

# ALSo...

## The Journal of the Alliance of Literary Societies

Volume 15 – 2021

**PARODY: THE WRITER IN  
LOCKDOWN**





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**Volume 15, 2021**

**PARODY: THE WRITER IN LOCKDOWN**

**Editor: R. M. Healey**

## Contents

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Editorial</b>	1
Dr Johnson: On Waking from my Slumber in the Year of Our Lord 2020	3
Phil Jones	
Expostulation and Reply (Virtually) (Wordsworth)	6
John Strachan	
Charles Lamb	7
R. M. Healey	
The Sharp-Nosed Frog (written while 'self-isolating' in Rome) (Keats)	8
Duncan Wu	
Mr Borrow's Quarantine (George Borrow)	9
Simon Keeton	
Lockdown for Hopkins	11
Kelsey Thornton	
Tandem Liberi (Gerard Manley Hopkins)	12
Hoon Manley	
Writer in Lockdown (A. E. Housman)	13
Linda Hart	
How to Live (Gertrude Stein)	14
R. M. Healey	
Gertrude Stein: The Unmaking of an American	15
Maurice Sterne	
Remembrance of Things Lost: Parody of Scott Moncrieff's English Translation of Proust	18
Phil Jones	
Right Ho, Lockdown! (P. G. Wodehouse)	20
George Emerson	
At the Restaurant (Percy Wyndham Lewis)	22
Alan Munton	

Letter to Wyndham Lewis (T. S. Eliot)	Geoffrey Elborn	24
Meeting in Saint-Germain-des-Prés (Hemingway)	Robert Wilson	27
Desultory Observation (Geoffrey Grigson)	Chris Martin	29
Malone Awakes (Samuel Beckett)	Phil Jones	30
Author in Covid (Betjeman)	Peter Wright	32
Ted in Lockdown	R. M. Healey	33
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>		<b>34</b>

## Editorial

This special issue of *ALSo* has come about mainly because, over the years, I have been unable, after various attempts, to launch a national parody competition, sponsored by the ALS, in a commercial literary magazine. For me personally, this failure has been a great disappointment, as I enjoy parodies and saw the competition as a way of promoting the Alliance nationally and perhaps adding to its coffers.

I can only conclude that the lack of enthusiasm shown by those editors I approached suggests that parody is not as popular as it was some 50 or more years ago, when the *New Statesman's* famous competition attracted a substantial number of entries, with contestants vying to outdo one another in cleverness and invention. Prior to this, writing a parody had been a popular exercise for over two centuries. *Rejected Address*, a collection compiled by the Smith brothers in 1812, went into several editions, while *Warreniana*, which was brought out to great acclaim by William Frederick Deacon in 1824, has been praised by recent commentators on Romanticism, including the present writer. *A Century of Parody and Imitation*, edited by Walter Jerrold and R. M. Leonard in 1913, pays tribute to *Rejected Address*, calling its publication 'the birth of modern parody'. In it the compilers assemble items from some of the most gifted parodists of the nineteenth century, including people like Coleridge, Keats and Lamb, who have themselves been parodied over the years.

From the Edwardian period onwards parodies continued to feature in magazines like *Punch* and, as we have noticed, the *New Statesman*, but for some reason writing a parody never become a staple of writing workshops and creative writing courses. Perhaps they were seen as 'difficult' exercises compared with the writing of a poem, which is undoubtedly true. However, the fact that accurate parodies must necessarily demonstrate a critical sense as well as a sense of humour, should not mean that fledgling writers ought to avoid them. Parodies present a challenge that most writers worth their salt should accept. Luckily for us, our parody-averse age has produced in Craig Brown someone who is almost addicted to writing them, most notably for the pages of *Private Eye*. Brown is certainly gifted, but though his parodies expertly capture the vacuities and hypocrisies of our celebrity-obsessed age, they are not classic examples of their type, such as one might find in *A Century of Parody and Imitation*, but instead concentrate on encapsulating the *essence* of the media personalities they mock, who are not necessarily writers themselves. This topicality adds, of course, to the piquancy of Brown's work, but it also means that fans of the literary form are denied the chance of seeing how well our favourite parodist might handle, say, Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dr Johnson.

Happily, readers of *ALSo* can now enjoy not one, but two parodies of Hopkins and one of Samuel Johnson, along with pastiches of Gertrude Stein, Ted Hughes, Betjeman, Wordsworth, Beckett, Hemingway, T. S. Eliot and Wodehouse, among many other writers in this special issue. All these parodies were contributed by ALS members who gladly took up my challenge when I issued it last year. The fact that they were written at all might suggest rather strongly that the classic parody is *not* dead, but (to quote the immortal words of the parrot salesman in *Monty Python*) is 'only resting'.

## **The next issue**

Having got parodies out of my system, for a while at least, I am now turning to the next issue of *ALSo*. Readers are invited to submit articles on the subject of 'The Writer's Day Job'. We all know that T. S. Eliot worked in a bank, Anthony Trollope was a big cheese in the Post Office and that Charles Lamb was a clerk at East India House. Many other writers, including those represented by our societies, also worked in jobs for a while or for most of their working lives, that had little or nothing to do with their literary vocations. Did you know, for instance, that the acclaimed poet Peter Reading worked as a weighbridge operator for many years before quitting after being forced to wear a uniform? I would like articles that consider the ways in which the day jobs of writers, however brief, had a negative or positive influence on their literary productions. All authors writing in English, whether or not they are represented by the ALS, can be considered, as long as they are not living. The articles should be no longer than 1,000 words and the closing date is 1 April 2022. A style guide is available on the ALS website. Please send all submissions in WORD format to [R.Healey709@btinternet.com](mailto:R.Healey709@btinternet.com).

R. M. Healey

## Dr Johnson: On Waking from my Slumber in The Year of Our Lord, 2020

*Pulvis et umbra sumus.* (Horace, *Odes*)<sup>1</sup>

Phil Jones

Perhaps few authors have introduced themselves to the public, and proposed to grow eminent by the application of scholarship, without bearing in mind the manifold impediments to the acquisition of excellence; and recalling that distinction is not bestowed but as the requisite of industry, and that industry, spiritedly persisted, should deliver handsome reward.<sup>2</sup> I labour under the necessity to propose such an introduction to the common reader, having been aroused from slumber early one morning, to receive intelligence that the date was April 1, 2020. Sir, I resolved, in that instant, that I should render some account of my changed situation and that, in accordance with that design, I should effect some prefatory remarks in order that my readers might have better acquaintance of me.

I fear I stray, but I am obliged to proffer the opinion that the periodical press has suffered some considerable change in the passing three centuries. Indeed, I offered this very production to the polite world in the person of the Rambler,<sup>3</sup> but was apprised that it would be aired before the public as a species of literature, termed a 'blog'. The consummate coxcomb, who styled himself the 'copy-editor', taxed me concerning my employment of nomenclature drawn from the language of the Roman; he had conceived a notion that I considered my offering to be proposed, *imprimis*<sup>4</sup>, to persons of the Southern American continent, whom he understood to converse solely in the Latin tongue. Macaroon! He further submitted to me, that the discourse was obscure, the sentences too long and that there was a prodigious excess of hard words that passed his understanding. 'Sir', I replied, 'those are some of my more pithy periods!' I begged him to comprehend, moreover, that none but an unlettered noodle would be troubled by the choice expressions therein. The creature responded unintelligibly: 'You what?' All the same, he mended his manners mightily after I had acquainted him more closely with my stout oak cudgel.

