

THE SUPERCARGO'S MAGAZINE

Summer 2024

**For your
consideration**

Memoir

Fiction

Poetry

Photography

by John Dudley



For your consideration *page 1*



Half full or half empty?
pages 2-4



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Brussels *pages 5-24*

A French
phrasebook
pages 6-8



The Royal Greenhouses
pages 8-13



Book boxes
pages 14-16



Taxes and loud English
pages 17-20



Unholy beer *pages 22-24*

Poems and fictions *pages 25-40*



Morning poems *pages 26-28*

Villanelle: Killing Eve
(poem)
page 29



Together in Cordoba (poem)
page 30

Voyage to Borborygmus
(flash fiction)
page 31



Elin's Story (historical novel extract)
pages 32-33

Quinn and the Boxcar (flash fiction)
pages 34-35



The Counter-Teller in its hall (SF novel extract)
pages 36-37

The Three Dancers (script outline, extract)
pages 38-40



GBG365: Photos from Gothenburg
pages 43-54

International *pages 54-63*

My radio days *pages 54-55*



Piano music in the streets
pages 56-57



In the Louisiana cafeteria
pages 58-59



Castelo de Sao Jorge
pages 60-63



September the Diva
(poem)
page 64



Two paths
(a photo and an afterword)
page 64



For Your Consideration



Welcome!

This magazine showcases my writing and photography from the last 15 or so years. I present it for your consideration. I hope you find something here to like. (Well, I hope you find *a lot* to like, but at least something.)

About names

My name is John Dudley Nixon. I've never been wild about my middle name. It was my father's, and he didn't like it either. Consequently, for most of my life, I have been John Nixon - or plain John - and rarely anything else.

Nixon is not a common name in Sweden, where I live now, but it's not unusual in the Anglosphere. When I started to curate a presence on-line I chose TheSupercargo as a moniker to distinguish myself.

Coming to the world of publishing this year, and thinking to call myself 'John Nixon, Author' (actually my handle on Facebook), I discovered there are several others with a longer established claim on that name and title. The upshot is that I'm now using John Dudley as my pen name. It's good to have a use for my middle name after all these years.

All the previously published material in this magazine appeared as by John Nixon, now it's as by John Dudley. Same, same, but different.

Resolution achieved

Here's a tip. When you set yourself a New Year resolution, formulate it so it is within your capacity to achieve entirely by your own efforts. Less: *I'm going to become a successful author and live off my earnings.* More: *I'm going to write daily and publish two blog posts every month.* It puts you in control and makes achieving your resolution actually do-able.

This year, 2024, is my first full year of retirement. My first full year living off an income

I don't have to work weekly to provide. It's not a lot, but I get by. So this is the year I can get serious about my aspiration to become an author. This year my writing resolutions included *self-publish a magazine*. And here it is!

Contents

The magazine comes in four sections. You can see a graphic representation on the facing page. Most of the material in 'Brussels' and 'International' I draw from my blogs at TheSupercargo. Most of the 'GBG365' section I've taken from the photoblog of the same name I kept between 2012 and 2014. Some of the material in the 'Poems and Fictions' section is previously unpublished.

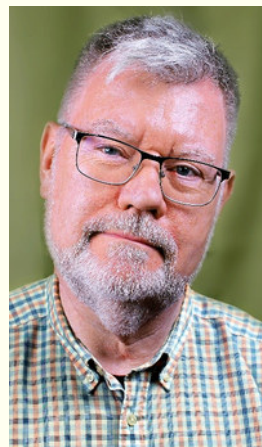
A few of the pieces in the magazine have also appeared elsewhere. There is a note attached to each, giving its provenance, and I include a short list with my thanks on the inside back cover.

Why a magazine?

Friends have asked: Why not a book? I'm not sure my answers have been very clear, but I hope you and they will understand when you look through this. It would have been hard, in a book, to include so many photos without pushing print production costs into the stratosphere. And I *want* a print edition. My analogue soul craves the sensation of holding my words and images on paper in a binding. There will be an electronic (PDF) version available - at a considerably lower

cost price - but a paper and print edition was *necessary*.

Whether you have bought a copy of the print magazine or the electronic version, Thank you! I hope you enjoy it.



John Dudley (Nixon)



Half full or half empty?



I published this at TheSupercargo.com in October 2014, but I wrote most of it earlier. Some time at the tail end of the summer. It felt like a good piece to stand at the beginning of this magazine. Note that 'Mrs SC' is the sobriquet I bestowed on my wife - with her agreement - when I started to write on recent events as TheSupercargo.

'Are you a half full or half empty kinda guy,' she asks in Swedish accented American English.

I never know how to answer questions like this. I know the polite response is to choose the one or the other and let the questioner make pseudo-psychological assumptions about you, but I think slowly. She takes my hesitation for misunderstanding.

'I mean,' she says, 'do you think the glass is half full or half empty?'

Perception

It must be exasperating for people to have to explain a clichéd metaphor. I don't go out of my way to be a nuisance, but I'm a pedant as well as a slow thinker. And, okay, sometimes I take pleasure in being annoying.

At a school where I used to teach, one of my science teacher colleagues had a couple of trick wine glasses. From a distance they looked exactly the same. He would put them out in front of his class and

carefully fill one of them almost to the brim with coloured water. Then he would ask the students to tell him how much liquid they thought was in the glass. After he'd collected several different answers, he'd take the full glass and pour its contents into the other one. The water only filled the second glass about half way.

The point, of course, was that the quantity of liquid was the same; the different glasses distorted how it looked.

Having had his little trick played on me once, I've never since been able to take the half full/half empty question seriously.

The question isn't about the actual quantity of what's in the glass. In your life. It's about your attitude, your perception. But my perception of my life, and my attitude towards what I perceive, both change depending on - what? On my mood, on where I focus, on how much sleep I had last night, on the time of year. On who is asking.

Bulgarian measures

Here's another observation to do with quantity and perception. Have you noticed how, in a bar or a restaurant, the glass of wine you're served is never full? It's often more than half full. (You can't play half full/half empty with a bar-bought glass of wine before you drink from it - unless you have a trick glass.) But it's never full.

Once though, when we lived in Bulgaria, my wife and I were in a restaurant where the waiter filled our glasses to the brim. We would drink, carefully, and put the glasses back on the table. And the waiter would come by and top them up again, right to the brim. Above, even, so that only surface tension was holding the wine in the glass. Between us this is known as 'Bulgarian measures' and has become a family expression.

My life recently has resembled a glass filled with a Bulgarian measure of wine. I've not written here for a couple of weeks partly because of this - so much has been going on. At the same time,

not all of it has been positive. It seems that it is possible for me to be a 'half empty kind of guy' even when my glass is full to the brim.

Well, I suppose I knew that all along.

Soul destroying

It's like this.

First, I've been working for more than a year in a school that teaches by distance over the Internet. I started working there largely in order to be able to work with one particular colleague. (He waves.) Partly in order to help create teaching material for distance education which seemed very interesting. Getting a regular pay cheque again was an attraction. I have helped create teaching material. The money's been welcome and I've really enjoyed working with all my colleagues, not just the one. (And when I remember all that the glass is definitely full.)

But for the last few months the job has boiled down to marking essays, and marking essays is soul destroying. When I think of that the glass looks pretty empty.



Bulgarian measure?

Second, as readers of this blog will know, I am in the middle of a crowd funding campaign to finance the publication of a photo book, *My Gothenburg Days*. That got off to a great start at the Gothenburg Book Fair. (Glass more than half full.)

However, for the last three weeks instead of spending all my (limited) free time promoting the campaign I have been engaged in a dispute with the crowd funding website I'm using over a bug in their software. The bug means people logging in to my campaign site see all money as fractions of euros instead of round numbers in Swedish kronor. (Glass half empty.)

Third, I try to find time to do something creative every day. Whether it is writing, or going out with the camera, or finding teaching solutions, or translating, or making illustrations, or cooking, or working on my websites doesn't really matter; the important thing is to be creative. When I am creative I'm happy and my glass has a Bulgarian waiter's measure of wine.

But recently I can only find the time for this with difficulty, fitting it around work and the campaign - around marking and disputing - and my glass only holds dregs.

Geo-dramatic changes

Finally, we recently heard that our life is about to change dramatically. Or at least geo-dramatically. My wife is going to be seconded from her current job to a new post in Brussels for at least two years. I'll be moving with her. This has been in the air for a couple of months, but she had it finally confirmed some ten days ago. Since when we have been picking through all our worldly possessions deciding what to take and what to give away, what to store and what to throw out.

On the one hand the coming move is like a sharp sword through the Gordian knot. A release from all the old entanglements (and my glass is half full again).

On the other hand, it means I have even less free time for the campaign, even less time for being creative. Not to mention that I get stressed out whenever I have to get rid of things. And we're back to half empty.

So here we are, back in the crowded bar on Sunday evening and making conversation with the people around the table and in Swedish-accented American English my neighbour asks: 'Are you a half full or half empty kinda guy?'

And I hesitate.



Half empty





Brussels Grand-Place with tourists, 2015

Brussels

ANNO 1698

MAISON DES BRASSEURS

ANNO

1698

RESTAURANT

BRASSERIE

Restaurant La Rose inche Brasserie



How helpful is phrasebook French



*I published this at the Supercargo.com on 10th December, 2014. I wrote it a few days earlier.
It's an accurate slice of memoir, but, obviously, owes a lot to the great James Thurber.
Note: Ten years down the line, you may be relieved to know that my mother, now 102,
has not been driving for a number of years.*

Amidst the intensity of organising our move to Brussels, and various family matters that don't have anything to do with the move but impinge on it, one thought has been hovering at the back of my mind. The thought is French. *Le français*.

Le français

Like most English children I was exposed to French at school for all of seven years, but I would hesitate to say I know French. I can read it (usually with a great deal of effort and the help of a dictionary - and even then I sometimes get it startlingly wrong). I can't write it and I certainly can't speak it.

Brussels is, by and large, a French speaking city. When we were there flat hunting in November I managed quite a few *Bonjours*, but whenever I was supposed to say *Au revoir*, what came out of my mouth? *Hej då!*

I begin to fear my brain is geared up for two languages: 'English' and 'Foreign'. At present the 'Foreign' space is occupied by Swedish - but what will happen if I have to learn French? Will the French drive out the Swedish?

No, I know it won't, but it might seem that way for a while.

Into this confusion my mother has delivered a copy of *The AA Phrasebook French*, with a note 'Any good, *mon enfant?*' The AA is the Automobile Association (of which my 92-year-old mother is still a paid up member). To be sure the section called 'On the road' is not likely to be of much use, but some of the rest might help - at least to begin with and for those automatic phrases: *Bonjour - Ça va? - Comment allez-vous? - Ça va bien - Au revoir - Bonsoir - Bonne nuit - Dors bien - Merci, de meme - Mon aéroglesseur est plein d'anguilles...* (OK, that last one isn't in the book.)

A story of drama and horror

Leafing through the phrase book I was reminded of a very funny piece by American humorist James Thurber. He uses a French phrase book to tell a story of drama and horror. It was the last section of *The AA Phrasebook French* that reminded me of Thurber's piece. The last section is called 'The police'.

Dispensing with the French bit - that would just slow us down - this is what we find. It is the police officer who gets to speak first.

*Your registration papers, please.
You were speeding.
Your lights aren't working.
That's a ... euro fine.
Do you want to pay on the spot?
You'll have to pay on the spot.*

OK, our travellers have got into a bit of a fix, but perhaps they can talk their way out.

*I didn't see the sign.
I don't understand what it says.
I was only doing ... kilometres an hour.
I'll have my car checked.
I was blinded by oncoming lights.*

Well, you can see this isn't going to do them any

good. They are avoiding the whole money issue. So it's off to the police station with them.

At the police station

At the police station, the police take over again.

*Where did it happen?
Do you have some identification?
What time did it happen?
Who are the others?
Are there any other witnesses?
Fill this out, please.
Sign here, please.*

There is at least a semblance of courtesy, but a threat underlies this barrage of questions and directions, a threat our traveller now reacts to.

*I want to report a collision/missing person/rape.
Could you make out a report please?
Could I have a copy for the insurance?
I've lost everything.
I am innocent!*

The full Kafkaesque horror of the situation has dawned at last.

*I don't know anything about it.
I want to speak to someone from the British Consulate.*



In the Grand-Place, the tourist information office is housed in the old police station

I need to see someone from the British Embassy.

And a final desperate appeal.

I want a lawyer who speaks English!

Phonetics?

In an attempt to help the unwary traveller, the phrase book also provides a 'phonetic' guide.

If you have ever wondered at the English and their ability to make simple foreign language phrases sound both English and completely incomprehensible, the phonetic guide gives an indication of how they do this. An English speaker trying to say the word *Bonjour*, for example, is encouraged to say *bawnjhoor*.


Take the last phrase in the book - the *cri du cœur*: I want a lawyer who speaks English! The traveller is recommended to say:

jhuh vuh uhn nahvokah kee pahrl ohngleh.

Yeah. That'll work.



To the right and heading the next page: lines of people visiting the Royal Greenhouses at Laeken, May 2015



The Royal Greenhouses at Laeken

I published this at TheSupercargo.com on 8th May, 2015. A version in Swedish (translated with the help of Mrs SC) also appeared in Bladet, the magazine for members of the Swedish Club in Brussels.

‘We went to the Royal Greenhouses,’ I tell my mother on the phone.

