

Five tableaux

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Let me paint you a picture: An abandoned breakfast on the patio. A house sparrow is investigating.

- You know the important thing (what caused the interruption) isn't actually shown in the picture.
- The action and possibilities are in your imagination.

This could be a bit more exciting than some paintings.

What if I add a cat flap to the kitchen door? Now there is another imaginary story thread concerning a sparrow's terminally interrupted breakfast. But that's not all: This opens a gateway to another garden of communication and contemplation between artist and audience.

If I have seeded the scene with one cat's ghostly paw print then perhaps I've planted some other suggestive tracks. Do the edges of those fanned letters lying in the shadow of the milk jug counterpoise the sundial and its radials in the same way as the sparrow relates to the cat flap? Now you're interested in details you can consider what sort of person would have a garden like this... ...And when looking again you've just seen the gnat vibrating the coffee spilled in the saucer...

The crying man

The crying man sits alone on the hillside overlooking the bracken and furze covered sides of the vale of Avon. He is oblivious to the elements, which today are April clouds chasing their shadows up and across the opposite side of the valley. His rough brown-grey features stand out against the shivering gorse in the clear, shallow, shifty April afternoon sunlight.

We don't know why the Crying Man is here. Nobody saw him arrive.

He does not speak except silently.

The space in front of him is empty. Rabbit-shorn grass, an adder's summer sunbath, with the odd tuft of rushes and stony outcrop. What do the rabbits and snakes care about the crying man? Stone-still he looks out over farms and woods and roads and homes and the village in the crook of the river bend below.

Are we afraid of the crying man? Of course not... ..but we might hesitate a while before continuing our hike. There are few sanctuaries or excuses for avoiding the obvious out here on the open hillside. Why is he crying? Local gossip has it that his daughters were taken away: Some say by the Romans, some say by the fairies as payment for a crooked promise, some will tell you patchwork legends where he banished his daughters only to be tormented later by a guilty conscience.

The crying man is a solitary standing stone with a bit of boggy ground at his base. At first it is a bit difficult to see a lump of stone as a man, but there is no doubting that this is a good place to come for a blink, a cry, a sob and a deep breath of 'no more just now'. There is no particular sense of sorrow about the place, after all it is just another scrape on another moorland hillside, but there's a sighing solitude sprinkled with unobtrusive pleasantries suited to melancholy and empty reflection. This is where the quicksand of the past traps future hopes.

Along the track from around the shoulder of the hill comes a solitary silhouette which develops into a man in middle age making his steady way towards the stone. The open spaces of valleys, hills and heaths are bigger than you think, but shortly he arrives at the Crying Man. A cloud shadow shoots across the grass as a reminder of the pressure of time. Our man makes a tiny nest between the gorse clumps close the ancient stone - a pagan symbol ... and private landmark. Our man doesn't cry, he has been trained not to. Our man is not overwhelmed by sadness, he has seen enough to accept it. Our man knows that all the answers to his questions are guesswork and illusions. Our man is praying. The odd spot of rain appears on the crying man. April's stony wind denies any promise of spring.

Our man also feels a spot of rain and takes the hint. After some struggling with a knife and some sharp reminders of the glove-piercing thornyness of gorse he cuts half a dozen spiky branches in bright yellow bloom. After a few minutes and lots of painful learning and checking with the Crying Man he has a ring about two foot in diameter. By a miracle the wreath lands as a crown on the monolith's head at the first throw. The April clouds do what April clouds do. Our man with bloody scratched hands sets off home, wrapped-up against the elements and warmed inside with emotion. The Crying man will be here tomorrow.

The raven

Ravens can see into the future and over the horizon - Not in a Gipsy-rose-lee sort of way of 'this will happen', more a 'this has happened already'. It's a bit like saying "The bus will depart at three-thirty tomorrow and you could be on it" - That bus is going regardless. Some of the younger ones are light-headed Teddy-boy types who will cheerfully spit into the wind for 'good luck', but it is a tradition that a raven is a reasonably trustworthy servant so long as the master isn't easily distracted. If a raven doesn't respect you then ravenish comedy is bound to follow.

In the nineteen-sixties and early seventies of acid, dope and communes, some went round the world in a bus, some took the overland Hippie Trail to India, some chilled-out in sunny California, and some found themselves on a Welsh hill farm. In Wales the gumboot and Mackintosh beat the moccasin and kaftan every time. Back in those days it was perfectly acceptable (for 'acceptable' read 'necessary') to accept hot baths and European wine from one's friends who were married, in permanent jobs and looking forward to when the children would be off to school. They were a wonderful bunch - the folk who put their 1960's university education into practice.