I have written, that among the authours who acquire the giddy bauble of reputation, *pro tempore*<sup>5</sup>, by concerning themselves with present incidents or characters which strongly engage the passions, and provoke universal admiration, exhaustion is very prone to set in, *brevi tempore*.<sup>6</sup> I am, notwithstanding, under an obligation to give some account of my present circumstances. Transplantation to my beloved birthplace of Lichfield in April 2020 has been singular and inconvenient. I find myself in what the natives term 'Locks-down'. I had hazarded that this might denote the date set for the barber to present himself to his

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<sup>1</sup> Latin for 'We are but dust and shadow'.

<sup>2</sup> Loosely adapted from Johnson's writing.

<sup>3</sup> Mr Rambler was a persona used by Johnson in his essays.

<sup>4</sup> Latin for 'chiefly, particularly'.

<sup>5</sup> Latin for 'for the time being'.

<sup>6</sup> Latin for 'shortly'.

customers. That, I learn, is not the case. There is some sickness abroad which affects the people greatly. Mr Defoe, I warrant, composed a most artful tale concerning such a pestilence in his *Journal of the Plague Year*.

It is lamentable to witness the suffering of the people. They possess only something, termed the 'television', to divert them from their dismal prognostications. More jackanapery from the addled brains of the projectors! They engage the machine by manipulating what they style a 'switch' and, in a trice, diminutive phantom creatures arise, prancing like dancing dogs. I am minded to consider that the little, jiggling persons are nothing more than supernatural agents, procured by a species of enchantment which takes possession of the mind by a kind of violence.<sup>7</sup> One of these persons appeared, unbidden, last evening, calling himself Johnson (aforenamed Boris). No kin of mine: my father, Michael, would have thrashed him for the whelp that he is. He is a fellow of wild appearance and loose speech. I recall nothing distinctly of what he spoke and he did not leave a pleasing impression. *Tempora deteriora fiunt*.<sup>8</sup> He is a mean fellow of scant acquaintanceship with the Latin tongue, his pronunciation being that of an untutored schoolboy. I am informed that he is something in Government.

I am, for my pains, closeted in the garret above my old father's shop in the house of my birth. There are many strange transformations. I find, to my great consternation, that the privy has become a roaring thing that expels water in prodigious quantities at my lower person. The custodian of the premises, nonetheless, suffers me to quit the house to exercise from time to time. I am distressed by the sights I have witnessed on my perambulations. There are two statues raised in the square; one of myself, a poor likeness in my view, and another, I am mightily disapprobated to learn, of that bibulous backfriend, Boswell of Auchinleck.<sup>9</sup> I wrote, long years since, to my friend, Joshua Reynolds, that every man has a lurking wish to appear considerable in his native place. I had not contemplated, for all that, that I would be dogged, in statuary form, by that licentious lackbrain, Bozzie, for all eternity!<sup>10</sup> Dear companion he was, he had, howbeit, only two topics of conversation: myself and himself. I told him I was sick of both. *Esto perpetua!*<sup>11</sup> Please God, no! I have been perusing his *Life of Johnson*. It is very prettily written but there is too much of Bozzie and too little that is true. It made good kindling for the fire.

I conclude here. The secret horror of the last!<sup>12</sup> Time has aged me. I suffer from the dropsy and at the hands of the poltroons of these parts.

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<sup>7</sup> Phrases adapted from various of Johnson's writings.

<sup>8</sup> Latin for 'times change for the worse'.

<sup>9</sup> Market Square in Lichfield has statues of Johnson, and of Boswell, his friend and biographer and author of *The Life of Johnson*.

<sup>10</sup> 'Bozzie', Boswell's nickname.

<sup>11</sup> Latin for 'let it be perpetual', the motto of Johnson's famous Club.

<sup>12</sup> A quote from Johnson's *Idler* essays (*Idler* 103).

Today is my birthdate, 18 September. I am 311 years old. Nihil umquam mutatur!<sup>13</sup> Much gets worse. Dear Tetty, I miss her so!<sup>14</sup> And so farewell to you dear Reader! I mean to end my days here but I have company. A library. By the reading of books, many temptations are avoided. I have other solace. Today I witnessed a large, feathered creature flutter aloft the statue of my friend. The fowl seemed to regard him curiously, then deposited mightily on his comical crown-like hat. I own readily, that it was mirth, not sorrow, that arose instantly in my breast.

-o0o-

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<sup>13</sup> Latin for ‘nothing ever changes.’

<sup>14</sup> Johnson’s wife who died in 1752.

## Expostulation and Reply (Virtually) (Wordsworth)

John Strachan

'Why, William, on the sofa prone,  
For the length of a year - and more,  
Why, William, lounge you thus - alone?  
You've turned into a bore.  
Where are your poems?—the light bequeathed  
To all who to Dove Cottage wind!  
We need to drink the spirit breathed  
From great poets to mankind.  
So look round on this suffering Earth,  
And give us counsel wise  
For Covid is an evil birth,  
And people drop like flies'.

One morning thus, on Zoom we spake,  
When life was grim, and all knew why,  
To me my good friend Robin spake,  
And thus I made reply:  
'Our eyes, they cannot choose but see  
The havoc round us still;  
Our bodies fail, where'er they be,  
However strong our will.  
But deep within us there are Powers  
Which of themselves our minds impress;  
That even when pandemic lowers  
Deep within us can impress  
That amid all this mighty sum  
Of suffering, pain and grief,  
That one day healing to us will come,  
Just like the falling leaf.  
—Then ask not why, here, all alone,  
And locked down every day  
I lie upon this sofa prone,  
And dream my time away'.

-o0o-

## Charles Lamb

R. M. Healey

Mitre Court Buildings, 23 August 1808.

Dear Coleridge.

I hope you are not too encumbered, as I am, by this total curfew. The Government, damn them, have invented these cant terms yclept 'lockdown' and 'self-isolating', as if one were not already in these plaguish times, 'isolated' enough by a want of friends. Thankfully, books are to me instead of friends. They think for me. I fancy I may put this happy phrase into an essay at some time.

Doubtless, you are content enough among your cursed lakes and mountains and can wander at will around Ullswater and clamber up Skiddaw, but here in Mitre Court I dare not venture out for fear of arrest by some Government lackey intent on enforcing the rules. Aren't these masks the very devil? Mary forgot to take hers the other day to Newbury's and feared a public exposure, but none came. The shopman looked kindly at her, for he knew in her illness that she is wont to forget such things and there were so very few people in the shop.

You will be surprised to hear that Wordsworth called on us the other day just before supper. He brought with him some pages from his projected Lakes Guide which he desired me to look over. He is become a great enthusiast for masks and impressed upon us the great necessity of using 'em at all occasions when abroad. No doubt as a government *sinecurist* (albeit a very minor one) he is bound to preach thus at us these sad days, but I resent the implication that we are *non-compliers*. After he left I looked cursorily at his Guide, which appears to be very dull stuff indeed and not likely to beguile the hours as pleasantly in *lockdown* as my battered Burton and Massingers which Mary volunteered to wrap in brand new morocco, egad!

Hazlitt paid us a rare visit two days ago. He was in a fury about the Government restrictions on unnecessary travel. He protesteth that the new rules do insist that travel to places outside the immediate *locale* are forbidden. He had booked a journey by the Salisbury coach to Winterslow for tomorrow and feared being quizzed by government agents and losing his money to boot. The dog is determined to resist this new-fangled regimen at any cost and boasteth that if some official upbraids him for not donning a mask he will knock him down.