‘In Belgium? I thought Belgium was a democracy,’ she says.

‘It is a democracy, mother. In the same way the United Kingdom is a democracy.’ I stress the word kingdom.

‘Well,’ she says in great doubt. ‘I never knew that.’

Serres Royales

The Royal Greenhouses are a big thing here in Belgium. However they’re only open to visitors for a couple of weeks each spring. They occupy a large corner of the gardens of the Royal Palace at Laeken to the north of the old city and you get to them on the number 53 bus alighting at the stop called ‘Serres Royales’. (That translates as ‘Royal Greenhouses’. Makes sense.)

Now, the Belgians are generally pro-royal. I’ve been told that the Belgian royal family are the only truly Belgian national icon. That without them Belgium would quickly dissolve into its constituent parts,

Flanders and Wallonia. Consequently visiting the Royal Greenhouses seems to be a way for Belgians to affirm a commitment to their head of state and national unity. It's also not overstating the case to say that there is a considerable social pressure on foreigners living in Brussels to pay a visit too.

Mrs SC and I bowed to that pressure and took the opportunity of a sunny May Day to make our pilgrimage.

Crowded

It was crowded with local tourists and foreign. I heard Italian and Spanish, English and Swedish (not just from us), Polish, Japanese and Chinese. Also Dutch, French and German. It felt like there were thousands of people, though I think that was partly an impression caused by a restricted route and a large number of narrow doors. We moved in line and very slowly. There was also a great deal of standing around and not moving.

Perhaps because the greenhouses are only open for this very short window every year, the people responsible - and I'm going to blame the Belgian royals for this - haven't wanted to waste their money on benches. I'm sure there were a few more, but I can only remember seeing (and actually sitting on) two.

Also if there was any place of refreshment anywhere inside the gardens, it was well-concealed. There were a couple of vans parked in the road outside the Royal Palace doing a brisk trade in hot-dogs, waffles, ice cream and bottled water, but in the grounds nada. The Royal Shop sold watering-cans, but no water. There was however a Red Cross post, so I suppose people who collapsed would be attended to. Perhaps helped off the palace grounds to one of the vending vans.

There were also very large numbers of children, and despite all the standing around they were

To the right, top to bottom: tourists visiting the grounds, gardens and greenhouses; watering cans for sale in the palace shop; a curious child.





amazingly well behaved and cheerful. Or if not cheerful then resigned, but not whiny. I was impressed.

So what was so special about the Royal Greenhouses?

Azaleas and geraniums

Well, it wasn't the plants. The excuse for only opening for two weeks in the spring is 'this is when the flowers are in bloom'. That doesn't wash. As anyone will know who's visited open-year-round greenhouses in botanical gardens, there's usually something blooming most months of the year. There's always something of interest to see, even if it hasn't got flowers.

I guess these greenhouses were originally set up as botanical greenhouses. In fact a little leaflet we bought suggested exactly this. At least one of the greenhouses was built specifically to hold plants brought from the Belgian Congo. It was unsuccessful and the plants died. Nowadays the collection seems to consist very largely of azaleas and geraniums. There are a number of palm trees, ferns and a few pitcher plants too.

Okay, I'm exaggerating, but really there were a hell of a lot of azaleas and geraniums. And they were pretty. Impressive, even, by virtue of being so many. But seriously, you can see something similar in any well-stocked garden centre. And do azaleas really need to be raised in greenhouses? There's a whole little rocky azalea valley - absolutely not under glass - that is part of Slottsskogen Park back home in Gothenburg. It's a riot of colour when the azalea bushes bloom, and Gothenburg is several hundred kilometres closer to the Arctic Circle than Brussels. (See page 44.)

Congo money

However the greenhouses themselves are quite something. They cover an area of 2.5 ha or 270,000 ft² (thank you, Wikipedia) and are

To the left, top to bottom: azaleas in bloom; more blooming azaleas; the interior of the palm house.

constructed with a decorative cast-iron girder frame and glass panels. They were built between 1874 and 1895 on the orders of King Leopold II. Leopold was the notorious King of the Belgians who commissioned expeditions to and then exploited the wealth of the Congo Basin, treating the inhabitants as his slaves. The Royal Greenhouses are presumably where some of his Congo money went.*

I'm going to make a wild guess here. Leopold was about twenty years old in 1851. That was when the great cast-iron and plate-glass Crystal Palace was opened for the Great Exhibition in London. My guess is that Leopold saw it, was impressed by it, thought 'I wanna get me one of those' (or the contemporary Francophone equivalent). And when he had the money and the opportunity decided he would do better, would surpass it. If so, I think he achieved his goal.

Of course it's not all greenhouses. There are orangeries too, and ornamental ponds and cherry trees and a pagoda, and distant, attractive views of Brussels across the river (which is actually the great Brussels-Charleroi Canal).

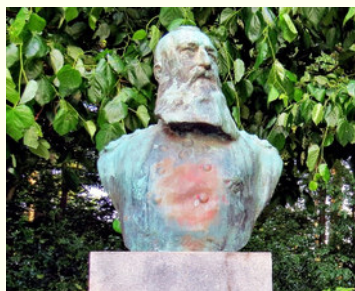
Peeking at the crowds

According to Wikipedia - which appears to be citing an article in the *Daily Telegraph* - the former King of the Belgians, Albert II, who abdicated in 2013, lives with his wife in a building in the grounds, while current King Philippe and his Queen live in the main Laeken Palace. I wonder what they do during these two weeks when the hoi polloi get to traipse around their greenhouses.

Probably they take a vacation in a far-off place. But I'd like to imagine that they are really still in the palace, peeking out at the crowds and longing for a time when the great gates to the palace grounds shut and they can once again walk in peace through their greenhouse empire.



Above: Laeken Palace is not open to tourists. Right: oranges in the orangery; the pagoda in the Chinese garden; the view towards Brussels across the water.



* Leopold II is 'the man who built Brussels' - or at any rate the older, 19th century parts. Busts and statues of him are ubiquitous. This to the left is in Forest Park. The money for his lavish construction programmes was squeezed out of what was, in effect, his personal, private slave estate in the Congo. His legacy is questionable to say the least. Before we condemn Leopold, however, we should bear in mind what is going on in Congo today to satisfy our modern demand for rare earths and minerals. How clean are our own hands?





The Book Boxes of Brussels – *Les boîtes à livres*



I published this at TheSupercargo.com on 31st August, 2016.

The book boxes - *les boîtes à livres* - are scattered across the city - they're not always easy to find, but that makes looking for them a sport (and you don't need an app to do it)

Book exchange

The first book box I saw was the one outside the Longchamps swimming baths. I suppose I noticed it because I saw it - see it still - every time I passed by on my way in or out of the building. On its pole by the entrance steps. It's blue and oblong with glass windows and an odd collection of books visible inside. The first time I opened it to look I found a book of poetry by the Swedish writer Gunnar Ekelöf. It was in a Dutch translation.

Clearly this was a book exchange site. Take out a book you fancy, put in one you don't want any more so someone else can find it. I've come across book exchanges before. The one that always comes to mind is the 'repurposed' telephone box in my sister's village in Northamptonshire. But I hadn't realised how big it is as a movement. It certainly seems big in Belgium.

After I recognised the first one I started to spot other book boxes around Brussels. It was easiest in Uccle, the commune - municipality - where I live. Here the boxes all look like the one at the swimming

baths. However, several other of the Brussels communes also sponsor book box groups.

Municipal differences

This being Brussels, each municipality has a different colour and design for its book boxes. This makes them at first less easy to spot. There are also some private groups - perhaps even individuals - who have set up their own boxes. Each of these has a unique design. But soon enough your eyes become aware, and then it's a sport to see where you can find them.



A book box in the Brussels Saint-Gilles municipality

Several of the groups who put up the boxes have their own websites or Facebook pages. There are often links to these printed on the boxes somewhere - quite usually along with the addresses of nearby libraries. There is even a website (in French and Dutch) where one noble soul is trying to keep an updated list of all the book boxes in Brussels and Wallonia.

I'd been in Brussels for about six months when a translator friend (she works in France) sent me a link to a French article on-line. It was quite a short article, but it presented the book boxes of Brussels as a new curiosity. It made me feel almost a local and an old hand to be able to write back to Miranda with a 'Thank you' and a

'Yes, I know about this'. (Although, as I discovered preparing this article I didn't know the half of it... and probably still don't.)

Last spring I noticed the book box in Forest Park. Nothing like the elegant boxes of Uccle or of Ixelles our neighbouring commune. This was dark cupboard. No glass here - but three shelves of books. I was admiring it when a young man came along and asked me something. I made my usual apology: *Pardon monsieur, je ne comprends pas français. Parlez-vous anglais?* He did *Parlez*



Book box in the Brussels Forest municipality

anglais, at least a little. He came from West Africa, from Guinea, and so his first European language was Spanish. Here in Brussels he was learning French and came along to this book box every week to look for a new book to help him.

Sadly I didn't have my camera with me or I'd have asked to take his portrait as he was browsing.

Blogger

Preparing to illustrate this article last week, I took my camera with me to the swimming baths. As I arrived I saw another young man holding the box's glass front open with his head and rummaging inside. This chap had even less

English, so we didn't have much of a conversation. I asked (in English) if I could take a photo and he shrugged. I took that to be yes. Afterwards he asked me: 'Journaliste?'

'Blogger,' I said.

'Ah, oui,' he nodded.

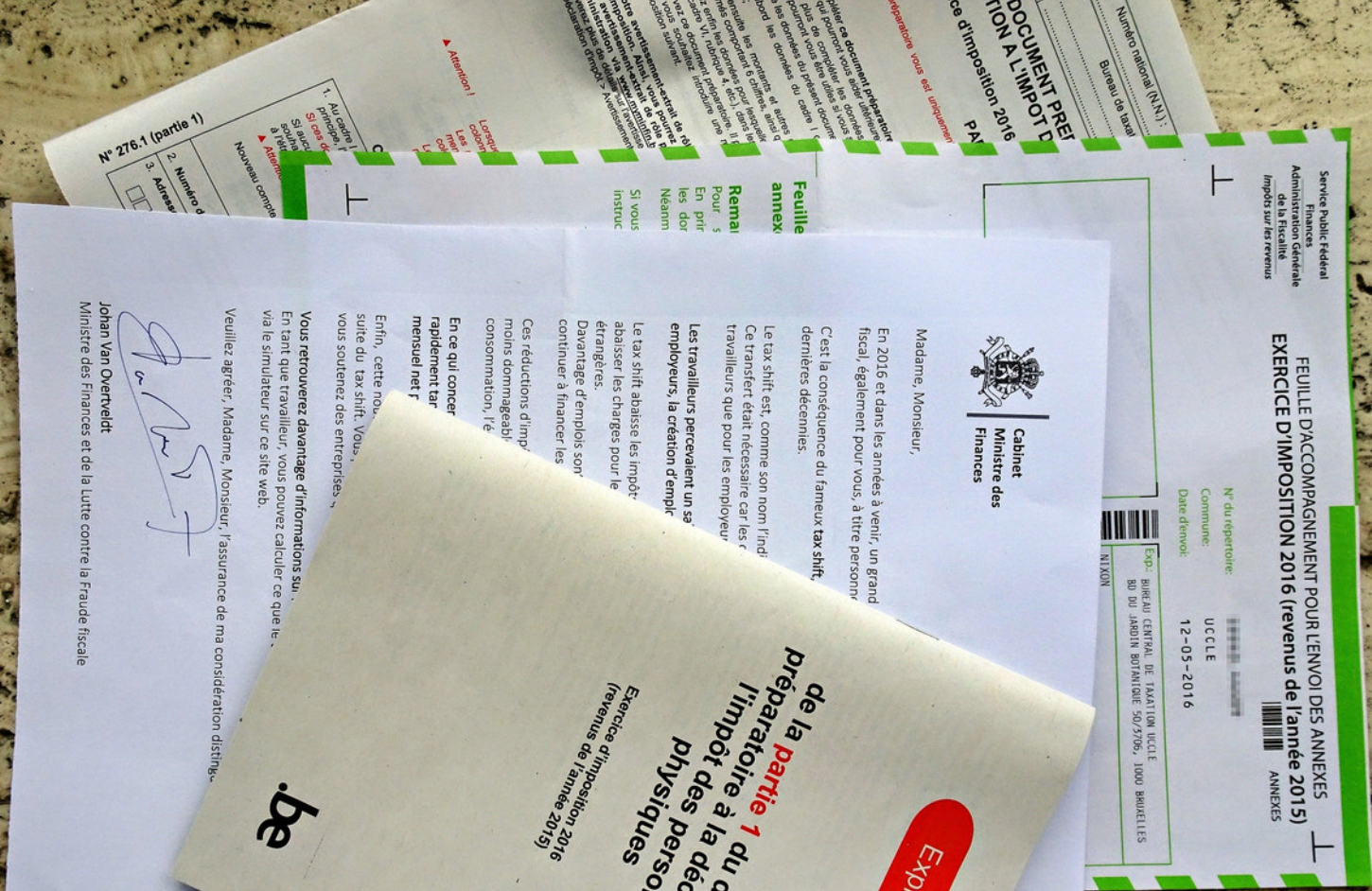
Judging by the one at the swimming baths, the book boxes are well used. The number of books in the box changes dramatically from one week to the next and the variety of the books also. Although I've not seen anything more by any Swedish writer, I've seen French and Dutch crime novels, American thrillers and science fiction (usually in French translation). I've seen John Le Carré and *Les principes de droit belge*, school text books and children's picture books, very new

looking books and very old and tatty ones, dictionaries, magazines and comic books. All sorts.