Nobody's grass was greener than that at "Brân farm". Now the residents called it "Launchpad" and the locals called it "the hippie place". A raven would point out straight away that humans can't live on grass no matter how green. Technically they might be wrong: Wheat, barley and oats are grasses - but arguing this point on an empty stomach is a miserable game best left to somebody else. The undercurrent of all colonies is survival - and the short-circuit is compromise. Fortunately amongst the mixed up escapees and explorers were some competent and sought-after craftsmen and women who could sell their fabrics, paintings, design, metal working and alternative technology skills. Even so, making an art out of scraping a living can still be desperate poverty of the sort that rations cups of tea or replaces coffee with berries. Still - if you get enough vegetables then home made wine and the occasional smoke fills the gaps. Rationed light and heat breeds stories. Shadows and smells and coarse fabrics add to the texture of their telling.

Everyone is an individual. Seedlings and shoots - waiting to mature and bloom, seeking the sunshine and trying out new roots, and if everything works out - bursting into a gorgeous flower. So far the commune is more a place to be than a proper family. More an open clearing in the forest with some light than a cosy nest. Men and women in their respective clans with grubby wide-eyed children as dedicated observers. (Dear reader, you may not have even been born at the time, but you'll probably have twigged that the most useful thing any member of the commune could do to improve the conditions would be to leave. It is rather frightening how easily we let our horizons shrink to survival dimensions.) Responsibility in the commune operates as the male 'punch and kick for a short while' and the female 'close eyes to the negative and get on with the necessary'. If you're a bloke then being sent out to kill a sheep is the limit of your horizon for a couple of hours, before returning to tinkering with invention and construction. If you're a girl then thousands of years of earth-mothering, child rearing and picking up the pieces are your lot. Being primitive is really easy - anybody can do it...

... Except two Welsh hillsides either side of a stream will only feed a flock of sheep... ...But humans, specifically Man, doesn't rely on animals or crops - he can harness the energy all around: Windmills look energetic while well-fed Welsh waterwheels have muscles that take a long time to tire. Even so, mills don't feed and clothe a community who need certain modern luxuries such as freedom from personal vermin, books, light bulbs, motorised transport and tuition fees. The community keeps itself afloat by selling craft goods and paintings.

The premier artist, Keith, has the appearance of an always-hungry lanky youth but moves into each new scene like an old man - Slowly double-checking everything with his eyes. Demanding time to be allowed to catch-up, yet with that searching quick gaze that betrays a sharp mind. As some people have dark sides of their family they don't speak of, so Keith often vanishes to somewhere in London. Most of his paintings have a strong scent of anger - these sell really well - especially where the canvas has been physically slashed and variously repaired. His more tranquil works, some of which are apparently lustrous representations of placid summer in the countryside are pitcher plants... ...Deliciously beautiful until you're trapped inside.

Nobody really knows how close to get to Keith's knife-throwing act. Nobody can call a man who can see into the spaces of your mind you didn't know you had completely harmless. A raven may throw its clucky chortle at you by way of being sociable, but Keith's interaction with the community was more of the 'bringer of tidings' sort which leave more questions than answers.

Bradly is an escapee from the army for political reasons. He has quickly built up a decent business as a general engineer, hack architect and general constructor. If you want welding done, or pipes laying or barn doors rebuilding or turning a couple of labourer's cottages into a holiday home then "call Bradly". The trouble for him is that hippie communities are not very good at operating as a small jobbing engineers.

Both Bradly and Keith, the beavering optimist and the opportunist pessimist, feel the stagnation. In the river of life there are currentless side branches, lay-bys, backwaters with layers of curling grey-brown alder leaves quietly rotting into ooze. Every sort of discarded object from common wheels, paint tins, mattress springs and bottles to the exotic gas-meter and car door is attracted from nobody knows where. A home to sun-loving insects, clockwork butterflies and black moorhens scooting amongst the shadows. No matter how delightful the careless backwaters are, everyone knows how close the horizon is, how simple existence is and that there are other excitements out in the main stream. One day the busy duckling will grow up and disappear to another continent. One day the ugly dragonfly nymph will climb out of the water then hunt along the river. Should Bradly and Keith do something to turn this dead-end creek into a bustling harbour or should they leave this placid backwater as it is and leave themselves?

After 'talking to the ravens' (there aren't pubs to loosen the brain cells and a reefer is just a dream projector) Bradly addresses the meeting: "I should like to propose that we build an arch. A gateway. It would symbolise the freedom and escape from the selfish capitalist society where success is defined by advertisements for cars and lipstick. Here our work gives us satisfaction and comradeship. Helping people is what matters to us, not having the latest model Vauxhall or some mass-produced gimmick from the Kings road in Chelsea." In the discussion that followed, which was mostly abstract ideas about the decorative details rather than the substance, Keith chipped-in and settled the matter in a rather unsettling way: "Good idea Bradly. I would definitely like to help. Work does give us freedom. Perhaps something like that should be written over the archway. Death is the only true freedom; but until then let us look for opportunities to improve, progress and flower."