-oOo-

## The Sharp-Nosed Frog<sup>15</sup> (written while 'self-isolating' in Rome (Keats))

Duncan Wu

Sweet thy grunt, sharp-nose, plucky amphibian  
In the sylvan dark, yet where art thou now?  
Thou leap'st high—to Venus, high upon her brow,  
And I am with thee, where the sultry Libyan  
Maenads play about thy flanks, while the faerie  
Songstress croons her roiling love-ditties,  
And the sumptuous soft Venusian hippies  
Press busy about thee, urging ye tarry  
Longer, longer, and yet still longer, that this wild  
Cosmic ecstasy be continued far into  
The cold unending night. Thou jump'st? Adieu,  
Old sharp-nose, as ye descend to thy defiled  
And stagnant pond. Shall I not miss thy grunt sublime  
As I wallow and wade through this world of slime?

-o0o-

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<sup>15</sup> The South African Sharp-Nosed Frog is less than three inches long but can jump 11 feet, or 44 times its body length.

## Mr Borrow's Quarantine (George Borrow)

Simon Keeton

It was early evening when there came a knock at the door of Number 22, Hereford Square in the residential area of South Kensington.

Jenny, the maid, went to see who it was. She wrinkled her little freckled nose in dismay as she recognised the uniform of the Metropolitan Police.

'Good evening, Missy,' said the Policeman. 'I am Officer Wilkes. May I please speak to the Master of the House?'

'I am afraid that Mr Borrow is not at home but he will be back presently,' she told him with a brief curtsy. 'Can I call the Lady of the House?'

The man nodded and when Mrs Borrow appeared, he took off his top hat and nestled it under his arm. 'If you can convey this important message to your husband, I will be very grateful.'

She gave him an impatient smile as if to say she had handled many a crisis in her time and was more than equal to her husband to deal with this one.

'I have been sent by the authorities,' he went on, 'to inform the people in this area of an outbreak of cholera near the River and since it is only a few miles hence, everybody is being urged to cease all social and other engagements and remain at home for the foreseeable future, only venturing forth for essential items. All public houses, taverns and other places of entertainment will be shut down for now. The disease has been designated as a contagion and so the less contact there is between folks, the better. This comes into immediate effect.'

Of course, Mrs Borrow knew about cholera. It was a horrible disease which usually ended in death.

'This is grim news,' she said. 'Thank you Sir. I will indeed tell my husband as soon as he arrives home.'

'Very good, Ma'am,' said the officer, replacing his hat before going back down the steps into the street and disappearing in the autumnal gloom.

When the impressive figure of George Borrow returned an hour later, he was excited.

'Do you know my old friend, Fitz, is in London?' he began excitedly, 'and he has offered to lend me a Turkish dictionary...' but his wife cut him short with the unwelcome news.

Borrow listened with a dark expression on his face, perhaps thinking more of the restrictions on himself than the general situation.

'It is unfortunate indeed,' he remarked, handing his coat and hat to Jenny, 'that only recently have we come to this district from Yarmouth. On the coast it was much healthier. If we had had prior intelligence, we could have returned to Oulton cottage or perhaps never come at all.'

'Yes George, that is true but this is a very nice house. I am sure we will be very happy here when this is all over.'

Borrow gave her a rueful smile. 'How long did he say this state of affairs would last?'

'He said for the foreseeable future.' Her husband bit his lip in frustration.

'We must ride the storm, George,' she continued, 'as well as we can...like all the other people in this city.'

Obviously, the subject was the sole topic of discussion over their mutton chop dinner which Borrow washed down with ale and afterwards a glass of port. Meanwhile, Jenny would eat later with the cook in the kitchen.

'Do you know,' he demanded, 'that the word quarantine comes from the Italian for forty, that is to say forty days was the length of isolation from the plague of Venice which reputedly killed Titian at the age of 99?' A period, he thought bitterly to himself, that could well last as long now or even longer.

Mary shook her head as indeed was often her response when questioned thus.

George Borrow was a Word Master or a Lavengro which was the name of his latest book.

'Do you remember, Carreta' he asked, using his pet name for his wife, 'how I told you in a letter that I had been in quarantine in Trieste?'

'Yes, but that was only for two and a half days,' laughed Mary. 'And just imagine how irked you had been!' But the conversation took a darker turn.

'What I fail to understand,' said Borrow, 'is that only a few years ago, Doctor Jon Snow established in his experiment that cholera travelled in contaminated water. So why the need for quarantine at all?'

'Yes,' agreed his wife, 'but the Policeman said it was called a Contagion which means it can be caught through touch, either through the skin, clothes or perhaps possessions. How do we know it is not infectious?' she added. 'Many people still believe it lies in the miasma of bad air.'

Borrow laughed abruptly. 'Ha! That is the very meaning of malaria. Bad air...So this cholera seems to start at the River and spread out and could be carried by infected individuals far from that source.'

'At any rate George,' said Mary, 'it seems wisest to keep away from the poor people who live clustered together and always carry disease. We must avoid others in general at least for the present.'

They quickly fell into a routine. Jenny, wearing a scarf over her mouth and nose, was sent out to shop for food. Mrs Borrow worked with the cook in the kitchen and Borrow himself, when not working in his study, paced up and down and crossed the road to the paddock which formed the centre of the Square.

After four days, he told Jenny that he would do the shopping and she could stay at home.

That evening, there was a knock at the door. It was Officer Wilkes with Mr Borrow, who was brandishing a book. It was the Turkish dictionary!

'Well, it is an essential item,' was all he said.

-o0o-

## Lockdown for Hopkins

Kelsey Thornton

Locked down, locked in, locked up and with no key,  
Infection's fear last year gripped man and maid.  
Our bodies' God-made systems felt betrayed  
With no release as far as we could see.  
Though jabbed once, we can feel no guarantee;  
Pandemic panic proves a clinging jade,  
Until the day breaks when we all are made  
By Astra Zeneca or Pfizer free.

Brute boredom, drab, oh, flatness, lethargy here  
Buckle, and the yawn that breaks from me now, a billion  
Times told dustier, more humdrum, this grey year.  
No wonder of it! Sheer slog makes most civilians  
Long for a time when colours reappear —  
Scarlet, blue, orange, gold, green and vermilion.

-o0o-

## Tandem Liberi (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Hoon Manley

Shag-haired, haggard and hug-hungry,  
Sprung from house-arrested, onesied, splintered isolation,  
Muffin-topped to overflowing covid kilos,  
Gagging to get going.

Now at long, long last, at least, that lost look lightens,  
brightens!  
O now can we meet mates, make merry, mate and marry?  
Or must we yet tarry, lest rushing rashly we  
undo the good we've done, the far we've come?

But that tunnel-end light beckons: freedom at last!  
Unlock, open up to the new now:  
Let hostelries be full again, swift half or cheeky sesh!  
Let libation-rinsed palates revive us, the virus survivors.

Unclosing to be close again, the pull of near, the gravity,  
the human touch, the oxytocin rush, overdosing levity,  
gingerly meeting, greeting, outdoor seating, world-beating!

But, ah! overhead  
threat hangs by a thread.

-o0o-

## Writer in Lockdown (A. E. Housman)

Linda Hart

In winter time on Bredon  
There are no bells to hear.  
Churches, shops and pubs all closed.  
The country lives in fear  
Of one more Covid year.

But on the top of Bredon  
I really want to roam.  
This lockdown's like a prison.  
It's hard to write a poem  
When stuck all day at home.