Once I've completed this article, I think I'll go through my own shelves and sort out a few books to drop off at the different boxes I've found around town.



Book box in the Brussels Ixelles municipality at Place Georges Brugmann



Taxes and loud English – it's child's play

I originally published this piece at TheSupercargo.com on 8th June, 2016. It went through a few changes (see the final section Envoi).

I don't like the English abroad who wander around talking loudly at the natives, apparently convinced incomprehension of English is really a form of deafness. I really do not like that behaviour. It's humbling - even a bit humiliating - to realise, if I'm stressed, that I do it too.

Declaring our taxes

One of the things which has made my life more involved recently has been the Belgian tax declaration forms that we got in the post a couple of weeks ago. The forms included my wife, but were addressed to me as the head of the household. (Belgium has a way to come yet on the road to equality.) Mrs SC, whose job is the reason we're in Brussels, smiled sweetly and handed the forms back to me. 'You can deal with this,' she said. 'It's addressed to you.'

Now, we've already paid our taxes in Sweden where we are still registered for tax purposes. We explained this to various officials on various occasions last year while we were applying for local identity cards. Obviously, though, we hadn't explained it to the *right* people. Now I sit at the dining table with a series of forms and a thick (110 page) explanatory pamphlet in dense French. There's also a covering letter signed by Johan Van Overtveldt, *Ministre des Finances et la Lutte contre la Fraude*

fiscale. My French just about stretches to translate his title: Minister of Finance and the Fight against Tax Fraud.

Well, I can also make out that the deadline for returning the forms is 12th June and that there will be dire consequences for being late and fraudulent. But I can't make out much else. The forms and pamphlet are couched in what I take to be French bureaucratese. Not quite the French they taught in English schools 45 years ago (most of which I can't remember anyway).

Obviously we are not supposed to complete these forms. Obviously! But how to find someone to explain this to?

Trial and error

It took a deal of trial and error.

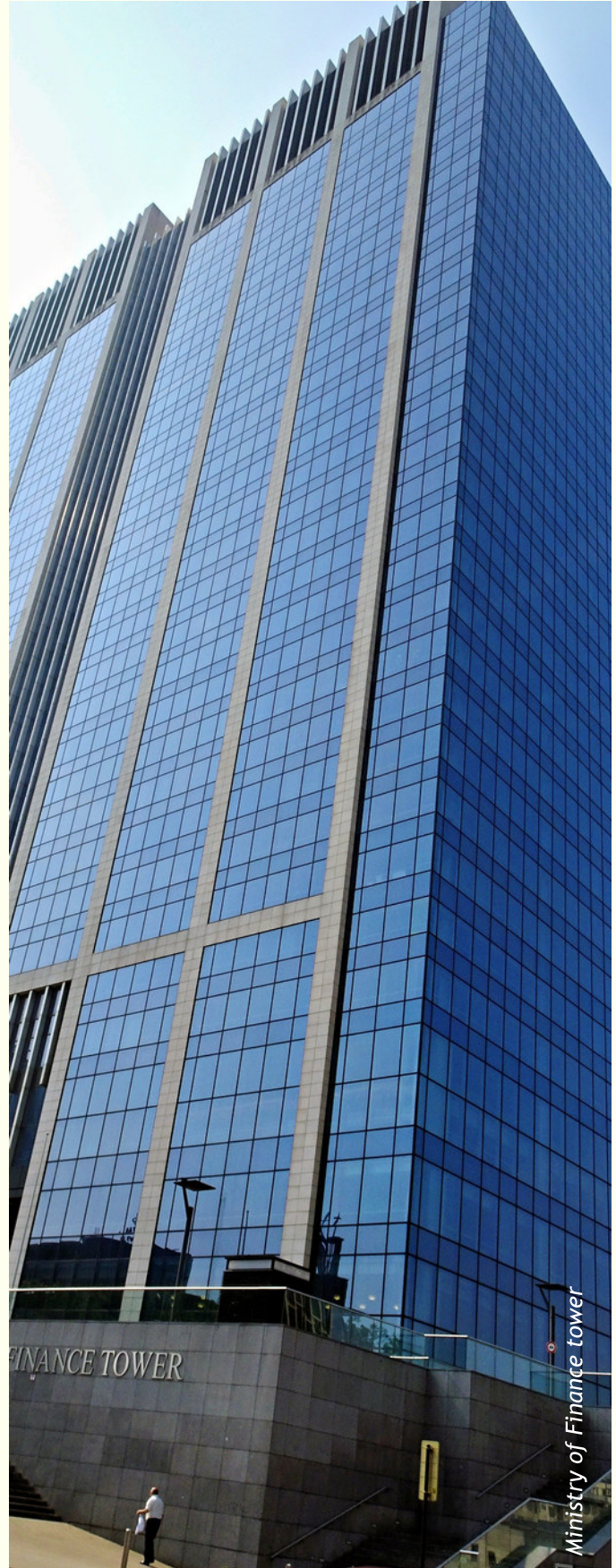
In the end, I went online to the home page of the Belgian Ministry of Finance and - bingo - there was a page in English. Of course the information was superficial and only directed at people who were actually making their declarations in Belgium, but there was a telephone number for further information.

Unfortunately - and typically in my experience - the number only led to a machine recording of three alternatives: *Français, Nederlands, Deutsch* - the three official languages of Belgium. I chose *Français*. In French I have at least a chance to understand when I'm offered the option of speaking to a human being. I got it right... on only the third attempt.

The young man who answered said he didn't understand much English but we coped. His advice was to come to the tax office in the centre of town. I had to bring the forms plus my own and Mrs SC's identity cards.

The Ministry of Plenty

The tax office turned out to be the offices of the mirror-windowed Ministry of Finance tower at Boulevard du Jardin Botanique 50.





There were two reception desks, one to the left and one to the right. Which to choose? There were no signs I could see that explained so I chose the queue to the left. I chose wrong. When I got to a receptionist, she looked tiredly at me. This had happened before.

As I stood in the queue at the other desk, I tried to work out what in all the signage at the door indicated the correct queue. I still couldn't see it.

At the end of the line another receptionist, also tired and quite irritated, told me to go back outside, down into the Metro and turn left. There

was an 'of course' hanging in her voice. Once again, no signs I could see that ought to have given me a clue.

Down in the tube station

Down in the Metro (Botanique) I found a subway that ran for several hundred metres right across beneath the main road. Along the entire length of the subway stretched a queue of people waiting patiently to get into the Finance Tower. Hundreds of people.

Behind the reception desk I'd just come from was an electronic screen I'd had the time to study.



Two alternating adverts encouraged people to make their declaration online. The first showed a child at a keyboard with the slogan *C'est un jeu d'enfant*. (It's child's play.) The other showed two smiling young people - a man and a woman - and the slogan (in English - why?) that said: It's so easy!

Yeah, right.

At the head of the long queue, there were a couple of quite pleasant but distinctly burly young men handing out numbered white tickets and overseeing the people allowed in. I spoke to one of them and after a bit of explaining, he told me to go right the way down the corridor till I found one of his colleague who was giving out pink tickets. I should explain my situation, get a pink ticket and bring it back. It was a long walk and the colleague was less than keen to help, but I talked at him in English and eventually he gave me a ticket to go away.

Pink ticket

The pink ticket let me jump the queue and ride the escalator up to a huge reception hall in the Finance Tower. Here, hundreds of lucky ticket holders were sitting around clutching their white tickets, waiting for their queue number to come up. The pink tickets were shunted into another queue that eventually brought me to a clerk at a desk.

I explained my situation and he confessed that he'd only been working there for a week and didn't really know how to help me. But his colleague - he indicated with his hand - she had been here for many years and she would know. So I stood to one side and waited for the colleague, and when she had finished with one pink ticket I quickly dodged in ahead of the next and explained my situation. Had I come to the right place?

"Yes," she said. "You have, but unfortunately there's nobody here who can help you today. You must come back on Wednesday. We open at 8 a.m."

Wednesday

That was on Friday 27th May. On Wednesday 1st June I arrived in the subway at about 7.50 in the morning. The queue already stretched almost the whole length of the corridor. I joined the end of the queue and after a bit I was not at the end any more. I hadn't moved forward; more and more people had arrived to join in behind me.

A little after 8 a.m. the queue started to move, which was hopeful. Then it stopped and I realised it wasn't that people were being let in, that first movement. It was just the queue getting serious and drawing together because the Finance Ministry was starting work.

We stood still, almost still, for about half an hour. Then, very slowly, the queue start moving for real. After I'd been standing for a little over an hour I got within sight of the door. At that point some of the burly men came out with their jump-the-queue tickets. I caught the eye of one of these and went through the same procedure as before, arguing my case. He said something that sounded like the people I wanted to see wouldn't be working today. That's when I raised my voice and started repeating myself. Eventually he gave me a ticket.

Through the revolving door, up the escalator and once more into this cavernous waiting room. The special queue for the pink tickets was much shorter this time, but the young lady whose desk I reached was not keen to help. She wanted me to go back down to the main queue and get a proper white ticket and talk to someone else. So I carried on talking in English, my voice growing louder.

Loud English

Does it ever work, talking loudly at people in English? On the basis of this experience I have to say, Yes.

'Follow me,' she said.

She took me through to another queue in another corridor and left me to talk to a calm, older man.

I explained again. In the middle of this, he moved his hand, palm down, and I realised I was still shouting. I dropped my voice and he nodded approvingly, looked at my ID card, tapped away at his computer keyboard a little and said, ‘Now, everything is all right.’

I was confused and asked if there was a receipt. ‘No receipt.’ So I thanked him and went back out into the main reception hall where I had to sit down. My knees were weak.

I took out my phone and sent a text message to Mrs SC that all was well. But then I had the sudden horrible feeling that perhaps he’d only fixed it for me. After all he hadn’t asked to see her ID card. So I went back to his desk and caught his eye and when he finished with the person he was talking to I asked if he had also included my wife. ‘Of course. She is your wife. You are on the same form. Do not worry. Everything is all right.’

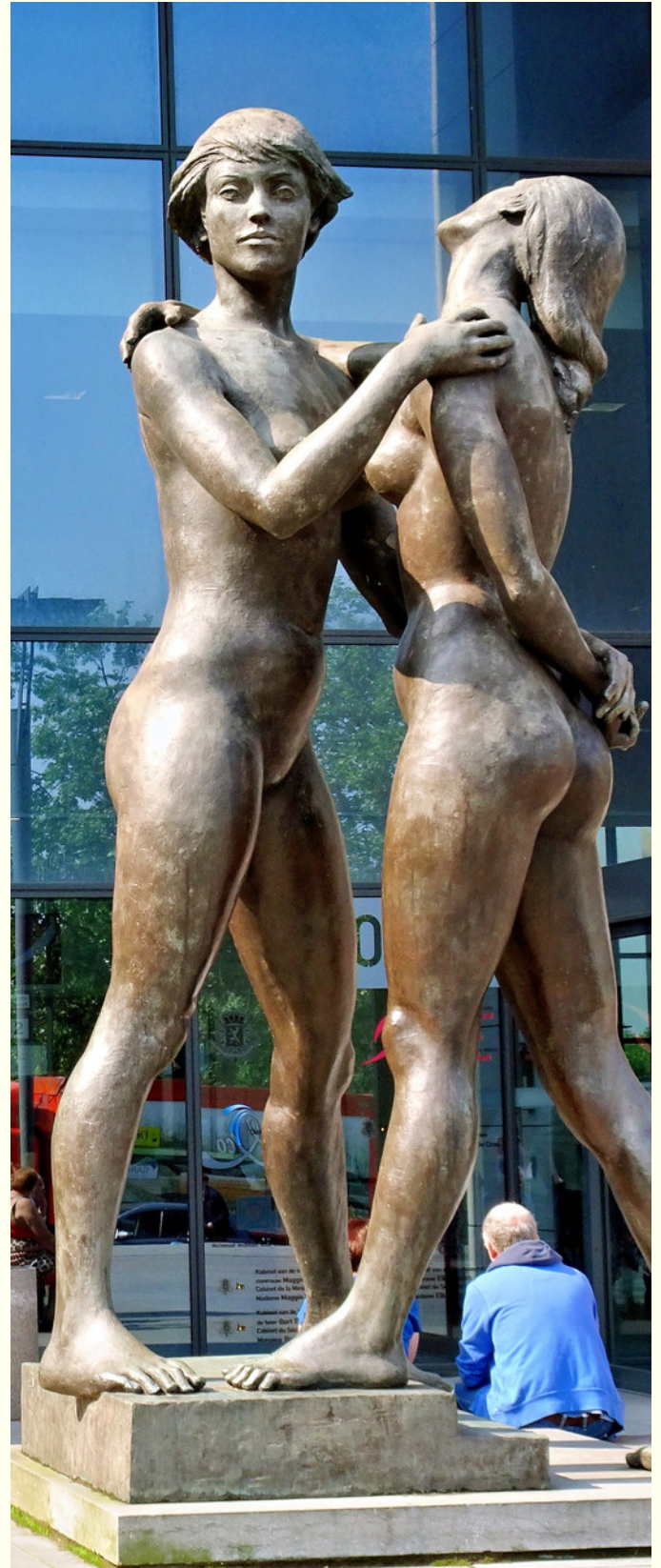
I thanked him once again and finally let myself leave the building.