From that moment both Bradly and Keith realised a gateway, no matter how well-meant, contained danger to the point of death. Bradly saw the image of Keith dangling from a rope slung over the arch. Keith knew a symbolic arch would suck people in with inevitable ceremony, obligatory acceptance or savage rejection. Inanimate but hungry and irresistible.

Thirty years later Bradly and Keith are still good friends. Now they look back on their days in the commune with the knowledge that you only know what school is all about when you've left it. Bradly has built gateway features for clients. All have built-in seats for contemplation but none has a structural arch. Keith added the gateway icon to his repertoire to great acclaim. Powerful forces, contrasting atmospheres or rotten mirrors serve to charge such 'gateways' with uncertainty and malice. A view beyond, an invitation that might be a trap. Early on they agreed that Bradly would stick to mildly inspiring constructions and Keith will never ever paint two sides of the same gateway. There are some things that are too fierce for ordinary people. You can listen to the raven but you don't have to do as it tells you.

The cat and fiddle

The Cat and fiddle holiday park comprises approximately 150 caravans without wheels, a central complex with shop, office, launderette, chip shop, bar, and entertainment hall for dances, films, music, keep-fit and wet-weather activities. It's basic, clean, cheap and friendly. Paul Katt who started the caravan park in 1958 is still chief of manners, arbiter of 'good taste' and friendly. Nowadays his son, Tom Katt, has inherited his father's simple jovial manner. He is always around, always smiling and always quick to play with the children and deal with problems. The father and son both have that magic combination of their own strength covered with a soft compulsion to be friendly.

In some ways the caravan park runs itself. Each Saturday new people appear to fill the vacated caravans. It's different faces but the same people: Reading the same newspapers, drinking the same beer, with the same video games, beach toys, physique, fashion awareness and command of the English language. Still, it is every Englishman's right to do as he sees fit rather than conform to arbitrary rules. Here, at the Cat and Fiddle he can be 'on holiday' in the style to which he has become accustomed. His wife and children will enjoy unusual freedoms in ways that seem taboo at home.

Another feature of the holiday park which is taken for granted, but perhaps should be studied more, is the completely different level of threats, worries and hassle here to that which most of the visitors find on their estates and schools at home. I've already told you this is a friendly place, and emphasised it. Take a moment to appreciate what that means. Even the teenagers are safe. Many hands are held in daylight. After dark there are plenty of not very well lit spots. The garden of Eden may not have been rows of caravans on concrete standings but neither did it have the varied facilities for private romance provided by the Cat and Fiddle.

Back in 1958 Joe Katt turned a field into a holiday camp in three months, advertised in colour and rode the post-austerity boom. It was a time when the latrines could be emptied by a tractor pulling a tank, the cinema was considered first rate entertainment and holiday-makers came by train with a suitcase each. How times change. Yet they don't change for Joe and Tom. Every day is a practical day. Sort this, deal with that, "Oh dear - tell your dad he can borrow my pump". Also every day is a pleasure to meet people who have been coming for decades... And making a point of greeting newcomers then making sure they know they're amongst friends. Tom has never had to advertise for custom - although sponsorship in Denbry-on-sea lubricates local businesses and makes the park acceptable to the locals, to whom the place is a bit of a mystery - You wouldn't go there, wouldn't tell anybody it was next door and wouldn't mix with the clients - Like an abattoir.

Denbry liked to portray itself of itself as a nook for artists of all sorts to commune with nature and do whatever it is that painters, sculptors and violinists do as they cultivate their cliques. The fact that chicken in the basket is served by the

hundred portions is ignored while a 'famous' playwright being 'clever' in an extremely boorish way is considered something to celebrate. It is probably nearer the mark to describe Denbry's function to the artistic community as a place to escape to with the intention of drying out but with the expectation of weeks of getting belligerently or maudlin drunk with a different audience. The survivors from the 1960s are mostly still sozzled even if they've now called a truce over stealing each other's partners.

In the summer there is a film and stage show every week at the Cat and Fiddle. There are things for teenagers to do, a swimming pool, and one hundred and one activities and amenities that Denbry itself doesn't have. Somehow even the teenagers don't feel the need to show-off at the Cat and Fiddle. Nevertheless the older Denbrians maintain their distaste for the undoubtedly working class caravan park even though, should they try, they'd find no problem sharing.

