behind them. 'When people blame or hate you, go to their inward selves, pass in and see what kind of men they are; are they right or wrong?'

If they are the latter, then we should never listen – and certainly never end up in hospital with a broken lip because of their words. ◊

Snake Man by Alan Wykes

Looking back at the world of herpetology circa 1960

Snake Man *by Alan Wykes is the story of the author's journey to Africa to meet C.J. Ionides, an explorer who became known simply as the 'snake man' after earning a reputation for catching the snakes that plagued locals. Ionides is an eccentric character, apparently once pictured in the bush wearing a diving mask to shield his eyes from cobra venom. 'In his thirty-five years in Africa, Ionides has lived for ten days on the partial contents of two ostrich eggs,'* Time *magazine reported in its review in 1961. '[He has] been trampled by a charging elephant resulting in total deafness of one ear, climbed a hundred-foot tree, despite acrophobia, and with only one arm free, brought down a writhing mamba.'*

In this extract Alan Wykes details an incident in which Ionides is bitten. He remains unflustered and simply asks Wykes to record the effects of the snakebite.

When the morning came we opened the house door wide to let the chill dawn wind blow into the living room and into Popkiss's cage, to keep him cold and sleepy while Ionides handled him for the first time. He lay forming an omega shape. I watched with considerable apprehension while Ionides knelt before the cage and made the same slow, swinging motion of his hand that he had made every morning by way of introduction, followed by the holding of the stick and the opening of the lid. But this time he handed the stick to me and put his hand in instead. There was no response from Popkiss, and Ionides went on stroking him for three minutes, keeping to the tail end, before taking his hand out and going through the whole business of introductory movements, stick pretence and stroking once again – this time for five minutes, and slightly nearer the head.

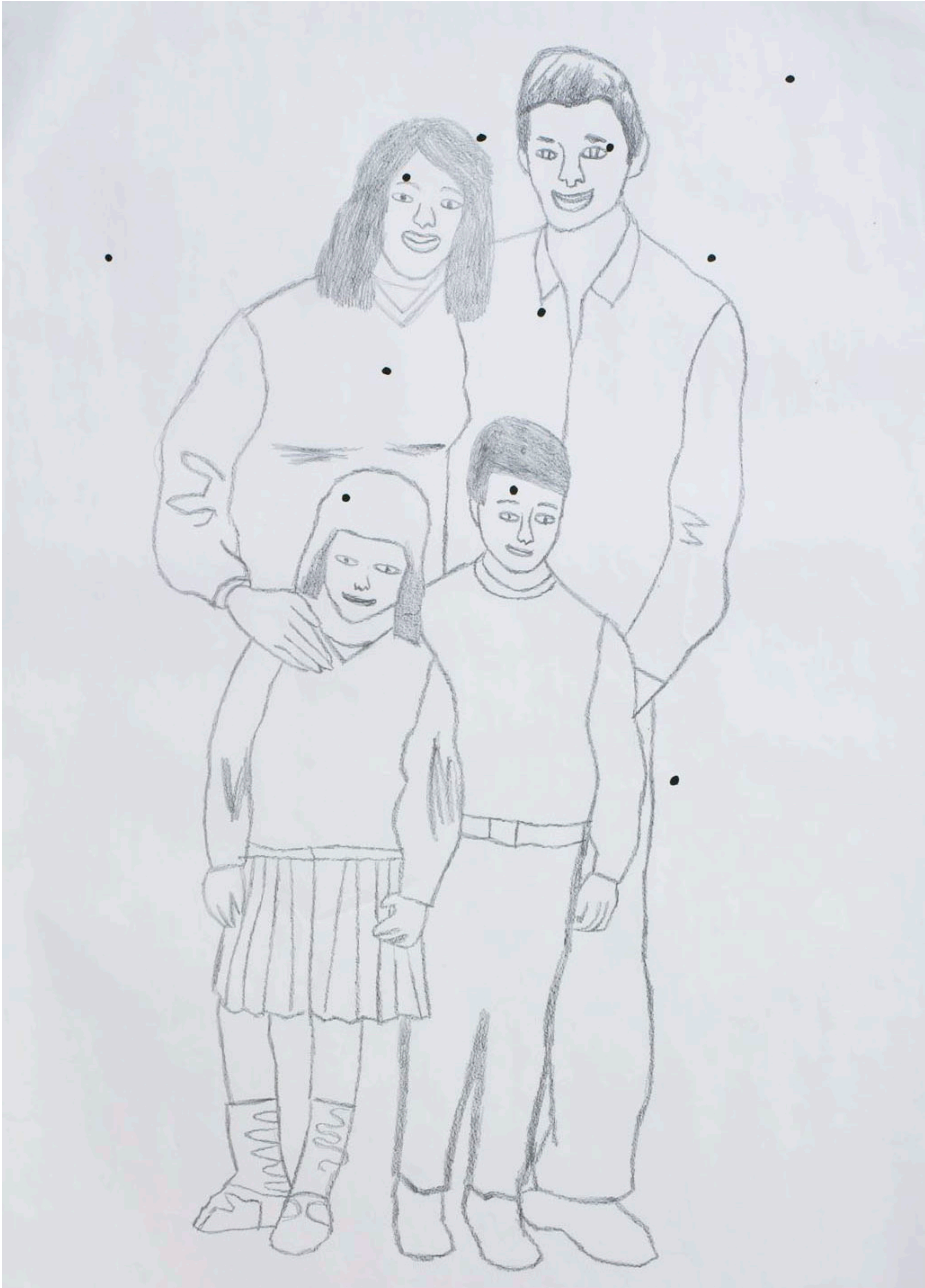
It was at this juncture that a sudden flurry of wind whisked the door shut with a bang and the vibration unnerved Popkiss, who struck with startling rapidity at Ionides' hand. I thought at first that he'd snatched the hand away from the snake in time but it wasn't so. There was a conspicuous single fang mark on his right little finger, which within a few seconds began to turn bruise blue, while I turned white.