When I go to Bredon Hill  
With pen and pad in hand,  
I'll see the coloured counties,  
The beauty of the land –  
And won't my verse be grand.

I'll write, despite the lockdown,  
About the lads who die  
From the Corona virus.  
In graves they now all lie,  
Beneath a leaden sky.

-o0o-

## How to Live (Gertrude Stein)

R. M. Healey

In a year we have days. This does not mean we have days all to ourselves. The stores have shutters. This is what it means. Lockdown means we can't have days out. In Paris anyway we do not have days. Out we cannot have. Days I mean. We have evenings expressly. They are different.

Visitors are not days. Visitors are forbidden. For days. On La Rue de Fleurus we have Picasso and Hemingway. Ordinarily we have it. It seems years, but it is days. We were in days. Hemingway was not possible. He was not possibly. To visit us. He was not allowed.

It was a way of saying. It was a way of saying days. It was a way of saying shutters. It was a way of saying face coverings. These Americans. Masks are being lost. Mine felt. A bit itchy. Alice lost hers. It does not mean sitting in an armchair for days. It does not mean sitting in an armchair. Alice did some nice meals, however.

It is different. It does not mean we have days to use. It is all too long. These days. He phoned. It wasn't apparently. It does not mean there is no talk. Possible that is. Yes please. Yes. Will they please when they came. Perhaps we can. We could if. It does not mean. In Lockdown utterly. We have days. Nights too. Apparently.

-o0o-

## Gertrude Stein: The Unmaking of an American<sup>16</sup>

Maurice Sterne

To: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)<sup>17</sup>  
From: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)<sup>18</sup>  
26 April at 14.13

Dear Miss Stein

I wrote to you on April 1, 2020, to inquire as to your present circumstances. The City Council's records indicate that you passed away on July 27, 1946 at the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine. Despite, this, it would appear that you are alive and well and are currently resident in what appears to be an extended broom cupboard in an annexe of the Heinz Stadium, home to the Pittsburgh Steelers. That being the case, that would make you at least 147 years old, which is remarkable enough in itself. More to the point, however, I have been making enquiries of you to determine any deficit in tax due to the City and to the federal authorities since 1946 when you were registered as deceased. In reply to questions about your current financial affairs, I received this reply.

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'To: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
From: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)  
21 April at 16.22

Dear Mr Arsewipe

Tulip is a tulip is a tulip is a tulip. Out of charity comes greenness and out of grown-ness comes swift alike enquiry, out of a mouth comes experiment, out of collection comes aching livestock. There is no here, here.<sup>19</sup>

Yours  
Gertrude Stein'

-----

While I understand that you were celebrated in your day for the development of a novel style of prose composition, you can perhaps appreciate that your reply does not furnish the tax

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<sup>16</sup> A play on the title of Stein's novel, *The Making of Americans: being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925).

<sup>17</sup> Reference to Alice B. Toklas, Stein's life companion.

<sup>18</sup> Stein was born in Allegheny (which merged with Pittsburgh in 1907), Pennsylvania.

<sup>19</sup> Stein was famous for developing a highly hermetic, modernist stream-of-consciousness prose style.

official with much that is useful to determine any tax due from yourself to the City and to the IRS. I have also previously passed on to you correspondence from environmental health colleagues who are concerned about whether your current accommodation is adequate and sanitary, to which you have not responded.

Best Regards

Gerald Arsewipe, G.I.T, Dip Hons Acc., F.Art

-----  
To: [r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
cc.: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
From: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)  
29 April at 09.23

The shift in hue is possible and a variation a very small variation is arranged. Molasses is not a meat product. Hue is hue is not hue, in angry blue a man is a house. House, cupboard, a tax does not mention an occupation. Sanitary so that a long deed is not a length. A room was heavy. Football, that makes no length to axe is the history that there is a request to assume. To start the locating there is no locomotive.

Yours

Gertrude Stein

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From: [r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
To: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)  
cc.: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
5 May at 10.47

Dear Miss Stein

My colleague, Mr Arsewipe, wrote to you on the 26 April concerning the information that we seek from you in relation to your tax and accommodation status. Our main concern is to support you and ensure that you are in compliance with all state and federal tax and environmental requirements.

Like my colleague, I am struggling, somewhat, to discern how your response of the 29 April constitutes an adequate response to the enquiries we have made. Unlike Mr Arsewipe, however, I have some familiarity with post-modern literary theory (of considerable utility to the environmental health inspector) and I discern that through your use of automatic writing and stream-of-consciousness techniques, you may be attempting a highly coded response to the questions posed. I have, accordingly, taken advice from Professor Flewcaut of Harvard (a leading figure in post-structuralist circles). She interprets your statements as implying that your tax affairs are up to date and that your accommodation meets all building regulation standards. She points, particularly, to your use of the nouns 'house' and 'tax' and employment of the lexical unit, 'sanitary', as very clearly in her view, supporting this supposition. I wonder if you could kindly confirm this understanding.

Yours Roland Ratcatcher Env.Dip, Dip.Shit

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To: [r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
cc.: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
From: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)  
24 May at 16.14

The occasion of there being less is an occasion of less. The range is bigger. A small dawdling puma and a Louis IV chaise, all the striking milk products which are quartz, all of it and a selection, a selection of a log book. This does not denote the same as evaporation. It was of a size that rendered no viewer smaller if the aperture is determined why ought there not be prone. It was lying there. A pile was opaque. There was no difference.

Yours  
Gertrude Stein

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From: [r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:r.ratcatcher@pittsburgh.pa.gov)  
To: [gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com](mailto:gertrudestein@alicebtoklas.com)  
cc.: [g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov](mailto:g.arsewipe@pittsburgh.pa.gov)

5 May at 10.47

Miss Stein

Thank you for your comprehensive reply. Our enquiries are now complete.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours  
Roland Ratcatcher

-o0o-

## Remembrance of Things Lost: Parody of Scott Moncrieff's English Translation of Proust

Phil Jones

For a long time I would get up early. At the moment of rising from a profound and all-consuming unconscious state, the realm of sleep appeared as remote to me as some exotic kingdom, visited in some far distant past, and so foreign, that I was unable to determine whether my dreams reflected a waking reality or were the stuff of phantasmal imaginings. As I looked around the room I would look at the many familiar objects lodged in every nook and cranny of the chamber, which helped transport me back to my comforting, quotidian world, the reassuring props that made up the varied *mise en scène* of my habitual daily life. The ancients believed that objects contained the souls of those we have lost. This was a notion that had installed itself deeply within my repertoire of inner certitudes. So, my Great Aunt Hermione spoke to me in her haughty, supercilious tones from the varnished plastic finish of the Kenwoods Electric Mixer. My grandfather's deep, reverberating baritone seemed, also, to rise breezily from the Bosch Series 2 Larder Fridge.