A good guess would tell you that Paul Katz is a refugee from wartime Europe. In those days Poles were acceptable in Devon, but the Yorkshire accent he'd worked hard at on arrival in England was something tangible that could be held against him. When Paul was changing the tired face of post-war Britain it was easy to paint the spectre of an invasion of thousands of black-faced miners conjured-up to engulf genteel Denbry. What made it worse was this perfectly polite and proper invader paying wages to free-born locals. How dare he do something so effortlessly that had escaped the best local brains.

Denbry is only a tiny town but that hasn't stopped the council embellishing its offices. Although technically only a parish the councillors wear bicorn hats and black gowns with gold braid edging, parading sedately in line at arranged opportunities: As one observer described one such Mayoral procession "Mice following a rat". A developing caravan park needs a certain degree of official acceptance if not social approval. The burghers of Denbury were not used to dealing with such independent and persistent people as Paul.

If you look in the May 10th 1962 Western Daily News you'll find an advertisement stating that "Paul Katz of the Cat and Fiddle holiday park challenges the Mayor of Denbry to a Chess match to be played on the Strand at 2pm on 26th May with the chess pieces to be played by real people. £50 to be paid by the loser to the RNLI". (£50 was a LOT of money in those days.) With cat's patience Paul had waited until a pompositor of wealth assumed the role of Mayor, then pounced knowing the little thing would be away from its hole and fun to play with. The other councillors were outraged and delighted: Outraged that Mr Katz could call them out, and secretly delighted that the Mayor was the target and not them. The Daily Mail (who told them?) were soon onto the story, interviewing Paul who pointed out that even though he, a simple working man, had provided facilities such as swimming pool, a cinema, bingo, supervised children's activities (not to mention the golden sands) and the sales in the local shops from holiday makers were considerable, the town council tried to obstruct the development of modern amenities. The final straw, so Paul said, was when the deputy Mayor was reported to say in the council chamber "These low-class goings-on only serve to drag down the high reputation of Denbury". The deputy Mayor denied saying

this and it is quite likely that Paul made it up but that's what got printed in the Daily Mail and became to all intents and purposes historical record.

Cornered, the Mayor had no choice but to accept but demanded to play as White. At least he would have the satisfaction of playing on the side of the angels. While chess pieces were being kitted out - it has to be said that the black pieces were easier to recruit than the white - the players were taking precautions behind the scenes. Thanks to the Daily Mail, Paul's bookings were now complete and he could afford the services of a Master. Sadly the Mayor, not being a chess player at all had to resort to calling-in some favours and making some not-so-savoury promises before anyone would take on playing strategy for the angels.

The Mayor belatedly recognised the touristy value of the match and sent the clerk to negotiate. It was agreed that the game would be played for public entertainment value as in truth, unsaid, Katz had already won.

On the day of the game there was confusion laying out the board on the sand, a vicious rain squall forced players into the Ship and the Crown for 45 minutes during which every player expected their drink to be paid for and the public vanished. The individual players had no grasp of the overall picture and Paul's Master taunted the Mayor's trapped champion. The rain started again and it was a very bedraggled end to a non-sporting match. Despite promises to do it again next year there never was another. Nobody remembers the match or the mayor now, but the Cat and Fiddle keeps entertaining.

The Faerie Queen

The Faerie Queen is rapidly taking shape amongst the brass and iron sculptures in the gloomy works of Milener and Co. Flat and curved plates with holes waiting for rivets and bolts, solid and spoked wheels, silvery turned driving rods next to sheaves of black boiler flue tubes, stacks of boxy things and rows of curvy things with sharp edges. Normally the works would be full of noise and men carrying, fitting, forming and fighting metal, but now it is Sunday morning and the dust has settled over everything as a noiseless soft brown carpet. A tall door opens in the end wall, and sunlight streams through defining shapes by shadowy edges and pools of black. Two figures, their sharp silhouettes showing them to be a man with top hat and a slim bonneted lady in a crinoline appear then blend into the gloom. This intimate encounter between the young and energetic chief engineering draughtsman and Miss Milener can't be put off any longer. She, driven by an enquiring mind, inspired by the energy of Florence Nightingale she's been reading about in the papers, and bored by the prospect of marriage to any of the eligible sons of mill owners or gentry around Leeds is a young lady who wants to be in charge of her own destiny. He, Art, who can deal with the stupidest workman or calamity caused by breakage or bad luck, is not so confident. Mr. Milener has made it clear that Art would be a welcome son-in-

law, and then naturally partner, and is expecting him to tame his daughter.

"Here she is. Nearly ready to go to the paint shop. What do you think Freya?" This is Art's work. His ornate design charmed the Maharaja's representative and his talent for explaining the thoroughly modern design, attention to detail, robustness and economy persuaded the directors of the Great South India Railway Company to purchase what they all hoped would be the first of many. Art had gambled on the love that men have for showing-off their new toys. The other five locomotives were to be sturdy workhorses while this would be an emerald thoroughbred fit for any prince. Art guessed that the London-based railway company put up the capital and was looking for a 5% return while the Maharaja let them have the land was hoping for a much bigger return in prestige. How could he resist flaunting such power and progress in front of his primitive neighbouring princes.