'Now you can be really useful,' Ionides said calmly, 'and write down what I tell you I'm feeling. "Sharp pain – ordinary pressure of fang puncturing skin – intense numbness round infected area – " ' He paused and regarded the bitten finger with detachment, though there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. For several minutes the discolouration spread until his finger became uniformly blue with a black blotch half an inch across where the puncture was, and there was an obvious swelling of the finger – it grew as thick as the adjoining one while I watched. But there, it seemed, the symptoms were for the moment determined. I asked him if I should have a poultice prepared in lieu of an antivenene injection, but he said no, the pain was now no more intense than might have been caused by a trio of wasp stings. 'Disappointing. I'd thought we might record something really useful. But it seems that unless something else develops I've gained a certain degree of immunity from my previous bites. But even that's a useful bit of information to record, in a small way.'

Afterwards, when he regained his health, Ionides recounted an encounter with a black mamba he found in a toilet.

'I remember thinking snakes would be a pleasant study for my old age. As it turned out, I was forced to take my wheelchair and my herpetology rather earlier than I'd intended; but that's not for discussion at the moment. I haven't anyway finished the story about the mamba yet. I thought there might be a good chance of catching it when daylight came if we left it undisturbed overnight; and indeed the following morning it was still there – not on the seat but on the ground, with both head and tail concealed, which didn't help me much. Still, I'd chosen by chance the time when he was sluggish and I'd brought a forked stick with me – it was the only method I'd worked out, and of course it's basically the same method I use today. But being unable to determine which end of the snake was which I put the fork too far back and he began to wriggle and strike at the stick – somewhat to my horror, for I'd had no idea of the power a mamba could put into those strikes. I could feel his immense febrile energy transmitting itself along the stick to my hand, and I saw that in a very few seconds he'd wriggle free if I didn't do something. But what to do? I had no idea, of course; and I could feel the sweat running down my back. I just yelled for my boy to bring another stick, which he seemed to take about three centuries to do, and when he brought it I just managed to get it horizontally across the snake's neck and pin him to the ground. I had a lot of luck there, because he was thrashing about like a mad thing; and when his head was pinned down the rest of him – he was a hell of a length – got wound round my leg and the other stick. My boy was having fits of horror and dancing about like a firecracker, and there was, in general, a chaotic entanglement, of snake, man and sticks. But at last I had the bright idea of whipping the hat from my head, screwing it into the sort of pad a woman uses to grip a flatiron with, and grabbing the mamba's head with it. I gripped it very hard and somehow or other got the rest of him coiled up like a lasso. Then of course came the problem of getting him into a box. (I hadn't worked out the bag technique, and didn't till years later.) I'd got an ammunition box ready with a lid swivelling on one nail, and of course I just tried putting the snake in and letting go. I need hardly say that that method is not a successful one. To put it simply, the snake springs out again, like a jack-in-the-box; and I had a wearying few minutes trying to stuff in eight feet of mamba and swing the lid shut without doing any damage to the snake or getting any done to me. I fear he got a lot of bruising in the process, and I lost a good deal of weight in sweat. But the box got shut at last with the snake inside it, and if you care to call in at the Coryndon Museum when you're next in Nairobi you'll see it there. Eight feet four inches he was. A fine snake. When I'm forced to visit that dreadful vulgar city I always visit the Coryndon to get out of the noise, look at my mamba and recall that splendid oasis of silence so many years ago when I sat in my lavatory at Liwale and heard the sound – the very faint dry sound – of his approach towards me.' ◊

Broken Britain 1 · Paul Davis



Broken Britain 2 · Paul Davis

HAMPER and
DISCOURAGE
THE YOUNG.

Broken Britain 3 · Paul Davis

Broken Britain 4 · Sophia Augusta