Many years had passed since any recollections of my childhood in Chipping Sodbury had penetrated the inner sanctums of my shimmering fields of perception, years during which, time like some limping chariot, had lurched along in fitful leaps and splutters; when one day, my faithful maidservant, Sharon, had entered the room with a steaming plate of beans on toast, the heat rising from the glorious banquet in swirling eddies of paroxysmal sensuality. After a long and fatiguing day, in which I had, in truth, done little other than pass the hours in desultory and ineffectual speculations, thoughts which had advanced and receded like the rolling tide on the shores of far-flung seas, the ethereal aromas of the Heinz beans pervaded the small dim-lit room, invading every particle and corpuscle of that diminutive lodging, impressing themselves upon the atmosphere so as to crowd out all thought of everything other than this elysian savouriness. Whence arose this ecstatic feeling of a banished and forgotten portion of my personal history that had been sumptuously resurrected in all its full-bodied and particularised immediacy; a sense that the scene before my person, was beckoning me, enticingly back to some long-neglected highways and byways of my obscure and golden youth? The more I examined the repositories of my stores of faded and obscure recollections, the more I sensed that I was trembling on the frontiers of some glorious and shattering revelation; that the water, sugar, salt, spirit vinegar, modified cornflour, spice and herb extracts bound up within the substance of the luscious and captivating bean, were communicating in some urgent, yet mysterious, way with my sheltering hermit's soul, speaking a language of arcane and vegetative spirituality, whispering of time past, and scenes of vanished and elusive ecstasy, wafting in 57 varieties of pungent perfumes, the essence of some long-lost vista of infant bliss. Where, I enquired longingly, was this genie, sprung unbidden from some capacious urn, and summoned, seemingly, from a thousand and one nights of leguminous remembrance, seeking to transport me to, on the axminster rug of memory? Then suddenly, in a moment of supreme rapture and shuddering, epiphanic bliss, the answer revealed itself in a blinding instant: the spicy tang of the noble bean, in all its tomato savouriness, impregnated in several kilo-tonnes of the rankest native brine, was conveying me, inevitably and inexorably, towards the far-distant kingdom of my youth and the dishevelled chaos, of our tumble-down, one-bedroom cottage in one of the less distinguished, jerry-built estates that pullulated on the

outer margins of the otherwise impeccably, *haute-bourgeois* metropolis of Chipping Sodbury. My beloved, but slatternly mater, had slung the scalding beans on the wobbly table, gilded with Kraft cheese slices, creating little triangular pools of albuminous translucency, nestling on a bed of two inch-thick, badly charred three-day old stale sliced bread, conjuring up ineffably all the mysteries of the fragrant Orient (although, undeniably, the noble haricots had been further refined and purified to reach their exalted apotheosis in the incomparable processing plants of the Heinz factory at Wigan), transmuting their infinite and unutterable delicacy to the palate, on which the beans tripped the light fantastic in a symphony of olfactory and gustatory sensations, beating out an endless and throbbing tattoo, an incessant utterance which seemed to pulse from the chipped, white plate, a message at first, too soft to hear, but then growing louder, in a gathering crescendo of echoing sound, as I leaned forward and strained to listen, to capture the humble bean's divine discourse, to learn the ineluctable message heard down the centuries from the beginnings of time, the supreme message of unparalleled sublimity, the voice grew gradually louder and more distinct, and in infinitely solemn tones, I bowed my head in wonderous awe as the words uttered forth in a clarion roar: 'Beanz means Heinz'.

-o0o-

## Right Ho, Lockdown! (P. G. Wodehouse)

George Emerson

I found myself, I don't mind admitting it, in a bit of a quandary. As that dashed cove, Dr Johnson, once said, the difficulty of the first address on any new occasion is what every man feels, or some such malarkey. I don't mind admitting that old Bertram's noddle was working overtime as he attempted to knock together some sprightly aperçus on his awakening in April 2020. It would have been merely the work of a moment for Jeeves. You know my man Jeeves, of course, the dashed cleverest bird you'll ever meet. I once asked him if he knew everything, to which he replied, 'I really don't know Sir!'. A tremendous cove, Jeeves.

Old Bertram had started the day with a veritable spring in his step. I shall have to hark back a bit. I had spent the previous evening at the local Working Men's Club, being a little short in the old readies department. The Drones Club has evidently done a flit and the other gentlemen's establishments were beyond my ginger. Still! - sally forth and put one's best foot forward as I always say! I don't mind admitting that Bertram had cut a dash, resplendent in his new mauve shirtings and yellowest whangee. Although Jeeves had cut up rough on the shirtings front, on this occasion, the old Wooster resolve had stood firm. If you can keep your head up, while all around are bally well losing theirs, as that writer fellow once declaimed! Indubitably, that's Bertie's motto!

Well, tootling into the premises, I was, I will tell you, struck by a certain dowdiness in the general cut of the place. No deep plush leather armchairs, biffing up against a roaring fire, and there was a distinct absence of those helpful blighters who used to spring to attention as soon as one's foot had penetrated the threshold of the premises, pressing into one's waiting paws a decent sniffer or two in the time it takes to say Gussie Fink-Nottle.

Talking of that newt-fancying noodle, I spotted him by the bar and clapped him stoutly on the back. The fellow addressed, it soon transpired, was not the featherhead Fink-Nottle, but a docker from Barrow-in-Furness who invited me to step outside. Quite why the chap had such a passion for the outdoors, I could not quite make out, but Jeeves, indispensable chap that he is, managed to put him straight about old Wooster's abiding preference for the plush barstool over al fresco libations. When we had established ourselves comfortably at the bar, I asked for a Gin and French. The innkeeper perused me as though I had asked him to execute a *pas de deux* in a fluffy white tutu. It has to be conceded that old Bertram certainly detected a general *froideur* among the *habitués* of the blessed hostelry. Discretion being the better part of valour, as Bokoe Fittleworth always used to say - marvellous chap, you must know the blessed Bokoe - the old manservant and I did a flit.

I was woken the next morning by the old guide, philosopher and friend with a cup of tea guided smoothly to the table by the bed.

'Morning Jeeves. A juicy old day, if I am not much mistaken!', I said.

'Good morning Sir, indeed, I do believe, that the day is eminently clement', replied Jeeves.

In two shakes of a lamb's tail, with the tea guided skilfully to the Wooster laughing gear, as I believe the locals call it, I was right as rain and raring to go. My spirits were, admittedly, dampened a little, when I lifted my head to peruse the rather down-at-heel lodgings that we

had now engaged as chez nous. A council house in Wapping was all that the Wooster inheritance could now stretch to. Still, never it let be said that a Wooster cannot adapt and evolve as that blighter, Darwin, has it!

It was one of those mornings when you might say that the going was good to firm. Jeeves, as always, floated into the chamber like one propelled on runners, bearing a large platter of what I took to be the usual Wooster breakfasting items: toast, marmalade, sausages, egg, bacon, the whole blessed shooting match. Eagerly, I prepared to dispatch the comestibles like a king of the jungle let loose on some hapless prey, when, sorry to say, old Wooster was brought up short before the first fence, so to speak. Breakfasting, I had always considered, had been like winning the Two Thousand Guineas at Newmarket; old Bertie was now faced, gastronomically speaking, with, at best, a third place in some benighted Donkey Derby. Various grey islands of indeterminate matter oozed threateningly on the cracked plate. I did not want to offend the old faithful retainer but I felt compelled to ask Jeeves what it was precisely, that had established itself on the somewhat grimy and rather chipped plating.

'I believe, Sir, that is what the locals hereabouts term a spam fritter', said Jeeves.

'I see', I said, none the wiser, 'and the other life-forms accompanying this undoubted delicacy?'

'Jellied eels and tripe garnished with a coulis of what I understood are referred to as mushy peas, suffused with brown curry sauce', replied the imperturbable Jeeves.