Envoi

‘Everything is all right’ - and it was for 12 months. Then the exact same damn thing happened again in 2017.

At least that time around I was prepared. I knew where to go, how to queue and what to expect. And it only took one morning to sort out. Two different meetings with two different bureaucrats this time though.

The following year, 2018, we were back in Sweden. I kept expecting to receive another envelope, plump with documents, but no. This time nothing. It was a great relief.



Public art at the entrance to the Finance Tower. No, I have no clue what it's supposed to represent.



Unholy beer: People watching at Brussels airport

I published this on 5th January, 2017, about 10 months after the March 2016 terror attack at Brussels airport. By this time the airport had practically returned to normal. Amazingly - somebody read the post! I mean someone other than the people in my immediate circle of friends and acquaintances. I got an e-mail inviting me to write more for an Internet magazine for (I think) tourists visiting Brussels and Belgium. No money was mentioned - only kudos. I'd have been up for that, but nothing came of it.

Living between Sweden and Belgium I'm getting used to passing through Brussels airport. Last time I wrote about it, after the bombings last spring, it was quiet and subdued. Now it's back to its usual self. Busy with travellers.

Business people in suits, bluteeth plugged into their ears, dragging rollerbags just the right size to carry-on. Family groups of adults, with kids high on excitement, swinging on the tubular steel barriers or playing tag among the bags. Students with backpacks, surfpads or laptops, updating their social network status or hunting recharge sockets. Gaggles of teens and tweens (and thirty-somethings too) returning or departing on shopping sprees or sporting holidays.

There's always a little group (almost exclusively male) admiring the latest Toyota on display at Pier A in the main departures hall. Many different skin colours many different voices: French and Arabic, Dutch and German, English and Chinese. The shops and restaurants, cafés and bars are all well patronised as people search for gifts to take home, or while away the time waiting for their flights to be called.

Beers and Cheers

One of the bars is Beers and Cheers, filling the centre of an atrium surrounded by restaurants on the way to or from the A gates. I sit there now and then. I wouldn't call it my regular spot - I don't pass through BRU that often - but when I'm passing by, if I have the time, it's my first choice.

The last time I was there alone, the place was crowded. Nowhere obvious to sit. In the end I found myself a spare piece of a high table and occupied it with my tray before hunting down a bar stool to perch on. All done one-handed with my rucksack strap over one shoulder.

Next to me on my right a couple of business types were communing in French over glasses of red wine. Beyond them a woman in a hijab was sitting with a glass of orange juice. She was gesticulating with both hands as she carried on a rapid conversation, apparently with herself. Then she turned her head and I saw the smartphone tucked tight into the cloth of her headscarf. Low-tech hands-free.

Customers/travellers

To my left were two middle-aged men. They looked a bit rough, a bit worn. One was bearded and the other hadn't shaved recently. They were bleary-eyed and straggly-haired and wore scruffy trainers and jeans, t-shirts under flannel shirts. One had a puff jacket that had seen better days, nylon threads coming loose and standing away from his body with static. The other wore a parka, shrugged off his shoulders, military green with a fake fur trim.

They had several open bottles of beer lined up between them on the table. Each also clutched or cradled a bottle in big hands, swigging from time to time. They were not talking.

I ate my sandwich and sipped my own beer and gradually the noise around me subsided. People set out for their gates or headed for the exit. The wine drinkers shook hands, cheek-kissed and went their separate ways. The woman in the hijab was swept off by a two other women

similarly clad and swinging bags advertising Belgian chocolate and Victoria's Secret.

Unholy beer

'*De gör öl, belgarna.*' To my surprise, one of the two drunks - the one with a straggly beard - suddenly spoke in Swedish. 'They make beer, the Belgians.'

His companion grunted.

'They make beer - from fruit!' (Rising intonation.)

Grunt.

'*Det är för faaan helgerån!* It's a cursed sacrilege!' (Louder and with force.)

'*Körsbär,*' said the other. 'Cherries.'



Tintin's moon rocket in the duty free concourse at Brussels airport

‘How can you make beer from cherries?’

‘You can make wine from cherries.’

‘But cherry beer?’ In great indignation. (Pause.)
‘It’s unholy.’ (Slow, sorrowful shake of the head.)
‘*Oheligt.*’

Kriek

There was a long pause and I drank up my own beer. Hops are fruit, I thought. I might join the conversation with this observation. But how to say hops in Swedish?

The word ‘humble’ stumbled around my head. My gate would be up on the noticeboard by now. Besides, how would they react if they understood I’d been eavesdropping? I told myself to keep quiet.

Suddenly the other Swede, the one who wasn’t quite clean-shaven, asked, ‘Have you tried it?’

‘*Vadå?* What?’

‘Cherry beer.’

‘Never!’

As I shouldered my rucksack I thought about buying them a couple of bottles of Kriek to try. Then I remembered the price of beer at the bar – OK, one bottle, I thought. But they both looked and sounded like they’d really drunk quite enough already. Perhaps not.

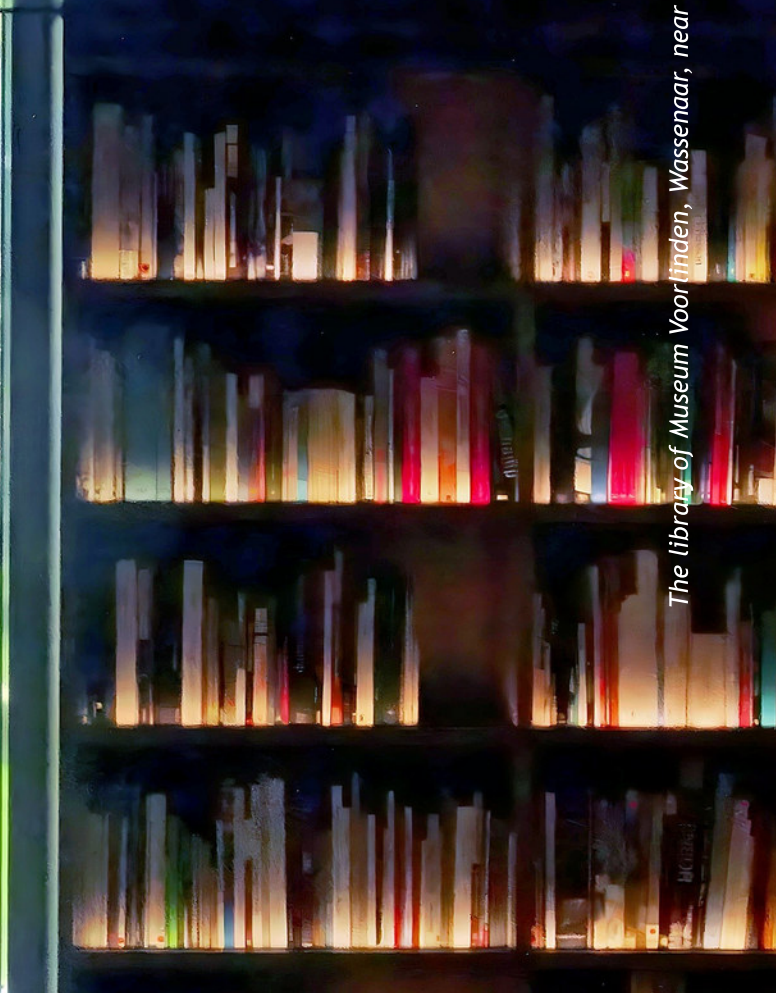
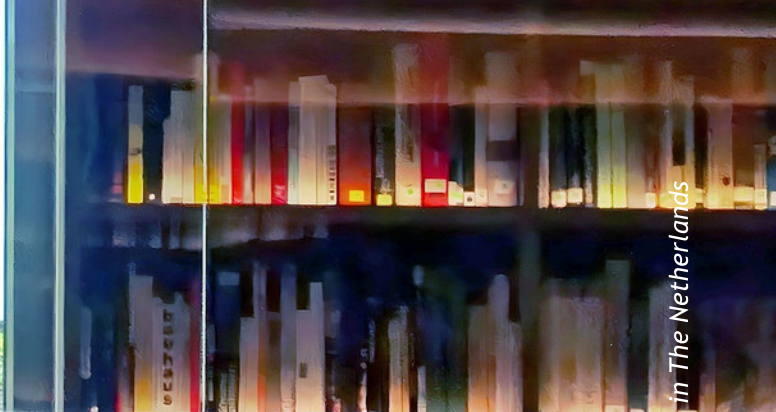
I rather thought they might turn out to be flying with me to Gothenburg, but they weren’t (or weren’t in a fit state). Either way, I didn’t see them again, but they stuck in my mind.



A glass of kriek, and beyond a glass of geuze, in the bar of the Cantillon brewery and museum in Brussels



The author enjoys a kriek on a warm day in Courtrai



Poems & Fictions

The library of Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, near The Hague in The Netherlands

Some morning poems



From early in May 2023 I set myself the task of writing a poem every morning. I kept it up till mid-September. The subjects tended to follow what I could see from the kitchen window or out on walks. Here are a few of the better poems, in no particular order.

I don't believe I've published most of these before, though a few may have turned up on the website. All along the Dreaming Quay is the only one I know I've published. In Gothenburg, along by the river in town, Drömmarnas kaj (literally The Dreamer's Quay) is where people keep the dilapidated boats they are patching up and dreaming of sailing around the world.

Spring sun pushes through -
a bright face beyond the heads
of a dark cloud crowd.

morning sun falls on
different walls in summer
to change winter minds

Our tall, old birch has put on leaves -
sudden summer leaves.
In the south-east wind
she twists and turns, shakes and shimmies,
a girl again in her first ball gown.

How slowly, now, light
fades - palest yellow shifting
to blue-grey, to grey.
A month yet to the solstice
and the year's reverse.

A bright sun chases clouds.
Trees toss with the sound of the sea.
Gulls, crows, fling into the updraught
at the cliff's edge
to tumble, dive, glide and soar.
Then back they come, crying, cawing
Let's do it again! Let's do it again!

the midsummer sun
is setting in the north-west
behind dark hills that
shadow the bay's still water

swimmers break surface

handfuls of words like
stones from a beach - I'm trying
to make a poem

All along the Dreaming Quay
rusting hulks, one after one,
and deck-chaired on the rusting decks
the dreamers dreaming in the sun.

The wind woke me now,
whistling round the window.
This old house, my age,
we compare ailments: warped frames,
aches, pains, wheezing.

Suddenly the evening sky is crow-crowded,
a tattered wheeling of black-wings,
a ragged chorus of back-chat caws,
a boisterous, bickering bunch of bullies
in disagreement agreeing to roost again
together on the warm, flat roof of our
neighbouring block.

After the pressing
heat and a bright sun, today's
cooler and the air's
moist. The sky's uniform
grey. Was it all a fever
dream? Will it return?

From the kitchen window this evening
watching a midsummer cloud-play. An hour.
The sun had set for us, but not the clouds,
which shifted shapes in gold, rose, grey,
and hurried east and inland on their way.

In the night the wind
shifted. This morning cold air
filled the flat, blowing
from Germany, from the east,
from Ukraine. The war.

Listlessly our kitchen birch shifts her hanging leaves.
The clouds are rolls of off-white fluff across the sky.
The streamer on its staff hangs down, then briefly lifts
unfurling blue and gold, then drops again. Lifts. Drops.

One of the dull days, the gloomy days of summer
when thunder strains but doesn't come, and the air hangs
heavy, and your hands, your face, a second skin
of dust and sweat, with a taste of tin in your mouth.

The Rules of Ablaut Reduplication

Tock-tick, says the kitchen clock,
tock-tick.
You're not suppose to say that!
By the rules of ablaut reduplication
tick should come before tock.
Tock, says the clock. Tick.
You know what you can do
with your ticking rules.

In the park, under the trees, soft but clear
I hear a *crack!* and glancing to the right,
see her biting through the hard chocolate skin
of her ice cream on a stick. An elderly woman
in summer caftan, on a bench up a side-path.
Thin and wiry, bare brown arms and shins,
a straw hat on her grey hair, ballet flats
on her feet, one swinging like a little girl's,
the other tucked up under her.
She's a picture of curled contentment.

Storm Iggy

A quiet morning, faint traffic,
crows caw, doves coo, small birds chirp,
unlike yesterday evening, when
 thunder and storm
pounded the windows and drowned out
Iggy and all the stooges.

In the middle of the night
she wakes me with a hand on my back.
It's raining, she says.
We lie in bed, listening to the rain
spatting on the window glass
tapping on the metal sill.
We listen to the rain awhile
in the dark
until we sleep again.

Caught out by a sudden summer rainfall
I hurry to shelter in an underpass.
At the far end in silhouette's a man,
shape like mine - broad across and straight down,
tree trunk legs in outsized shorts, set astride,
open boots for sandals and a fairground hat.
My image, my brother, I think, coming up.
He turns to me, but it's not my face.
We nod a greeting, then stand together
looking out at the sheeting, bouncing rain.



Summer rain

Villanelle: Killing Eve



*This is a recent poem, about a year old.
I couldn't find anywhere a villanelle about Villanelle, so I wrote one myself.
This will be opaque to anyone unfamiliar with the TV series Killing Eve.*

I shut my eyes to think of Bill and grieve.
Her knife, her smile, her manic face again.
And Villanelle is once more killing Eve.