In the fast moving world of steam locomotive building Milener & Co. have a reputation as competent and reliable manufacturers. They always deliver something that works, but others point out that their designs are three, four or five years out of date. Their market is the joint stock company that needs functional locomotives, the sponsors being capitalists who stand to gain immensely from awarding construction contracts to themselves and then sell as soon as the line is complete. The game is selling dreams of progress to the practical gentry who think they are investing in the future and naturally want locomotives from a reputable and reliable firm. Shareholders want something solid. Future service, maintenance and economy are not material aspects in these purchasing decisions. In a world where every shareholder expects to sell before the others or have taken their cut in legal or engineering consultancy fees there is no point in considering what will happen when the bubble bursts and the engines mustn't keep breaking down and if they do can be repaired by a blacksmith. In this exceptional case, although his design was mocked as a Crystal Palace on wheels, Art won the contract for Milener and may have set the standard for all Indian princes to beat.

Part of Art believes the myth: It is an invitation to a magical mechanical world where science and art are mixed in perfect proportions to power progress. The other part of Art is a cynical, calculating cost-cutter who knows that customers don't care about technicalities they can't boast about. Understanding is irrelevant to them while certain embellishments are essential. So for example he might say "Our cross-head feed pumps have been proven to pump 1100 gallons per hour - that's three times the average demand" knowing full well the figures to be irrelevant and a convenient falsehood. Even more privately he knows that the pumps should be replaced by Giffard's steam injector which is a lot more efficient but yet to be fashionable amongst the railway projectors. Every time he has suggested that the buyers might want a second pressure gauge so that the fireman can check the coal consumption for maximum economy, the offer has been accepted for an extra £50. Everyone pushes the merry-go-round of deception.

"What do you think Freya?"

"She's no more than a bit of metal built solely for the reason that some men want to take money off other men." (That's what happens if you let independently minded women know how things work.)

Oh dear, this isn't going right. "No. - Yes. But if it wasn't for money invested in railways we couldn't get from here to London in five hours. I agree our customers are only really interested in profits - and sometimes in shady profits - but sometimes I can add something that's fashionable this year which is real progress in engineering. This lady here is a queen because she's dressed up in finery, or she will be when painted and polished, and then we may sell more to all the other Indian princes who want something for their neighbours to envy - each one with more gold leaf and emeralds than the last. We need to pander to princes from time to time. It will be worth a fortune. Then think of all those poor Indians who will benefit also."

Freya has her own head of steam. If a bonnet could eject a fountain of sparks... "As I said, it's the vanity of men and their desire to show off that drags decent workmen to work here twelve hours a day in this gloom. They live more than ten to a house 14 foot square in filthy conditions in back to back terraces my father built with one water tap between six houses. They've been dragged from the sunlit fields to the smoke filled factories and towns choked with cholera just to put rivets into a iron icon. The more rich men lust after a such a goddess so the more poor men are enslaved by her."

Art is lost. Yesterday he was doing his job, part huckster, part conquer of metal, part charmer of steam, part dreamer of the engine yet to be, but now he's accused of something which he doesn't understand. What is this? Private jealousy? Or the inability of females to grasp practicalities? "Nobody forced those men to come and work in the town".

"I'm not fooled by the Faery Queen. Look at her - piston rods for earrings, bracelets of brass bands, big wheels for bosoms and a dress of softly curved metalwork decorated with painted curlicues. I know in your head you can hear her soft voice calling you through her chimney draught and smell the scent of the oil on her motion." (Freya's imagery takes both of them by surprise.)

"Well yes! I can enjoy the smooth running of a perfectly balanced engine it is like a perfect harmonic pulsing with energy. What's wrong with admiring your creation after hours at the drawing board? I created her. She belongs to me - not me to her."

"You're under her spell Art. You are bound by iron and brass and coal to level the land for her with railways, to build sheds and mines to keep her and feed her and enslave yet more men to live in the soulless terraces. Can't you see that?"

It's a bit of a shock happening so quickly - he'd heard of 'feminine logic' but assumed it applied to unimportant domestic incidents and justification for new hats. Now he was being held responsible for the way the whole country was changing. How could he defend himself when there was no crime!