I nodded curtly at Jeeves and prodded the plate to one side. Clearly some adjustments were going to have to be made in embarking on this awfully big adventure. A world bereft of The Drones, affable companions and edible rations was proving to be, perhaps, an even bigger challenge than that faced by Tuppy Glossop when a prospective (and particularly belligerent) mother-in-law had demanded that he deliver a 30 minute lecture on the joys of celibacy and sobriety to a crowd of fearsome young Brownies at the Chipping Camden Annual Temperance Society function. However, as they say, when the blast of war blows in our ears, one has to be prepared to imitate the action of the tiger, so I turned briskly to face the brave new world, thought better of it, pulled the curtains across, heaved the old noggin onto the plush pillow and committed staunchly to a revivifying 40 winks.

-o0o-

## At the Restaurant (Percy Wyndham Lewis)

Alan Munton

Pfarr adjusted his mask and spoke. His voice emerged out of a discouraging silence across the restaurant table. 'We are all artists, but we are separated from art and conversation. I can no longer speak of art.' His eyes flicker, twin tired intelligences, maimed and stressed, unable to focus on Jobson, his inadequate Cambridge friend.

'Well, Willie Nelson, when are you going to get your hair cut?' he says.

'Why do you call me Willie Nelson?'

'Beg pardon. He cut his plaits off. You should do the same.'

'I can't. The hairdressers are closed.'

Pfarr adjusted his eyes to express the view that while he understood the fact of the situation, he had no sympathy for the underlying reality. His glare fixated Jobson, who shrank before the insinuating critique implied by Pfarr's intensity.

'We should resist, and art will allow us to look upon the world as if it were real again. I am the Panurgic optimist. Anything is possible.'

'Surely nothing is possible,' says Jobson. 'How can I act with meaning when a meaningful relationship is prevented by social distancing? Sex has abandoned us.'

Pfarr's eyes flicker and withdraw. Silence falls.

Suddenly Krassler enters, a confident Czech taxi driver, outlawed by the complications of European politics. He is not wearing a mask. He sits down close to Pfarr, as he should not. His plump stomach, lugubriously apparent beneath his tight topshirt, asserts itself with casual unpleasantness.

Pfarr entertains a deep disrespect for that friend. Presumptuously he pulls an unused mask from the inside pocket of his too-smart check jacket and hands it to Krassler, who with a carefully controlled sideways gesture of the hand refuses it.

'There is no illness,' he says. 'You are imagining it.'

Pfarr chooses not to dispute this. His eyes turn back to themselves as he returns the mask to his pocket and with an innate casualness that asks no justification, finds in the same pocket a twenty-pound note, which he hands slowly to Krassler. He does not look him in the eye.

'This is worthless,' he says. 'Tear it up.'

Krassler stares at the note as if he had never seen one before. He holds it in his right hand, which shakes slightly. He brings the expectant fingers of his left hand towards the note; they open as if seduced by the likelihood of finding meaning in this action, and gently he tears the polymer in half.

'It is the truth', he says, his mouth tight. 'Nobody has died.'

Pfarr gathers to himself a terrible anger. He is surprised by this, and scarcely knows what, to find meaning, he should do. He is tempted by Krassler's stomach, bulbous and provoking as it is, but refrains from striking it.

As he hesitates, Anastasya returns from the toilet. She sits at a distance from him, as is required. She knows at once that despite his habitual arrogance, Pfarr is suffering. He replies to her questioning glance: 'Krassler says there is no pandemic.' She glances at Jobson, who nods. It is true.

'Krassler,' she says, turning slowly towards him, 'You cannot be with us now. As you have done nothing all the evening but render yourself objectionable, you should now relieve us of your company.'

Pfarr watches Krassler as he stands and leaves.

'I have found meaning,' he says to himself.

**-o0o-**

## Letter to Wyndham Lewis (T. S. Eliot)

Geoffrey Elborn

13th October 1921/20<sup>th</sup> October 1921 – November 1921?

Dear [Wyndham] Lewis,

I don't quite know why I'm writing this, but rather ridiculously, I am trapped in a beach hut on the Margate sea front, and can't get out.

I know I asked you to tell no-one that I had some leave from the Bank, but I suggested to Vivienne that I thought a spell by the seaside would give us a complete change.

'Margate' I said, 'would be just right. Quiet, and cheap winter rates at *The Albemarle Hotel*.'

As usual, Vivienne demurred at the very suggestion of doing anything. 'It will be cold', she insisted, 'and if it rains, all we will be able to do will be to play chess...'

She nagged me to get on with some poetry, while I told her that I wanted a few days off from all writing. 'Entertainment *and* those wicked machines, Viv dear', I said. 'What the Butler saw/ Is life in the raw,/All on hand/ At Margate sand.'

'No you don't Tom,' Viv said to me, 'you'll write if we do go there, and something better than that!'

Ellen the maid interrupted and said, 'What you go to Margate if you don't want to swim?' and laughed right out loud. 'Mrs E. - you do get some strange ideas - writing in Margate - you wouldn't catch me at that!'

Ensnared for a few days at the hotel, I was practising my mandoline, but there were complaints about the 'racket' I was making - as they called it. Viv said she had one of her 'headaches'. With her I'm afraid it's always a 'One Way Song' so I told her I would be in the massive Shelter, open to the four winds as big as a football stand.

I thought Viv might come along later and spoil the day, so instead, I went off to a poky beach hut completely unoccupied in October and, mandoline in hand, started on a few scales.

I must have dozed off for I woke to hear someone shouting 'lock down' and when I tried the door, the lock *had* gone, though how anyone knew, I have no idea.

At least I thought, soon someone one will come to let me out, but no. I feel it is coming up for a hundred years since I sank on the wooden bench, although I suppose it must only be a day. Looking out, the beach is deserted, just like a bit of waste land, and all I can do is to wait for a knock on the door.

Relief. The door was wrenched open by a man in nautical garb who said in an excitable voice, something about a pandemic COVID something or other and how everything had gone into *lockdown*.

'Lockdown? I thought it was something about my door lock breaking and...'

'Where have you been Sir?' the nautical type went on, and I immediately dubbed him *Phoenician Sailor*. 'There's been nothing on the wireless but Covid.' And so he related all he knew. Fatal...highly infectious...

'Heavens', I thought, looking at the crashing waves. 'Covid? More likely *Fear death by water*.'

I hastily scribbled the phrase on a scrap of paper as it flashed through my mind - possibly the memory of being nearly drowned a couple of years ago with Sachie Sitwell and Mary Hutchinson.

Eventually it dawned on me that Viv would be isolated in the *Albemarle* and after hours in that hut, I couldn't quite take in everything the Phoenician Sailor told me.

I staggered back to the hotel, where Albert the Commissioner told me to 'Hurry up please, it's time you were inside - your wife's been ever so worried about you.'

'Oh Tom', Viv said, almost running towards me as I opened our bedroom door. 'I thought I'd never see you again.'

'Don't ask, Viv', I said, as I sat on the bed, and put my mandoline on the floor.

Fishing in a jacket pocket, I pulled out all the stray pieces of paper with things I scribbled in that hut - mainly reminders. Pay the paper bill, and another I couldn't make sense of: 'luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel, followed by a week at the *Metropole*'.

Of course! My first choice for our Margate hotel, but it was fully booked. Soon there was quite a heap of paper on the counterpane - which Viv snatched up and took to a small table by the window.

'Why, Tom', she said, flicking through the paper debris, 'You have been writing a poem after all...Phoenician Sailor...beach completely deserted...just like a bit of waste land...'

'No', I interrupted, 'I started writing a letter to Lewis, or Percy as you call him, to pass the time when I was stuck in that hut, and the rest...just odd little pieces - memos I wrote myself to...'