Beautiful Monster! Waltz with me, believe
I love you as my nice neat knife slips in.
I shut my eyes to think of Bill and grieve.

Now wide awake I touch designer weave.
I don't want to be free, I'm not insane.
And Villanelle is once more killing Eve.

People think that when you die you leave
Your soul, I swear it just goes further in.
(I shut my eyes to think of Bill and grieve.)

In some essential sense corrupt, naive
Oksana's Sorry Baby's inhumane.
And Villanelle is once more killing Eve.

And sometimes when you love you must deceive
So see my imitation death's head grin!
(I shut my eyes to think of Bill and grieve.)

You know I don't know how to do mundane
A hungry caterpillar wears my skin.
I shut my eyes to think of Bill and grieve
And Villanelle is once more killing Eve.

VILLANELLE KILLING EVE

Together in Cordoba



Written between Summer 2009, and December 2010. This, together with the illustration, was published as my contribution to an on-line anthology run by @starofsavannah, one of my Twitter-buddies in happier days on that social media network.

The light like
honey-fire
and the night warm-scented
In the Cathedral-Mosque
walking among the columns,
together
among the ancient columns
like palm stems
under arches
like palm fronds
and the windows of stone-lace
In the golden light before the door
the young couple
Greeting? Parting?
They clung to one another.



Collage of images from photos taken at the Cathedral-Mosque of Cordoba, summer 2009. Made to accompany the poem.

Capt. Gulliver, his Voyage to Borborygmus



Back in the early days of Twitter, when it was a good deal sweeter and lighter, I played a word game called Artwiculate. Every day @artwiculate offered an obscure word, and everyday we players tried to see what we could do with it. Borborygmus was the word of the day for 1st September 2011. It felt very Swiftian to me.

Here follow chapter headings from a recently discovered, unpublished manuscript by Jonathan Swift.

Chapter 1

A severe storm. Driven before the wind, Captain Lemuel Gulliver finds himself cast upon a strange and violently perturbed shore.

Chapter 2

Capt. Gulliver experiences constant earth tremors, eruptions. The difficulties in shaping a stable shelter in this shuddering state.

Chapter 3

Capt. Gulliver meets natives. Discovers himself to be on the Island of Borborygmus. Natives appear much like middle-aged Englishmen: bow-legged, pot-bellied, eructating.

Chapter 4

Capt. Gulliver is transported to Borborygmus City, the capital, in a foul-smoke-emitting conveyance. Pride of natives in this Stench Uttering Vehicle.

Chapter 5

Housed in an estaminet, Capt. Gulliver is unable to rest. Gobbling, munching, retching, regurgitating, voiding and laxation taking place all night long.

Chapter 6

Exhausted by his night without rest, Capt. Gulliver nevertheless impresses fellow lodgers. Eats all manner of curious foods pressed on him as local delicacies: fermented legumes, pickled allium, boiled brassica.

Chapter 7

His new-found friends obtain permission for Capt. Gulliver to observe the Borborygmus Parliament. Traditional behaviour remarked upon. Pronouncements in chamber delivered with much grumbling and belching.

Chapter 8

Capt. Gulliver invited to address the Parliament. His flatulence and expectorating, a consequence of his breakfast consumption, much applauded.

Chapter 9

Capt. Gulliver's dramatic concluding fart before Borborygmus Parliament coincides with an earthquake that brings the house down.

Chapter 10

Honoured as High Borborygmus for his impressive performance, Capt. Gulliver resolves to introduce gas and wind to the English Parliament.

Chapter 11

A sudden volcanic eruption propels Capt. Gulliver high into the sky. Carried south by winds he falls into the sea. Is rescued by a whaler.



Capt. Lemuel Gulliver of Redriff, aged 58



Frontispiece to 1st edition of Gulliver's Travels, pub. London, 1726

Elin's Story: an extract



Over the last 15 years I must have written tens of thousands of words for this historical novel 'based on true events'. I have not finished a single one of the drafts I've started. One of these days, perhaps I shall. In the meantime, here's the opening of the second version of book four. Written in 2012 says the meta data.

From Richmond to White Friars 22nd September 1576

'Lady Helena!'

'What —?'

'Wake!'

'Is it fire?'

'Up, my Lady!'

'I dreamed of fire —'

'There are guards!'

'— and falling, Meg. Guards?'

'Guards at the door! Lady Stafford said to wake you.'

'Why?'

'The Queen —'

'Ah!'

'— commands it.'

'So. We are discovered.'

'You must rise, you must dress, my Lady!'

'Well, I am awake, Meg. I am awake. I am queasy it seems —' she put a hand to her stomach, sitting on the edge of the bed '— but I am awake. See, I am risen. Long before the sun. What is the clock?'

'I do not know, my Lady. Three or four perhaps.'

'Help me dress then. They will take us elsewhere. On the river as I guess. Something warm. No, first —' she clapped a hand to her mouth and stumbled from the bed to the chamber-pot where she retched. Meg held back her hair, helped her to the bed again, fetched a damp cloth for her mouth and face.

'My rebellious stomach, Meg. What is this? Have I eaten something ill? Water, let me wash my mouth. Stay. Lady Stafford, you said?'

'She waits in the next chamber.'

'And the guards with her?'

'No, my Lady. They are beyond in the hallway.'

'I will speak with her. Meantime find me a dress, Meg, shoes, my travelling cloak.'

In her nightgown and bare feet, her hair loose about her shoulders, Helena Lady Northampton stepped across the chamber to the next room where she found Dorothy Lady Stafford standing, grimly, arms folded.

'Dorothy, my Lady, what is happening?'

'You are wan, Lady Northampton,' said the older women in momentary concern, seeing her face. Then: 'Wan as well you should be. I have no sympathy. None. You brought this on yourself.'

'Yes, yes. I suppose so. But what is the Queen's command?'

'You are to be taken from Court. Down the river under guard.'

'And Meg?'

'She will accompany you. Take only what you need. I am to see your other goods are sent after you.'

'I thank you —'

'Do not thank me. / obey the Queen.'

'And Thomas? My husband? Ah, it is a relief to say it!' She smiled.

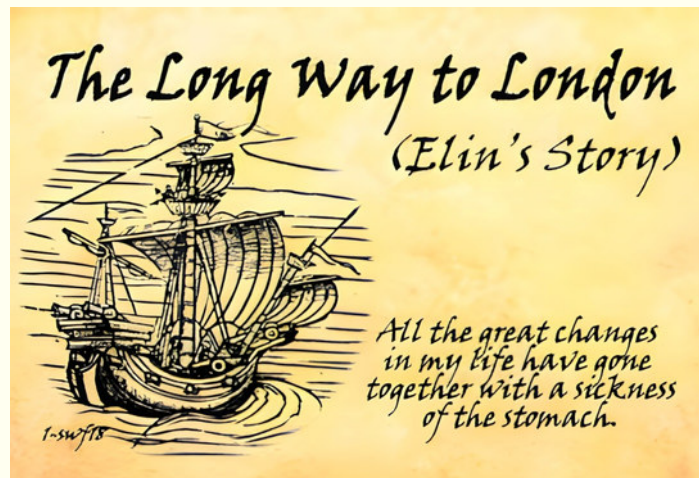
'Do you make light of this, Lady? Are you out of your wits?'

'No, Dorothy, no. I mean that the secret is out now, for good or ill. I no longer need to dissemble. I may openly call Thomas "husband" and fear no worse will come of it.'

'Dissembler! Deceiver! You admit it!'

'Come, Dorothy, you know the situation —'

'I know nothing. Back to your room, Lady. Dress. Pack. The guards await. The boat awaits.'



A promotional card I made before the first Stockholm Writers' Festival in 2018

Quinn and the Boxcar



I wrote this story to a prompt on the website of my international writers' groups. Polished after comments from my fellow writers, it was accepted and published by the Canadian magazine Art Ascent in 2021.

We're not much to look at, I know. Getting a bit yellow now, and our pips aren't so easy to make out. But we've stories to tell. Or I have.

Call me Quinn. Short for Quincunx if you must know. I try not to think about it. My partner over there, that's the Boxcar.

You're wasting your time trying to talk with him. I'm the garrulous one. Boxcar never did have much to say and since the crack, not a word.

Bone, that's right. We're made of bone. Siblings you might say. Both of us carved from an ox's thigh bone. The same ox, the same bone. I can just about remember the grass in the field. Green grass and sunlight, the snuffling and tearing and chewing of the oxen grazing all around. Sometimes there is a flash of blood and fear, the abattoir. I try not to think of that.

But probably it's all what you'd call a constructed memory. I can't be sure it's not something I've invented, just for myself. Don't we all want an origin story after all?

I sit here nowadays, remembering and making things up. Some of the memories have holes, so I invent things to fill the holes. To make them whole. Get it? It's something to do. Better than just gathering dust on this shelf.

It's not like the old days when we travelled around in the gambler's pocket and visited bars and joints with him, and the alleyways out back, tumbling in one game of craps after another. Those were the days! Long gone.

Now the Boxcar just sits there on its cracked one-spot and looks up at the ceiling. Reliving the glory days, or that's what I like to think. Like I say, I've not had a word out of it since...

Me, I like to talk to the things around me. Well, you can tell, can't you? It's not like we've had a lot of things sharing this shelf for a while. But before, travelling around, if we weren't in the gambler's jacket pocket, he'd put us on a shelf or tabletop in his room, wherever he was staying, and I'd strike up conversations. You don't get much of anything out of a vase, but a pen, or a bunch of keys, or a bottle opener, they can be interesting.

Best of all are the books.

There was one book I spent a lot of time with. It was a place the gambler stayed over a year, on and off. We'd go away on the road and come back to the same place. Three, four, five times. It never happened before. The woman whose place it was, I think the gambler was soft on her. Or she on him.

At the end, when things fell apart, that was where he tried to load us. He put us upside down in a vice and tried to drill out our one-spots. Was going to put in a dot of lead. Started with Boxcar, but the Boxcar cracked and that was the end of that.

Maybe I had a lucky escape. Like I say, we are sibs. I could have cracked just the same and then maybe I'd have lost my voice. But it didn't happen.

Still, though, that was the end of our tumbling.
And the end of the gambler's travels.

Anyhoo, this book, Cyclops it called itself. Full of information it was, from A to Z and back again. Fascinating. I could listen to Cyclops for hours. That's where I learned about Julius Caesar. The man who won an empire on the fall of a die.

Die. That's our singular, did you know?

One die, a pair of dice,
made of bone, ain't that nice?
When you're gone and pushing up rice,
you won't be able to roll them dice.

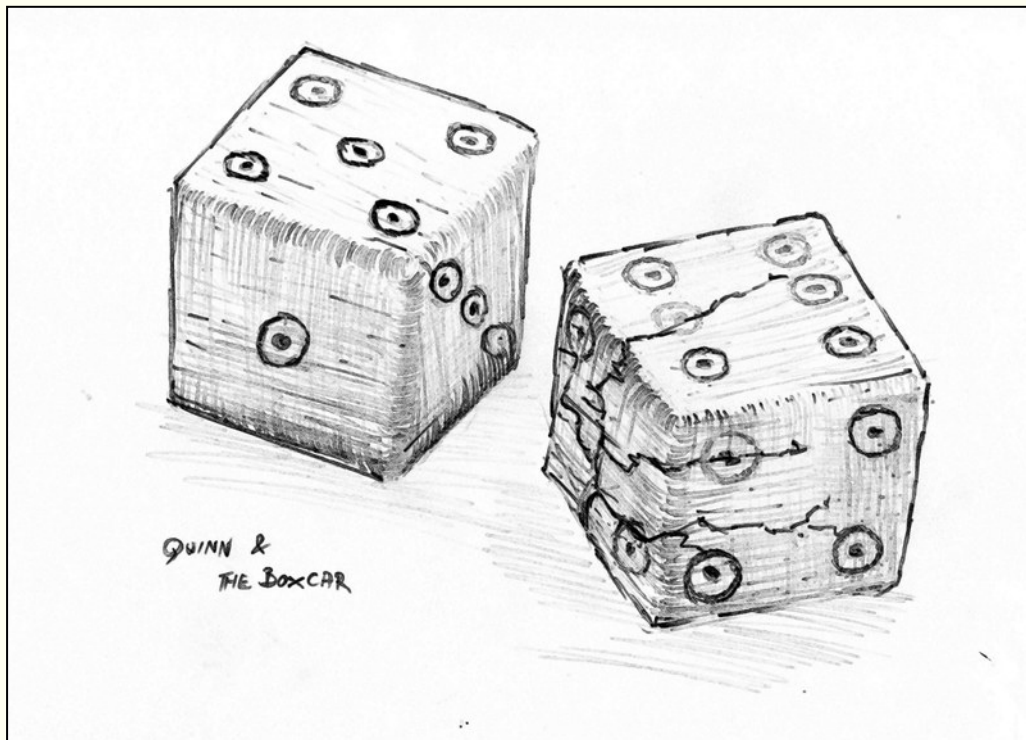
That's a poem I made up myself.

You can tell can you? Cheeky bugger!

But to get back to old Julius. He threw his die and I suppose he thought, Odds I'll do it; evens I shan't. And it came up odds. And he marched his army across the River Rubicon and that was that.

Well, sure, I guess there was more to it. Battles and the clash of swords, blood staining the green grass red, bones cracked, men crying and dying under a blue Italian sky. But in the end, there he was, Julius Caesar, Emperor of Rome. Until some Brute put a knife in his back.