"Come away from that engine Art. Let's leave this gloom." He takes her arm and they thread their way towards the sunlit doorway. Holding onto Freya now has his complete attention. "There's so many good things from progress. To build steamships that can beat the wind, to build dams that stop flooding and check drought. Railways mean that farmers can get their cattle to markets and don't forget a lot of country labourer's houses were hovels with no piped water at all. We mustn't look back. "

Progress towards the light falters as they approach the doorway. Gentler now: "Well admit it. You were in love with that engine."

"I suppose I was in a way - she's special".

"Don't look back - Is that really the best you can do?" She says, pampering him with soft temptation. Art is now completely confused. What was supposed to be a simple marriage proposal is now a twisted heap of dreams. Worse, she's looking him straight in the eyes with the sweetest expectant expression on her lovely face. Wheels spun! Cranks broke! Pipes burst! Glands spurted scalding water! Finally words come: "Freya. Freya - You have captured me." Amazed by his good luck he holds her. "Your queen takes my queen". He embraces her: "I can't do better than you". For a moment Freya hesitates but the will to be cruel isn't there so she agrees to capture him. Two shadows merge into one long enough for a two pieces to melt into one.

And so they passed back into the sunlight.

The sword in the stone

There is no stone and no sword stuck in it outside the Trevance county secondary high school. Once this was just the sort of bare, honest place in the moor under the bright sunlight overlooking the patchwork cliffs and unquiet waters of North Cornwall to find a magical gateway. Anyone who came up here in times past with the open sky and fresh wind would know they stood a good chance of being used to rub the velvet off the antlers of fate. The village cum town that is Trevance shot up the hillside onto the moor and millennia of mines and quarries in the 1970s in the form of a housing estate with the school on top where the playing fields could park on the scraggy plateau.

It's probably just as well there isn't such a magic stone as the authorities would have painted it white and surrounded it with concrete embedded with potato-sized rocks to stop people getting near it. The school is clean, methodical, bright and practical. It is built on the 'box' plan where form follows function and containment follows from cellular construction. Space is allocated to specific purposes and efficient education of the battery pupils goes on smoothly and efficiently on the surface - and abrasively or soggily inefficiently where it matters.

Until today there is no stone and no sword stuck in it to tempt every passing schoolboy (and some girls). It is a fact that if such a stone appeared then the boys would immediately be trying to extract the sword. Imagine what would happen when the school authorities found out about this: Instinctively they would issue a decree that no pupil was to touch it - thus ensuring all candidates to the throne came from the 'criminal classes'. Surely a price worth paying when anything not under their control is a threat to their rule. (It cannot be said often enough that the world works the way the school says it does - and don't you forget it!)

The new school year starts in September. Pupils arrive with renewed curiosity, private fears and the simple optimism of childhood tempered with resignation learned from previous years. There is surprise at the novelty of some redecoration and catching up with friends who you haven't seen for a couple of months. Each new year is supposed to mean you're growing up and able to appreciate the complexities and responsibilities of life - But the rather more boring facts that there are more years below to despise and the headmaster's address makes it clear that this year there will be more pressure from the teaching staff, means only one thing: 'Business as usual'. The hierarchy is unchanged.

Today, before the disappointment and resignation, an exciting rumour runs around. There's a new mistress to replace Brown-nose Brown - She's young, tall, beautiful and is actually nice to people. (That's only a rumour of course.) By power of magic Miss Vere soon has her classes under her spell. A charming smile, a willing gaze, and an irresistible novelty. Every question is framed as an action: "Scott. What would you say was the answer to question 7" "Tanya. Is it safe to be in the same room as Russel if he does that?" and so on. All of a sudden the textbook world has jumped into their lives. Scott, and Tanya and Russel and all the others have the 'me!' experience. Of course they enjoy the buzz of being the focus and discussing it afterwards but deep-down something else begins to wake.

Miss Vere combines infinite charm with complete ruthlessness. She never gives an answer, instead making the class go through the logical steps - somehow picking just the right level of challenge for each pupil. At the start of each maths lesson she writes on the board "What is the purpose of mathematics?" (sometimes abbreviated to "M=?".) Quadratic equations are like vegetables - Nobody thinks much of them. Especially if they're good for you. And 'good for you' soon turns into loathing if you're a teenager. There is no teacher that will claim that quadratic equations are interesting, exciting and break the ice at parties, but Miss Vere could make them sound like skittles you knock down to make a clean score - or something like that. Each week another skittle is knocked down, but still the question on the blackboard remains.

This is how the question got answered - although it is a long story: "Here is your homework. All I want to know is how much of my cake have the mice eaten? [diag - square] I want your answer as a fraction or decimal written in a box in your books exactly point-8 of a centimetre high by two centimetres long." This

was the first step, and the bit about the box was simple psychology. The next time was similar [diag circ] this time in a box 12.5 millimetres by 43 millimetres. The answer was the same but this time the box was simple mischief. (Power, like any muscle or any skill, needs to be exercised to keep it effective.) Now the mice have eaten some cheese [diag straight line down middle] to be presented above a box 15cm high by 4 cm wide listing 10 types of cheese.