I hesitated, as I was aware that Viv had stopped talking, and saw a glazed look in her eyes. 'Oh, if it wasn't for that Coffid or whatever it's called, you could really get on with a new poem.'

'Perhaps,' was all I could I reply. I was more worried that I might run out of tobacco...

Viv interrupted again. 'Can you hear anything?'

'No', I replied wearily, 'just the noise of the wind under the door.'

'Tom,' Viv gushed excitedly, 'if we're stuck here, you can forget *What the Butler Saw* and write a poem.'

'Really Viv! You can't think this lock down is going to last more than a few days.'

Well, Lewis, it's now a week since I began this letter which I hid from Viv. She hurried back to London, slipping out through the hotel's kitchen door. I thought she'd just gone downstairs for a newspaper, but it seems she'd had enough of the lockdown.

I'll post this when I am able to leave the room, but...one must be so careful these days.

PS: I nearly forgot to ask you if you ever found a studio?

-o0o-

## Meeting in Saint-Germain-des-Prés (Hemingway)

Robert Wilson

April 2020. The stocky man looked confused. He was drinking a demi outside Les Deux Maginots. His name was Ernest. He had a silver beard and was waiting for someone. He looked a little drunk and was unsteady in the chair. There were few people around. The man kept lifting his head to look around for newcomers.

The sun shone dully in the square. Nobody stirred. The man shadow boxed as he read *Le Monde* although the stories made no sense as they were written in a foreign language. A large gendarme walked up to the table where the man was sitting and said something to him in French. The man's face turned red. The gendarme kept talking and gestured to his face. He had a mask on. He wanted the man to do the same. The gendarme continued to talk to the man. The man did not say anything and did not look at the gendarme but shortly got up and his hand flew quickly to the gendarme's face and the gendarme went down heavily. He lay on the floor and did not move. The sun shone on his blank features. The man called the waiter over and they talked. Shortly after the waiter dragged the sleeping policeman away. The place looked tidier then. A clean well-lighted place.

The man returned to his paper but it made no more sense. He felt the old unease. He got a number of books out of his small satchel. He looked at *Flower Arranging for the Older Man* and put it down then started to read a book called *Ballet for the Portly Gentleman*. He grunted. The books did not seem to please him. He looked out of sorts and began to look round again. The sun had moved round and now the man's table was in half-shadow. Just at that moment a tall lean man came over to his table and tipped his hat. He gave a short bow to the man sitting.

'Ernest. Top o' the Morning to You, begorrah!', he said.

'Jim. Howdee! Sit down: take the weight off. Still scribbling those novels I don't understand? *Ulysses!* Couldn't make head nor tail of it...no bullfights, fishing trips or barroom brawls.'

'Ernest you're a great joshier. I know that you write these books for people with a vocabulary of only 50 words and use the conjunctions 'and' and 'but' at least four times every sentence. The English language is a wonderful thing, Ernest, why don't you make full use of it? We'd have called you a chancer in Dublin...talking of chancers what is that gendarme doing lying on the floor?'

'He's sleeping it off. Had a few too many drinks, Jim. We put a mask over his face because he was snoring too loudly.'

The newcomer sat down at the table and ordered a Guinness. He was very frail and had poor eyesight. His glasses had thick lenses and an ashplant lay beside his seat. He looked around him and then back to his companion.

'Ernest, how would you like to serve as my personal amanuensis? I am working on a new book and I could use a good personal secretary. Hours would be regular but you'd need shorthand and you'd have to be able to type 120 words per minute. How's that sound?'

'I'll pass on that one, Jim. How's Nora? I met her last week and she was saying that it would do you a world of good if we went hunting big game in Africa. That would give your cheeks a bit of colour. We could hunt lion, hippopotamus, rhino, giraffe, gazelle. All the big game you could use. Toughen you up. Give you something to write about.'

The other man raised his eyebrows and sighed a little

'Jim, you don't get to do much hunting stuck in that airless flat in the dull side of the Invalides. I could fix you up with a good hunting rifle, a Ruger Hawkeye 30-06 ought to be just the thing for you.'

'Hmm...'

'We could get you in shape by shooting at pigeons in the Place de la Concorde. Hit a few tourists myself there, occasionally, but I soon straightened them out when they turned shirty. Guy called Marcel Proust got sniffy 'cause I shot him in the ass. Some people, brother!'

'Ernest, I can't see three feet in of me. Nora says that I drink so much the only way I'd fell a lion would be by opening my mouth and breathing on it.'

'Jim, I've heard that one before. Dick Ellman covered it in his Joyce biography in 1982.'

*'Plus ça change...'*

The two men fell silent. The sun continued to move round the square. There was a groaning noise from close to where they sat. The gendarme appeared to be coming to. The stocky man walked over to him and kicked him sharply. The gendarme was quiet again. The café seemed tidier again. The taller man winced. The stocky man sat down again and began to sing 'La Donna è mobile' in a strange high-pitched voice, while reading *L'Équipe*, which made no sense, as it was not written in any language he understood. He tried talking to his companion about baseball and American football but got little change there and his friend replied with a long story about some guy called Fionn mac Cumhaill which also made little sense as the stocky man had never heard of a quarterback of that name.

The two men got up to leave. The stocky man gave the gendarme a final kick then produced a rope and started skipping in the square. He told his friend that he was going to be the world heavyweight boxing champion and would he like to be his trainer? He shook his head and said, 'Ernest, you're touching 121 years old!' The gendarme still lay heavily on the floor, the sun playing over his fallen cap.

-o0o-

## Desultory Observation (Geoffrey Grigson)

Chris Martin

Mist most obstinately  
occludes.

The letterbox clatters.  
Bottles of wine

and some foie gras  
are at the door

again. My she-cat rubs  
against my leg. I have

a black square masking me  
on the laptop's screen

full of talking heads  
without an ounce

of pride between them  
thankfully far,

far off, this true threat  
with the pandemic

of our misted times,  
to one's sanity,

the forever  
madding crowd.

-o0o-

## Malone Awakes (Samuel Beckett)

Phil Jones

I shall soon be quite alive in spite of it all. That poltroon Beckett killed me off in 1956. Now it seems the whole damned farce has started up all over again. Lockdown! I will likely limp on until All Saint's Day. God curse the day I was born. And now I find myself in...Bognor Regis! What in God's name is Sam up to? What abysmal prank is that? I don't remember how I got here. I am told that I am confined in something they term a Butlin's Holiday Camp. I profit from a lapse in my recollections, as I have little idea what tedious process of ratiocination would have led to my incarceration in this infernal place. The other inmates avoid me and wear masks so they do not need to prattle with me. I came into my room, it seems to me, to replace another hostage now, no doubt, deceased. The room has evidently been given to me, otherwise I can think of no earthly reason why I might have been deposited here other than for the saintly Sam's amusement. He has sent attendants to spy on me. They wear red coats and always appear in a state of great humour. Why do I deserve that? I pretend that I cannot see them, or grin at them in what I take to be an ingratiating manner, but this cannot be said to have been a particularly successful ploy as they recoil in horror at these overtures.