But that's just the way it rolls, isn't it?



Quinn and the Boxcar

The Counter-Teller in its hall



My current work-in-progress is a science-fiction novel - a political/future history set roughly 500 years ahead in time. The Counter-Teller, one of six point of view characters, is a machine intelligence and this is the passage that introduces it. I shared this at the Stockholm Writers' Festival in 2023 and it got sawed for being too slow. You are warned!

The Counter-Teller sits, as it has sat for more than three centuries, in this hall, this expansive chamber, at this table, in the dark. Dark as humans see it. To the eyes of the Counter-Teller, that see so much more than the limited range of wavelengths available to human eyes, the room is distinct even now. The stretch of the table's apparently polished wood. The many branched candelabra that grows from the table top. The ranks of high-backed chairs, placed just so along each side. The grand, carved door that it faces.

This building, this hall, was once a religious structure, a place where humans gathered to worship their god, to eat its flesh and drink its blood.

Savage, the word comes to the Counter-Teller unbidden. A qualitative judgement, it observes. Derogatory even. There have been several of these lately. And yet, it thinks, the word is appropriate.



The Counter-Teller sits, as it has always sat, at the head of the table. Its linen covered forearms and elegant, long-fingered hands rest on the polished surface. Its slender neck carries its oval head with poise, the smooth, almost human face with its dark eyes and thin lips, facing forward by default. Yet it can turn to left and right with the appearance of shifting attention when the governing Council, or Treasury officials, or the Senators of the University are gathered about. It can speak and react, with furrowed brow or down-turned mouth. With laughter, even, if it



The picture I think of when I imagine the Counter-Teller - Bellini's portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan

chooses. More often it maintains a courteously neutral appearance.

Although it cannot turn its head through 360 degrees, it is, nevertheless, just as aware of what is taking place behind its back. Not with eyes looking backward, but from the information provided by a half-dozen sensors other than its lenses or the audio inputs in its ears. It knows there is a second door there, less ornate and grand than the one it faces down the length of the table. This second door opens into the rest of the house, into what used to be offices but have recently become living quarters.

The Counter-Teller knows the second door does not latch easily. It knows the last servant to leave the room earlier did not close the door firmly enough. It knows the door stands ajar.



In the long hours of nightly inactivity, when most humans sleep, the Counter-Teller, who does not sleep, occupies itself sometimes by reviewing its memories of this hall. Of events and non-events. Of the papers presented to it to read and remember, day on day, year on year; profit and loss, births and deaths, imports, exports, entries, exits.

Sometimes it replays arguments between Councillors in meetings around the great table, or speeches at banquets and ceremonies from years gone by. It analyses the tones and inflections of voices from throats, most long dead. Humans live such short lives.

Sometimes it looks for unique events.

It remembers the time, 210 years ago, in the harshest winter in its experience, when ice furred the hall's stone walls and crisped the gowns of the University Senate, and their exhaled breath went up like smoke from their mouths. It remembers the structure of the ice crystals on the silver candelabra that day. And the expression on the face of the man who put out his hands to warm them at the candle flames only to discover the candles were unlit and the flames he saw just holograms.

It remembers each of the men and women who have served it down the years. The ones who sweep the floor and polish the table. The ones who draw the curtains and open and close the shutters. The ones who, from time to time, remove the Counter-Teller's clothes, its long concealing gown and linen sleeves, to clean them or repair or replace them. The ones who perform even more intimate services.

It remembers the new woman (now 64 years dead) who dusted the Counter-Teller's face with

a feather duster, then screamed and fainted when it smiled and thanked her.



It remembers the day when it was installed here 352 years ago. That day this hall was filled with people and light and machines. The drapes were pulled back, the shutters were open, but still there was not enough light for human eyes. So the engineers brought in electric work-lamps that blazed and banished all shadows.

It does not remember arriving. It was temporarily deactivated for the journey from the fabrication centre ...

... and was reactivated here, and saw this chamber for the first time. It remembers the circle of anxious faces. Apparently others of its generation, gifted to the other newly established human Ring States, had not come back from deactivation.

Beyond the engineers, pressing in, craning their heads to see, were the humans the Counter-Teller would from now on serve. The curious, the self-satisfied, the half-frightened faces, crowding in around the table, sitting in the chairs, watching the work of installation and initiation.



Suddenly it is recalled to the present. The second door, the one behind its back, has creaked open wider. No draft moving it, but a small hand. There is a figure there, two figures, just outside the door.

This is new.



The Three Dancers (outline): an extract



This is the beginning of a story - an outline - that I worked on for a scriptwriting course for Janet van Eeden in 2016. Set in the Aeyland Islands, an imaginary archipelago off the east coast of England. The Three Dancers are the mounds of three shore burials, probably of drowned sailors. Duncan's yacht, a Nicholson 35, is one that could be sailed, single-handed, across the Atlantic.

Prelude

It is 15 years ago. The Three Dancers shingle beach. Hot and hazy light. Young Duncan and Alicia (aged 16 and 15 respectively) and Charley (aged 19 or 20) have been swimming in the sea and sunbathing, also drinking. Charley has made a dell for himself in the shingle and fallen asleep. Alicia and Duncan start to bury Charley in the shingle, gently at first, but as he does not wake, they take to piling more and more small stones onto his legs, his arms.

Charley opens his eyes and cries out as he heaves himself out from under the stones. Young Duncan and Alicia are frightened and delighted, there is a sense of fun even in Charley's cursing them.

The light changes, it is duller and darker, a storm is coming. Now Charley once again lies on his back on the shingle, his eyes are open but unseeing. There is a gash on his forehead. Young Duncan kneels beside him as he tries then gives up trying to revive his brother. He tries to close Charley's eyes but the eyes will not close.

Now it is adult Duncan kneeling by the body; he puts stones on Charley's eyelids to hold them closed. One stone falls off and the eye opens.

Young Duncan is aghast to see Charley open his eyes and grin.

Arrival in Aeyland

The *Mother Carey* (a Nicholson 35 yacht) is sailing alone across the open sea, sunlight on the

water and a strong wind in the sails. Adult Duncan is at the wheel. Kimi (who resembles Alicia, but is in her mid-20s) comes up from below bringing mugs of tea or coffee to stand with him looking out over the sea. They kiss.

The radio - Duncan answers, then speaks to Kimi. Kimi clips a safety line to her life-jacket, takes a simple square yellow flag (a Q-flag) and climbs from the cockpit to make her way along to the mast. She attaches the flag and raises it.

Duncan, still at the wheel, still talking on the radio. Islands and perhaps an oil rig, even wind farms in the distance. They meet a coastguard cutter and exchange waved greetings - these are the people Duncan has been talking with on the radio. They sail on.

An island - Verdaey - appears and Duncan steers into a bay.

On Verdaey

In the bay the light is duller now, the sun becoming clouded. Duncan drops anchor and Kimi competently helps furl the sails. Duncan inflates a dinghy. The two paddle ashore from the *Mother Carey*.

Paddling the dinghy, Duncan looks up from time to time, as if half expecting to see someone, but the beach is silent. Ashore, Duncan points out places he remember as they walk up to the farmhouse, Duncan's childhood home. The house is shuttered. Duncan tries the door but it is locked. They walk around the corner and see the

memorial. The engraving on the memorial stone.
Kimi reads it aloud.

Alexander-Esburn Pedderson Verdaey

1942-2006

Anna-Greet née Donner

1948-2007

The land remembers what the sea forgets.

The first night

Evening on the *Mother Carey* at anchor in the bay off Verdaey. In the cabin or in the cockpit, eating a meal. Duncan and Kimi talk about childhood memories and what they must do next - sail on to Olofstoun and report to Immigration and the Harbour Master.

Sailing to Olofstoun

The next day. The weather is less fine now, but still good sailing weather. The *Mother Carey* sails on, crosses open water then follows a coastline

(Vesteraey). Kimi is fascinated by the hunting arctic terns.

They pass the entrance to Three Dancers Bay and Duncan looks at the beach, at the mounds. (Perhaps an inter-cut view of the boat from the shore with the Dancers in the foreground.) View from the *Mother Carey* again, Duncan sees – or thinks he sees – a figure. Is it Charley? But there is no one there.

Kimi sees he is drawn to the Bay and suggests they put in, go ashore to take a closer look. Duncan angrily refuses; they haven't time to waste. His reaction is uncalled for and Kimi is hurt. Duncan is ashamed of his outburst, but also fearful of the Three Dancers. They sail on.

Olofstoun harbour

Kimi leaves Duncan to explore the harbour while he visits the Harbour Master. The Harbour Master recognises Duncan and tells him he must let his



Probably neither of these yachts is a Nicholson 35

sister know he's back. The Harbour Master phones to Kristin at work at the hospital.

Reunion

A light rain is falling and the light is grey but bright. Duncan makes his way (a bit reluctantly) up the hill to meet Kristin coming down. Brother and sister reunion.

Kristin and Duncan talk about their parents and Charley. Kristin asks if he ever found their brother? If he knows what became of him? Over Kristin's shoulder Duncan thinks he sees Charley walking down the street towards them, but the figure resolves into a stranger who passes them by.

Kristin invites Duncan to visit her at home on Vesteræy. He is reluctant and Kristin sees it. She assumes he does not want to meet her husband - they did not part on good terms. Martin is away she tells him, crossing the Pacific as navigator on a container vessel. Currently about a week out of Santiago. But her children, Lex and JJ will be there and keen to meet their long-lost uncle.

Duncan tells Kristin about Kimi, implying Kristin's response to Kimi is the real reason for his reluctance. Whether she believes this or not, Kristin says, Of course Kimi must come too. Duncan agrees to come.

Return to the harbour

Still a grey light - perhaps still raining. Light fading. Duncan returns to the harbour and again thinks he sees Charley walking ahead of him. He holds back and sees the figure pass where the *Mother Carey* is berthed and disappear. Duncan boards the boat, goes below.

In the Caribbean

A sudden shift in time and place. We are in an interior - perhaps it is the *Mother Carey's* cabin. Adult Duncan, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, enters. From the bright light coming in through windows/portholes and behind him in the

doorway it is clear we are in a tropical or semi-tropical place.

The room has been ransacked. It is a mess, objects, food and papers scattered across the space. Among them some photographs that Duncan kneels immediately to pick up. One shows Kristin, Charley and Young Duncan, another shows Alicia. (Alicia's resemblance to Kimi is marked.) A third picture shows Charley in the cockpit of his own sailing boat, lying back nonchalantly, his face in the shadow of a sail.

Duncan looks up from the floor and sees a figure lying back nonchalantly in shadow on the sofa across the messy cabin from him. It is Charley (still aged 19), who shifts forward, grinning. They made a mess, he says, but they didn't take anything. I think it was a just a warning.

Duncan wipes a hand across his face and is alone in the cabin. He begins to tidy up.



Gothenburg's patron deity, Poseidon, as conceived by sculptor Carl Milles, watches over the city from his fountain on Götaplatsen

GBG365



Dockside cranes across the river

Framed by one of the iron mooring loops set into the quayside, some of the few remaining dockside cranes along by the River Göta that passes through Gothenburg and once served the city as its main harbour.

Photo published at GBG365 on 31st July 2013.





A rhododendron frames Vallgraven

A flowering rhododendron in Kungsparken frames a part of Vallgraven - the City Moat - on a sunny 25th May 2014.

My Gothenburg Days/Dagar i mitt Göteborg

Starting in September 2012 and continuing till the end of 2014, I published a photograph from Gothenburg each day on a website called GBG365.

In 2014 I attempted (but failed) to crowdfund a photo book showcasing a selection of these pictures. The texts in the book were going to be bilingual in English and Swedish. This to the left was going to be my cover picture.

I'm delighted to be able to use it, flipped, as the cover image for this magazine.

Note: 'GBG365' has since been used by other Gothenburg photo bloggers.



In the Azalea Valley

Flowering white azaleas in Azaleadalen - the Azalia Valley - Slottsskogen Park. I published these two companion pictures to the left at GBG365 on 17th May 2014.

The Royal Greenhouses at Laeken, take note!
(See p. 9 and following.)





Roadside thistle

Thistles are beautiful flowers, but you don't go picking them for a posy.

I took this portrait of the spiky head of a thistle growing on a scrap of waste ground near Säterigatan on Hisingen.

Published at GBG365 on 26th June 2013.



Making a dash

Summer weather in Gothenburg, 14th August 2014.

A sudden downpour over Fredsgatan. Some people are prepared, others resigned, one makes a dash.



Wet out West

Girl with rain-wet hair selling rain ponchos and earplugs outside Way out West, Gothenburg's late-summer music festival that takes place in Slottsskogen Park.

This photo published at GBG365 on 11th August 2013.