Curiosity amongst the rest of the teaching staff attracted a number of informal investigations which soon showed that Miss Vere's pupils were getting to grips with their subject and respected her. She would never be seen carrying stacks of exercise books as somehow there would always be a pupil attending to her chores. Naturally the automatic reaction to this was jealousy, although the staff that admired her for her charm and fancied their chances, were far more respectful - in various ways from fawning to gallant that would tickle a student of seduction. Oh oh oh! The desire to be allowed just to carry Miss Vere's bag of books spawned many early morning schemes amongst certain male staff and many late night poison potions from the totally outclassed female members.

It didn't take long until one day in the common room she was asked by the deputy head why she always wrote 'What is the purpose of mathematics?' on the board. "You tell me what the purpose is and I'll tell you why I write it". After a moment's stand-off of sudden silence he blustered some waffle about being a language to describe the universe and a tool to solve problems. "Oh how sweet - A lot of people think that" she replied with radiant charm that only served to silhouette the deputy head's failure to achieve the required standard. At that moment the undecided staff had to take sides: The confused and jealous frozen on the one side. The hopeful, who don't often have their blood warmed up like that these days on the other. (And in the middle the odd amused observer wishing 20 years away and looking forward to some china shop owners turning into bulls.) There is nothing more certain than confidence and competence being demonstrated by an attractive woman to start feuds and set men off to polish their shields and swords. (Dear reader, if you ever have the opportunity to witness provocation by innocence then study it, for it's a good way to get your opponents to bankrupt themselves one way or another and also to recruit admirers from the more alert and ambitious onlookers.)

There are few things more frustrating than somebody saying - "It's in front of you" while being unable to see it. This is something the reader may care to investigate.

As far as the pupils are concerned Miss Vere is a really good teacher. Maths isn't a monster lurking in the dark; just darkness of magical caves full of strange sculptures of stalactites and crystals waiting to be explored with a bright beam in the company of a mysteriously luminous guide. Essentially, if you're part of a group in a cave you make sure you don't get left behind in the dark - whatever happens - so even the lazy were joining-in.

Halloween, October the 31st, even though it has been bulldozed many times by conquerors, churches and supermarkets, is the moment which survives in

Britain because it gives an edge to our folk-memory fears. Where memories of hunger in the night, influenza and frostbite survive, then so does the battle between human organisation, community strength, and nature's five months of killing chill. This is the start of the Celtic new year where the forthcoming winter has to be faced. Some of the people we know will never see the spring - but WE WILL! Nowadays it is flu epidemics and hypothermia but in times past it was just wolf winter. Before the new year starts the open accounts of this one must be settled. At this moment when summer goes to sleep and winter awakes there is a void where disruptive forces, we might call them spirits, ghosts, fairies or witches can pull at the loose threads of uncertainty and maze us with confusion, stab us with fear and pull our souls inside out. So why would anyone go out onto the moor tonight? Because they want to show they're strong, prepared and not really very afraid. The spirit of survival fed with by the energy of group faith takes on the challenge of random nature.

Miss Vere doesn't need permission to go up onto the moor on Halloween although the headmaster wishes she did. Somehow she's let it be known that at half past six on Friday anyone who wants to should meet at the top of Moor road for a spooky two hour walk - bring a candle in a jar. Sir English, Sir Science and Sir History didn't need persuading once taken into Miss Vere's confidence. Privately each has embellished their part. Sir English has prepared a ghastly story about wolves. Sir History thinks he might yarn about giants forming the land. Sir Science cheats as he can't think of anything suitable so he resolves to pretend he has special x-ray vision that can see sprites and ghoulies. (Sad isn't it? But that's how legends go.)

The jolly parties of about 20 each start off at 5 minute intervals along the stony moor track towards the highest outcrop known as Brown Tom. It's only about a mile and a half away but the town's lights soon get distant, the dark gets really close and the rabble-chatter becomes private conversations, mostly about the practicalities of trekking in this strange environment. Nobody is actually afraid - at least not while they're with the bunch - but there's always the dark and possibility of getting left behind. There's nothing to be seen in the dark beyond the lantern-light. That doesn't prove there's nothing there. Gradually a new sort of conversation appears where teachers and pupils merge into wise adults and curious nearly-adults. Hobbies, ambitions and a few of the things that don't normally get shared are explored.

Sitting on the grass at the base of the outcrop known as Brown Tom there's a bit of confusion when Sir Science asks half of the company to put their lights out so they are guaranteed light for going back. Perhaps a quarter of the flickering lights remain now.