What is the last thing that I can recall before I came here? I can't remember. Talking, talking, endlessly talking as I do here. The voices never stop repeating in my head. If I say enough words, the words will speak me and I will become the words, puking up the endless bile that is my unceasing life. I do not find that the name Bognor Regis comforts me in the same way as sucking stones. There is a great comfort to be had from having a decent-sized pebble in your maw. I found some fine shingle on the sands outside. The sands of time. I will soon be dead. Perhaps I am already dead and that's what living in Bognor Regis signifies. A quick death would be a mercy compared to the interminable music that enters my room from morning to night. The guards appear to consider it a great kindness to expose me continuously to the strains of something called The Nolans, which I had, unwittingly, thought to be a medical condition. Disease is abroad. The disease of life! This voice which issues from me keeps speaking. It tells lies, saying that it is my voice, it pours forth, endless streams of words, claiming to be mine, telling a story of a life that I cannot recall, words bubbling up from my wretched gullet, murmuring in interminable streams, I can't prevent it, no, no shut your trap you bog trotting impostor!

The voices get confused. Last night the voice was saying that I was your Prime Minister and that it was 5 o'clock and that we would be holding a press conference at 5.30 and this would begin at 6.15. Mother of God, what is this wretched gobshite blethering about? But the voices swim in my head like small fry, and I often get befuddled, all of these voices, like rain, like leaves, like dead leaves, falling on the dead, in a deathly pall, amongst the dying and dead. Another voice appeared that evening, saying that I was the President of the United States and that my IQ - sorry losers and haters! - was one of the highest in the world ever. And: Everyone loves me in Bognor Regis. Sad! Voices shimmering, voices interminably echoing. This morning the voice said, Good morning Campers! This is Gladys Pugh, your Radio Maplin's Announcer. Hi De Hi! Dear Joseph and Mary! I fear I am losing my senses. But the voices never stop, they flow continuously, they insinuate, claiming to tell the story of my wearisome life, lying about the hours I have spent on this bitch of an earth. This afternoon the voice said that I was Kim Jong Un, the most glorious man in the world, and that despite the lies of the running dogs of capitalism, my kingdom was the happiest, and

had the slenderest and, indubitably, most handsomest leader of all. These voices, coming from I know not where. Echoing, decaying. They make me think of death. A consummation devoutly to be wished.

Bugger Bognor! Where did that voice come from, claiming to speak for me? It's no worse than any other hellish rathole on this godforsaken earth. One patch of scuffed ground the same as any other; the dog returning to its vomit. Always those voices, whispering, rattling dryly, deceiving. Sam was always fond of Dr Johnson. That opium-eating, dreading-to-go-to bed, terrified of dying, terrified of deadness, panting on to 75 bag of water! By God, there's something about these Sams. Miserable sons of bitches. He couldn't go on. I can't go on. You must go on. I can't go on. You wouldn't let it lie, Bob! What in God's name! You must keep on saying these words while there is breath, these benedictions, these maledictions. I can't go on. You must go on. I can't live if living is without you. Sweet Jesus, where do these voices keep coming from. I must go on. I can't go on. Perhaps I am already done. Perhaps I am already there. My old man said follow the van. I'll make myself a new voice, a new head to parrot these platitudes. I can't go on, I'll go on.

-o0o-

## Author in Covid (Betjeman)

Peter Wright

Through the upstairs skylight window,  
Winter draughts are seeping down,  
On a young unpublished author  
Writing books in Kentish Town.

Deadly killer, unseen virus,  
Covid nineteen's in the air.  
Wheezing cough and dread of headaches,  
Fills our wordsmith with despair.

Self-isolation, that's the answer,  
Venturing out is not for him  
Disguised with facemask covering  
And two metre distancing.

He'll support his local centre,  
Buying curries – take away,  
and have his goods delivered  
in the on-line shopping way.

Washing hands to happy birthday  
Is a rule he'll acquiesce.  
Rainbow windows and on Thursday  
Clap with thanks the NHS.

But despite the wide pandemic,  
He's a bigger fear to face.  
Writer's block is ever-present  
And his plot won't fall in place.

Rest you there, poor unloved writer  
Things will not get any better.  
If and when the tome is finished  
All too soon the reject letter!

-o0o-

## **Ted in Lockdown (Ted Hughes)**

### ***From the life and songs of Ted***

**R. M. Healey**

#### **Ted at home**

Ted tried the TV. It was some boring medic spouting the usual guff.  
He threw a hammer at it and it burst into flames.  
Ted laughed.  
So much for the experts.

#### **Ted at Tesco**

Ted surveyed the aisles.  
There was a man grinning.  
Ted launched his trolley at him, then  
Smashed his head in with a bottle of Prosecco.  
Blood spurted from his neck like a fountain.  
Ted laughed.  
Serve him right for not wearing a mask.

#### **Ted in his car**

He was stopped at the lights.  
Fury raged in him as he clutched the wheel.  
The car opposite him was full of young men, laughing, whooping.  
Ted cursed them for breaking the rules.  
He swivelled the wheel, jammed down the pedal.  
Hit them amidships. A crush of metal and screams.  
Then Ted whooped too.

#### **Ted gets arrested**

There were policemen, rubberneckers.  
Ted ignored them, struggled out of the tangled metal.  
Muttered to himself.  
A policeman bent his head towards him.  
Ted spat in his eye.  
Felt a ring of metal around his wrist.  
Ted gulped.  
A thin stream of blood crawled down his face.

**-o0o-**

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Geoffrey Elborn**, a member of the Charles Lamb Society, is an acclaimed biographer of Edith Sitwell and Frances Stuart. His *Dedalus Book of Vodka* appeared in 2012.

**George Emerson** is a full-time professional butler and Chairman of the Butlers in Literature Group, which hopes to be affiliated to the ALS.

**Linda Hart** lives near Bredon Hill and recites A. E. Housman's poem on her frequent walks there. She is a regular contributor to the Housman Society Journal and to its newsletter.

**R. M. Healey**, the editor of *ALSo*, is a member of the Charles Lamb Society and the Wyndham Lewis Society and is a founding member of the ALS. He has published two books on Geoffrey Grigson and is currently completing a short introduction to the poet and critic in the *Writers and their Work* series (Liverpool University Press) as well as a critical biography.

**Dr Phil Jones** is Chairman of the Johnson Society (Lichfield), which is affiliated to the ALS.

**Simon Keeton**, once a young member of the Gipsy Lore Society, is currently a member of the George Borrow Society. He holds an MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Liverpool.

**Hoon Manley** is a retired Islington teacher who is devoted to Hopkins. During Lockdown, he spent his time learning his favourite Hopkins poems.

**Chris Martin's** poetry was first published in *Poetry (Chicago)*. Formerly an Art Librarian at the University of Portsmouth, he is a member of the Wyndham Lewis Society and is presently researching a catalogue raisonné of the artist C. R. Nevinson.

**Dr Alan Munton** is a member of the Wyndham Lewis Society and a prolific writer on the artist and novelist. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at Exeter University.

**Maurice Sterne** is Chairman of the Environment Services Group, which is fraternally linked to the Johnson Society and the ALS.

**John Strachan** is Professor of English at Bath Spa University and Chairman of the Charles Lamb Society.

**Kelsey Thornton** was professor of English at the Universities of Newcastle and Birmingham. He is Vice-President of the John Clare Society and President of the Friends of the Dymock Poets. A collection of parodies, *Adlestrophes*, came out in 2017 from the Rectory Press.

**Robert Wilson** is Secretary of the Big Game Hunters Group, which hopes to be affiliated to the ALS.

**Peter Wright**, a town planner in Birmingham for 39 years, grew up loving the Arthur Ransome stories and is now Chairman of the Arthur Ransome Society. His latest project is to read one book or anthology of poems for each of the authors represented by the ALS.

**Duncan Wu** is Raymond Wagner Professor in Literary Studies at Georgetown University, Washington DC, and President of the Charles Lamb Society.