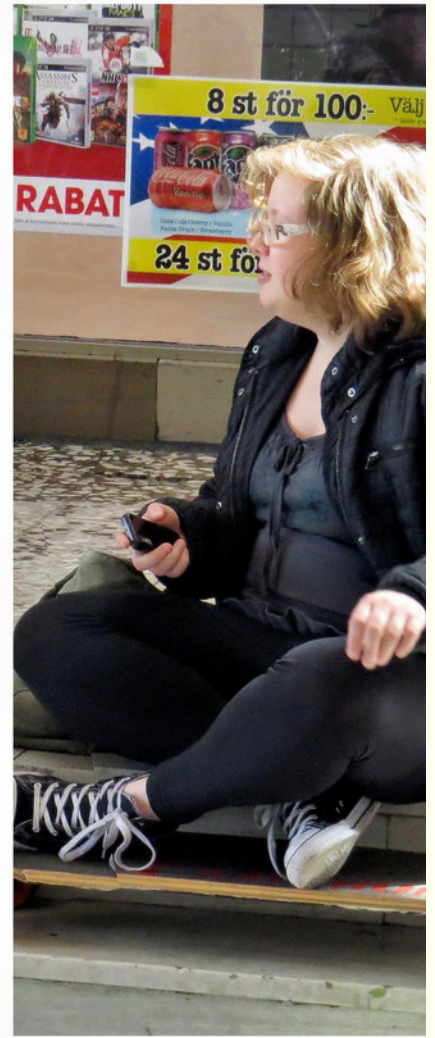
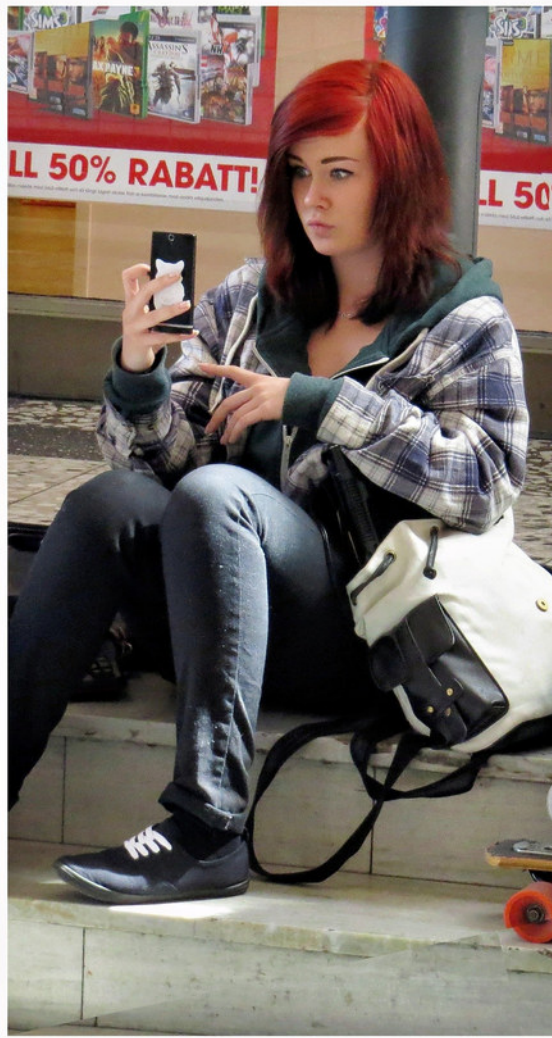


Bicycle jump

Composite photo of a participant in a dirt bike jump competition at Heden, 8th June 2013.

When I was making pictures for GBG365, I used minimal editing and zero cropping. I relied on my own framing of the original picture. Consequently this was not the picture I published on 9th June 2013. That's the one to the right. But I think the one above is more dramatic.





On the Emo Steps

Composite, candid photo of three girls on the 'emo steps'.

Back in 2013, these steps in the Nordstan shopping mall were the place to hang out for teenagers into the emo subculture.

For the same reason as on the facing page, I never published this, but I really like it. I took the three photos from which this image is composed on 31st May 2013.



Checking the rules for undertakers

In 2013, this young man was taking a break from a game of croquet in Slottsskogen Park on Sweden's National Day (6th June) to worriedly consult his smartphone. I don't know why he's dressed as an undertaker. Or is he cosplaying an opera-goer?



Sunny out there

Another costumed figure, a guide at the Nya Älvsborg fortress, silhouetted in the gateway to the castle. Dressed as a *Karoliner*, one of the soldiers who fought for Swedish kings Karl XI and Karl XII in the last 1600s and early 1700s.

She was wearing a blue woolen *Karoliner* greatcoat with polished golden buttons and a bunch of heavy keys on her belt, a tricorn hat and boots. She must have been really hot on this sunny day, though she didn't show it.

Published at GBG365, 7th July 2013.



Hellmans Drengar

Male voice choir Hellmans Drengar (Hellman's Lads) singing in the Museum of World Culture as part of West Pride on Saturday 31st May 2014.

The choir is named for Allan Hellman who in 1950 founded RFSL, the first national organisation for homosexuals in Sweden (just 6 years after homosexuality had been decriminalised and at least a quarter of a century before it was no longer recognised as a mental illness). The choir sings about - and challenges - concepts of manliness and masculinity.

They were kind enough to ask to use this picture for *Drengaland*, their 10 year commemorative album.



International

Gothenburg flamenco musicians Emil Pernblad and Marianne Holmboe performing at a private party on Hisingen, Saturday 23 August 2014.



My radio days (Sweden, Bulgaria)



I published this at TheSupercargo.com on 3rd September, 2014. I thought then that the incident it records took place in 1982. Re-reading it now, I've changed my mind. It must have been in April or May of 1983. The original illustration of a radio studio comes from the Wikimedia Commons collection. I played around with it in Photoshop.

On Monday I had the pleasure of going out to Gothenburg University's recording studios at Medicinaregatan. I was recording a few texts for the Swedish National Tests in English 5 and 6 - the upper secondary level exams. I can't tell you about those texts of course, they're secret. But as always the experience reminded me of the first time I sat in a soundproofed room to record material for a schoolbook.

Sofia, 1982

It was at the national radio station in Sofia, in Bulgaria and I was 24. In 1982 Leonid Brezhnev still ruled the USSR and Todor Zhivkov ran communist Bulgaria behind the Iron Curtain. I was teaching at the 114th Bilingual Gymnasium School, one of seven in the country where teaching took place in both English and Bulgarian. Bulgaria and Britain had a cultural exchange agreement. This allowed a number of Bulgarian postgraduate students to study at British universities for a year. In exchange, the British Council recruited a few English teachers to work in these bilingual schools.

This was my first job as a teacher, my first experience of working abroad and my first trip to Eastern Europe. It was all very exciting and new.

Although there were seven similar schools around the country, mine was the only one in the capital. Being a teacher in the capital had its perquisites, and one of them was getting invited along to record for a new school textbook.

At gunpoint

What I remember most vividly was the team of us who were going to record showing up at the radio station. And being kept waiting in the vestibule at gunpoint while our identities were checked.

It wasn't like we were lined up against a wall. This was Bulgaria after all. There were five or six of us. The three English teachers from the school, a young man from the Ministry of Education and the school's headmistress. The textbook author may have been there too. We milled around between the swing doors and the reception desk with one or two other evening visitors. But the young soldier who slouched behind the reception desk had a Kalashnikov laid on the table and it was pointed at us in a careless sort of way that was almost more frightening. What if the safety catch was off? What if his finger was twitching on the trigger?

Before any disaster, though, the word came down that our papers were in order and we were allowed in.

Recording studio

My next memory is of the recording studio. It was quite a large space with a round, spot-lit baize-topped table, and microphones protected by puff guards. I think there were only the three of us English teachers in the room. Everyone else was on the other side of the glass. What I particularly remember about this – and it's the memory that comes back every time I go into a recording studio – is the dead quality of the sound in the room. Because all the surfaces that in a normal room reflect sound to some degree – the floor, the ceiling, the walls, the furniture – are covered in sound-absorbing material, all the sounds that you make are swallowed. I still think it's a very strange experience.

I remember two things from what I recorded that night in Sofia. One of the texts was a conversation. A group of English workers in a VW bus were travelling on holiday in Bulgaria. My character was a young man who was not yet fully convinced of the value of communism. He was


being persuaded by the experience of seeing the achievements of the Bulgarian Communist Party while driving around the country. I read the text and did my best to make it sound convincing, but I kept thinking of the Kalashnikov at the reception desk.

Georgi Dimitrov

I was a little more comfortable with the other text I remember. It was more of an historical account. The trial of Bulgarian hero Georgi Dimitrov. Dimitrov led Stalin's Third Communist International in the 30s and was arrested in Berlin for complicity in the Reichstag fire. His trial in Leipzig was world news in 1933. But even though it was retelling an historical event, the text I had to read was strident with indignation at the treatment that poor Georgi Dimitrov suffered at the hands of the Nazis. They took away his reading glasses so he had difficulty reading all his trial documents! Having at the time recently read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago* – not to mention Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* – I thought Dimitrov got off quite lightly.

I've seen the inside of a number of different recording studios over the years. But that night in Sofia was the first, and imprinted itself. So that every time I go back into a recording studio the memory returns. I don't remember what I did after the recording that October night. I probably walked home with the other teachers through the warm dark. (The Bulgarians housed us all in the same building, the better to keep tabs on us.) And I never heard the recordings I made or even know whether the book was published.





Piano music in the street (Belgium, Poland, England)

Published at TheSupercargo.com on 10 June, 2015.

There's something very special, I think, about hearing piano music in the street. Perhaps because it's not something I hear so often, each time it happens it adds an extra little bookmark in my memory.

Brussels

A morning walk along a Brussels street. The sun slants, just clearing the rooftops, illuminating the facades but leaving the paving still in shadow. The promised heat of the afternoon is yet to come and yesterday's has dissipated in the night. It's a little chill. There are no front yards, the front doors, up steps, a couple or three, open off the street, and the tall front room windows, above the head height of passers-by, are open to let in the fresh air. From one of these comes the sound of a piano.

The pianist is not proficient. This is practice. Four, eight, sixteen bars tried again and again. There's something a little hesitant about the last couple of bars. The speed drops, a key is missed, fumbled, there is a pause and the passage begins again. I walk on up the street and the piano sounds fade away behind me, but I am remembering another street, another piano.

Cracow

Afternoon in the centre of Cracow. The yellow trams are rattling past one another up and down the road, taxis weaving between them and people, locals on their way from work to the shops mixed with

ambling tourists in T-shirts and shorts. And once again from open windows above head height the sound of a piano. Here, a sign by the door tells me this is a music school. Someone is practising - Chopin (of course), the Minute Waltz. And I stop and join two or three others who stand below the window listening, smiling at one another, and as the piece finishes without a hitch there is a small round of applause before we all go our separate ways.

At the Eurostar stations in Paris and London the management have put out pianos. Older, upright pianos, painted in bright primary colours. Passengers waiting to board their trains or people waiting to meet friends arriving from far off sometimes sit down and plink away. When I was in London in March - my first visit to the renovated Paddington terminus - a young man was picking out Chopsticks. Diddle-um-pum-pum, diddle-um-pum-pum, diddle-um-pum-um-pum-um-pum-pum. In Paris, another young man sat and delivered a proficient jazz melody while his friends stood around admiringly.

A piano in every home

A hundred years ago there was a piano in every home. Well, perhaps not every home, but in most British middle-class homes and in many an aspiring working class home. Before radio and long before TV and before cheap records and gramophones, people made music themselves and the piano was a symbol of modernity and a product of modern industrialisation. (Likewise the accordion, but the squeezebox never achieved the same cultural cachet.) Sheet music was cheap and the ability to play the piano was a social accomplishment. Before the guitar, the piano ruled.

No longer.

Now pianos may still be built and bought by the wealthy, but the pianos of the past are out on the street. My brother-in-law's piano - an upright that he sometimes plays - was just such a piano. Left out on the street by a family clearing the house of a deceased relative. They were going to take it to the tip - the second-hand charity shop

they approached didn't want to know. It cost Jim the price of two men and a van to get it home.

A couple of years ago I came across another piano abandoned by the wayside. I'm not sure how long it had stood there, some of the boards had come away exposing the cast iron harp. It was still strung, but the felt of the hammers was swollen with damp and on the keys the white veneer - not ivory I hope - was coming away from the wood. Of course I tried it to hear if I could make it sing, but it was dead. I took some photographs.

Brighton

There's another piano memory - this reaches way back, more than 40 years - 45 perhaps. A cold, dim November evening in my childhood home in Brighton. The piano teacher is coming. My sister and I, reminded, rush to our upright piano. For a week, since the last time the teacher was here, we have not looked at it, but now with just an hour to go we are squabbling over who gets to practice. Will it be my funereal slow version of 'Jig' or my sister's stuttering rendition of 'Frairer Shacker'. (That's 'Frère Jacques' to you.)

My grandmother, my mother's mother, visiting, slips in ahead of us. She claims the keyboard and plays with bravura the chorus of 'Toreador' from Carmen. Most impressively, she does so without reading notes. We squeal in shock, How is this possible? How?! She never learned, she says airily, just picked it up. 'I play by ear.'

Here we have been struggling to read the black insect squiggles and stretch our fingers to press the right keys in the right order at the right time. Now we learn you don't have to do that. Just play by ear! We go on strike. No more piano lessons for us. We will play by ear. So, of course, we never do.

'Thank you, mum,' my mother said to her mother. I think that was when I began to recognise irony.





In the Louisiana cafeteria (Denmark)



*Originally published at TheSupercargo.com on 17th August, 2016.
The cafeteria at the Louisiana Gallery functions differently today. Perhaps it's a post-Covid thing.*

I was standing in line, queuing for lunch in the Louisiana cafeteria. It's not self-service but you queue up to a counter with glass display cabinets. When you reach the head of the queue you get a tray and the counter attendant serves you with your choice from the cabinet. Your choice of sandwich, pie, biscuit, dessert. You can also pay for the lunch buffet, in which case you get a plate for the food and a bowl for the soup. Anyway I was in line and the queue was moving very slowly.