Sir History gives a potted history of Halloween while Sir English shines a torch from underneath to turn his features into a demonic 17th century woodcut. The end of one year and the start of another. The dark winter which everyone hopes is just a sleep. The confusion of the change-over all around at this minute. Then he explains the business of putting out all the lights then relighting. What could be more symbolic of human determination to overcome winter, even when there's only the smallest glimmer of hope, than deliberately extinguishing all

lights and then relighting them from a single ember. The dragon of Winter will be slain by close community cooperation.

Lighting the single candle and passing it round until everyone has a flickering flame is accompanied by this song.

All:

I have the light and I'll give it to you
Push back the dark. There's enough for two
Now pass it on and do it again
Lets send the light right along the chain

Sir History:

There's a clearing in the forest - where the sun shines in
The nomads settle and building begins
Homesteads and villages soon flourish in the light
Bar up your door in the dark of the night
Wolves and bears prowl through the wood
With outlaw bands who do no good

All:

I have the light and I'll give it to you
Push back the dark. There's enough for two
Now pass it on and do it again
Lets send the light right along the chain

Sir Science :

Lights of all sorts are easy for me
Just strike a match - That's chemistry
Oil lamps of history burned just the same
Prolong the day with a candle flame
A flame for the fire and a lamp for your bed
If you don't use science you'll be dark instead

All:

I have the light and I'll give it to you
Push back the dark. There's enough for two
Now pass it on and do it again
Lets send the light right along the chain

Sir English:

The words of the poet and the dramatist
Show light in the shadows on things you've missed
Light up the stage in the theatre's gloom
With glittering of stars in bright costume
Their flashes reveal and romances glow
And poems are mirrors for bright tableaux

All:

I have the light and I'll give it to you
Push back the dark. There's enough for two
Now pass it on and do it again
Lets send the light right along the chain

Miss Vere, shows off bracelets, earrings and diamante cape:

Sequins and jewels, silver and gold
Glinting faces and edges cold
I don't make light - but I glint and gleam
To rule all space with a white moon beam.
Maths is a lady with whom you can play
Be the Knight with the light who'll carry her away.

All:

I have the light and I'll give it to you
Push back the dark. There's enough for two
Now pass it on and do it again
Lets send the light right along the chain

Of course this never really happened: There was no stone with a sword in it. There was no mathematical temptress. But there are schools - and Halloween still clutches at survival - So maybe there's a little bit of truth in the legend.

Postscript

Have we have lost our ability to discover and reflect upon symbols? Echo and reflection, loose threads asking to be knotted, alternative possibilities, journeys to unreachable goals that reveal many hidden things. What is the story outside the frame? There are stepping stones just beneath the surface of the stream of life. Symbolism has been replaced by symbolics - the green man is now running for the fire escape.

All of these stories, as is traditional, have been invented. They are written to please, as well as to inform, to encourage, to entertain and also to do all the things that throwing a brick into a pond does. There's a wonderful pleasure seeing a constellation of crystals sparkling in a silent black grotto which you don't get with striplights and vacuum packs.

There are many snags in these tableaux. I'd like to think that once caught by a 'trick' stone man you'd be more on the alert for the crown-of-thorns/Easter symbol that is there in full view if your eyes are open. What is a "snag"?

Whilst writing these I was genuinely stunned by what becomes visible when

you investigate. For example I give you this 'universal truth' lying just beneath the surface of the fourth paragraph of "The Ravens" : Men *believe they* will get better; Women *hope things* will get better.

The reader may care to ponder how near the flower is to the roots. See the flower, touch the flower, smell the flower - And then the earth also. A locomotive called the Fire Queen, currently on public view at Penrhyn Castle Railway Museum, was built by A. Horlock & Company in 1848. The Fairy Queen, which is also still in existence, was built in 1855 by Kitson, Thompson, & Hewitson of Leeds for the East Indian Railway. Where were gateways with "work is freedom" over the top erected? Are monoliths only found on remote moors? Did you work out what maths is for? Showing how clever you are! You can solve problems in moments that boggle others.

The final tableau is for you to take to heart. How do the ripples from this reflect? How about battery children in battery schools? Not really, that's just a wake-up pyrotechnic. Elucidation without enthusiasm and education without empowerment. Boys need challenges and quests. Girls need knowledge to go with charm. Romance is a snag. Why has the magic gone out of learning. Why do neighbours fight each other instead of for each other? If you pulled a sword out of a stone what would you do with it?

I spell these things out because the world is full of people who don't turn over words to see if there's anything underneath. (Or for those who only colour-in their books - don't even bother to see what flavour their crayons are.) (Or for those without books... 1000 programs won't make up for your lack of words.)

Peter Fox

Looking forward to reading your pictures.