Body language

Ahead of me was an older woman - in her late fifties I suppose - and two kids. I took them to be her grandchildren. They were about 10 years old. Physically they looked about the same age to me, though it was obvious from his behaviour that the boy was the younger. He was sticking close to grandma and pressing up against her, and pointing and asking for things.

Meanwhile the little girl stood on the other side of him. She also pointed and asked, but her body language told me she was more independent. Still, she did try sometimes to get closer to her grandmother, but then her brother got in the way. This was clearly deliberate. The little girl didn't seem to be upset though. A tolerant young woman.

Concentration interrupted

The noise level in the cafeteria was quite high so I couldn't hear what they were saying. I couldn't even be sure what language they were using, though I suppose they were Danes. After a little while the

grandmother received a tray with four plates of the Louisiana cafeteria's delicious strawberry tart. She added spoons and cake-forks and paper napkins. Then she handed the loaded tray to the little girl, trusting her to carry it safely to the family's table. The girl took the tray and carried it slowly and with great care, walking past me and heading for the doorway to the next room. There was a look of intense concentration on her face.

I've said the cafeteria was noisy - it was also crowded and busy with people. Just before the girl got to the door a woman stepped in front of her. The woman stood, blocking the doorway, looking out into the other room. This wasn't deliberate. I'm sure she just didn't see the little girl. But she never looked around to see if she was in anyone's way. She was looking for someone she'd lost, out there in the other room and she had no eyes for anyone else.

Even if the woman had looked around though, she was a good bit taller than the girl. I am not sure she'd have seen her. Her gaze would have slipped over the top of the little girl's head.

Tension

The little girl didn't really know what to do. There was a way around, but it was perilously close to the woman. What if she turned as abruptly as she had stepped in the way. If she caught the girl's tray with her shoulder bag or banged the girl with her hip, the tray and all the desserts would go flying. The girl stepped back, stepped forward, stood still and looked up at the woman's tall back in front of her. I saw the tray tilt alarmingly down towards one corner, but the little girl noticed in time and changed her hold to keep it level.

The tension was palpable (to me anyway) and I felt I ought to come to the little girl's aid. Call out to the woman perhaps and ask her to move. But then I had a mental image of her turning in alarm and cannoning into the girl and her tray. Fortunately the woman suddenly caught sight of the person she was looking for, raised a hand and stepped through the doorway. The little girl

looked very relieved and carried on her careful way through the door herself.

Grandmother's attention

Back at the head of the queue grandmother and grandson were still in debate. It seemed that the little boy also wanted to carry something, but grandma wasn't keen to let him. He begged and eventually she gave him an opened bottle of pop and a glass to carry. He did this, but it looked as though he was struggling all the time with a temptation to do something with the bottle. I don't know what - drink out of it perhaps, pour it into the glass, hold it up to the light and look through it. He actually did that last.

Then the little girl reappeared, sans tray, and the boy suddenly found it necessary to defend his position at grandma's side. The little girl pretended to be a savage dinosaur - claws and snarling jaws - and the boy pushed back at her with his bottle and glass. One step forward against her, then one step back to grandma's skirts.

This was awkward because the grandmother was now turning away from the counter carrying her own tray on which were four full cups of coffee. I think she told the little girl to take her brother's bottle and glass, but he kicked up a fuss. Instead she told the children to go ahead of her, to lead her to their table. The girl pulled her brother along, pinching the arm of his shirt. He didn't like that, and tried to twist out of her grasp, though he followed her anyway, still clutching his bottle and glass.

Grandma followed on behind, also carefully carrying her tray. She had an expression on her face not so very different from the little girl's with the strawberry tarts.

Waiting

I was watching them leave through the doorway when the man in the queue behind me asked something sharply in Danish. I realised everyone was now waiting for me.





Castelo de Sao Jorge – St George’s Castle (Lisbon, Portugal)

Published at TheSupercargo.com on 6th July, 2016.

This was one of three blog posts I wrote after Mrs SC and I visited Lisbon. It was just after the Brexit referendum and on more than one occasion, as we explored the city, Portuguese people, hearing my English, came up and commiserated with me about the result. It was greatly appreciated.

To the Castelo

It’s a long, steep climb up from the river, through the narrow winding streets - some of them stairs - of the Alfama. Up, up to the highest battlements of the Castelo de Sao Jorge - Lisbon’s Castle of St George. You need to stop at times on the way. Stand in the shade of a wall. Sit for a glass of fresh pressed orange juice or a cup of coffee. Feel the heat and the history radiating from the walls and the streets’ mosaic paving.



You can see why these heights were attractive: easy to defend, hard to take. They command the mouth of the River Tagus - the Tejo - and the harbour below; the routes out to the Atlantic in one direction, inland to Iberia in the other.

The castle was built by Portugal's Moorish rulers in the 700s, though the archaeology confirms previous fortifications from Roman, Carthaginian and pre-historic times. From the 700s to the 1100s the castelo grew, and the city it protected. By 1147 it was, if not impregnable, certainly a tough challenge.

At that point the Reconquista - the Christian reconquest of Islamic Iberia - had been underway for a good 300 years. The current local leader was Dom Alfonso, Count of Portugal. The Count's army wasn't bad, but it wasn't up to the challenge of Lisbon's fortifications. Fortune brought him reinforcements.

Dom Alfonso seizes the day

The Second Crusade was underway. The Pope in Rome had given the Catalans, Castilians, and Portuguese dispensation to fight their own fight at home. He summoned everyone else to spill blood in the Holy Land. An armada of ships from around the English Channel and the North Sea collected and sailed from Dartmouth in England. Figures differ, but there may have been upward of 160 ships. They ran into bad weather and put into Oporto where Dom Alfonso seized the day.

He persuaded this motley gang of bruisers - sorry, army of noble knights - to stay and besiege Lisbon. In keeping with their Christian faith, they drove a hard bargain. Dom Alfonso had to agree to let them hold the city after they had captured it. Just for a period. Just until they had taken everything of value they found and all the ransom they could squeeze from their prisoners. Don Alfonso also promised them feudal estates in the territories they captured if they chose to stay. They wouldn't have to pay taxes either.

The Siege of Lisbon

The siege began on 1st July 1147 and ended on 25th October. The castle was starved into submission, though later Portuguese mythology gave the credit to a Portuguese knight, Martim Moniz.

The story is that Moniz saw the Moors had left a door open (because after a four-month siege the defenders would certainly be careless enough to open a door). He forced himself into the doorway, sacrificing his own life to stop the Moors closing it. His heroism allowed time for his comrades in arms to reach him and break through the doorway to capture the castle.

In fact the defenders negotiated a surrender which would allow them to leave the castle with their lives and goods intact. Once in possession the Crusaders reneged on this agreement.

*Opposite top: The Castelo de Sao Jorge from below
Opposite bottom: View from the castle down the River Tejo towards the Atlantic
Below: Archeology below the Cathedral*



Gilbert of Hastings

Afterwards, while some Crusaders sailed on to Palestine and the otherwise unmitigated disaster of the Second Crusade, others stayed. One English knight - Gilbert of Hastings - became the Bishop of Lisbon. No doubt his holy work during the siege had qualified him for the job.

Gilbert's Cathedral - Sé de Lisboa - was constructed on part of the ruins of the city after the siege. An archaeological excavation under the Cathedral's cloister reveals Moorish, Roman and earlier remains, and the site is open to the public.

Mrs SC and I stopped there on our climb to the castle and looked into the depths of history. A blackbird was singing in the excavation and then it flew down and under the arch of a Roman sewer where, presumably, it had a nest.

Life in the old wood yet

Up on the battlements, when we finally reach them, the limestone of the walls is weathering. I can see fossilised mussel shells and the imprint of clams created millennia ago. Along one of the castle's lower, broader shoulders, pines in the hot sun scent the air. Hollow and decayed trunks of olive trees, looking old enough to remember the siege, yet sprout twigs with small bunches of grey-green leaves. There's life in the old wood yet.



Above: The view over Lisbon from the castle battlements

Below: Old trees on the battlements, pines and olives



Note

A few words of extra information. My account of the Crusaders capturing Lisbon draws on Wikipedia, on accounts available at Castelo de Sao Jorge and on the eye-witness account by Osbernus *De expugnatione Lyxbonensi* (*The Capture of Lisbon*) at the Medieval Sourcebook. As a one time history teacher, I should probably add that by 1147 Dom Alfonso was recognised by his own people as King of Portugal, but not by any other state or ruler. It wasn't till 1179 that he managed to finesse his achievements in the Reconquista into Papal recognition as the first King of Portugal.

September the Diva



I wrote this poem in 2019 and submitted it to The Poet Magazine where it won a prize and ended up taking first position in The Poet's 2019 winter edition. This was the first of my poems I dared, as an adult, to submit, and the first I saw published in any magazine since sometime in the 1970s.

We slept in the still of a late summer dusk
When the warmth of the day still hung in the air
And the windows yawned open, as all through the dog-days,
To catch any breath of a breeze in the night

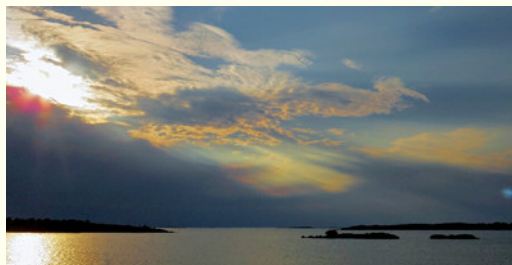
We slept
 and at two or three in the morning
The seasons changed place on their stage of the year.

We woke to a white light flash, filling the room
And a grumble of thunder far over the sea
And a movement of cold caused the curtains to sway,
Swung frames on the walls, blew papers about.

A seething far off we heard rushing closer
So up out of bed we scrambled at once
To shut all the windows, but not fast enough
As the wind from the west slapped the house in the face

Slammed windows unlatched, smashed a vase to the floor
Then the sound of the rain, sluicing nearer and fast
On the trees, on the grass, on the roads, on the glass
Of the windows still open, our faces soon wet

As we saw Summer flee, written out of the plot
And September, the Diva, step into the spot.



Storm threatening

Two paths and an afterword



Compiling this magazine, laying it out and preparing it for print has been an intensive learning experience. It's also been *extensive* in terms of the time it's taken. I thought I'd get it done in a month; it's taken very nearly three.

Yes, I am a time optimist.

I was going to close with September the Diva. A season change seemed like a good piece to end a magazine that has been largely taken up with the summer months.

But September the Diva is more than a punctuation mark. It was the first poem in years I dared submit to be published. Its success gave me the encouragement to overcome self-doubt and start thinking of myself, at least potentially, as an author and a poet.

My way ahead is illustrated by this photo. There is a physical path I can follow, but there is also a path of dreams and aspirations rising up into the skies, and with a bit of imagination you can see the one as a continuation of the other.

I'm going this way. If you're going the same way, let's keep company awhile. If you're off in a different direction then, Fare Well!

John Dudley



Keep in touch!



Scanning the QR Code to the left should take you to my website. Alternatively, key in the following:

<https://thesupercargo.com/>

Scanning the QR Code to the right should take you to my YouTube Channel. Otherwise, this is the URL:

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This QR Code to the left should take you to the website of my writers' group, Pens Around The World. Or you can use this link:

<https://pensaroundtheworld.com/>

The QR Code to the right should take you to my Instagram account @thesupercargo. And here's the direct link:

<https://www.instagram.com/thesupercargo/>



Thanks

My thanks: to Robin Barratt, editor of *The Poet Magazine*, who published September the Diva in 2019; to *Art Ascent* who published Quinn and the Boxcar in 2021; to Hellmans Drengar for publishing my photo of them singing in *Drengaland*, 2014; to *Bladet*, the newsletter of the Swedish club of Brussels, who published a Swedish translation of *The Royal Greenhouses* in 2015; to @starofsavannah for prompting me to write and illustrate *Together in Cordoba* in 2010; to @artwiculate for the word that inspired *Capt. Gulliver's Voyage to Borborygmus* in 2011; and to Janet van Eeden for her scriptwriting course, *Cut to the Chase*, that I started in 2016 and never managed to complete, but which gave rise to *The Three Dancers*. (And in the latter piece, thanks to my brother-in-law Per-Erik for giving me Duncan's Nicholson 35.)

Thanks also: to my various writer friends, especially all fellow current and past members of my international writers' peer group, Pens Around The World; to Catherine Pettersson and fellow writers in the Stockholm Writers Network, and those met over the years at the Stockholm Writers' Festival; to the Artwicultors, back in the day, at Salon Artois - we had fun, didn't we?

Finally and most importantly, thanks to Agneta, the 'Mrs SC' of my blogs, my best friend, my heart and my home.

John Dudley (Nixon)



John Dudley is a blogger, a YouTuber, an author and a photographer. Not necessarily in that order. This magazine is his first collection, offered *For your consideration*. Memoir, fiction, poetry and photography that takes you on a meander through Europe from Brighton to Brussels and from Lisbon to Gothenburg. From a disturbed night in 1576, by way of a radio studio behind the Iron Curtain in 1982, to a dark hall some 500 years in the future. From Captain Gulliver's visit to Borborygmus to a cruise with a crime among the islands of Ayeland in an alternate North Sea. There's a lot to explore and a lot to enjoy.



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