

New suit of words

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Reluctantly but resolutely I struck out along the wet London pavement. Perforce to battle with other umbrellas and avoid the worst sock-soaking splashes. On the corner where the Strand and Aldwych meet I was gripped by a display window where three lines written on a snowflake, an aeroplane and 'skull as a hot-air balloon' caught and tingled me.

Inky characters
By shaking hands
Sonnet or Haiku

If only it had finished with '6 across ten letters' I'd have known where to start. This puzzle poem, presumably a poem, had just knocked a hole in a wall to reveal an attic in my mind I never knew existed. At my age this sort of discovery is worrying. How can you talk to anyone about finding a hidden room when you're fifty nine? Mysterious clues to hidden treasure are supposed to be for lonely neglected twelve year-olds with delicate health. Auditors aren't supposed to hide away and be lost in the stories behind the images found in long-abandoned books. The frisson of illicit dreaming in a private world can't be shared.

This turned out to be my destination so I had to go inside anyway, but I wish there was someone watching over me I could ask.

The revolving door hushed round then puffed open to reveal a much larger and impressive interior than I was expecting. Stairways, alcoves and powerful columns stretched into the back. There were smooth sweeping outlines in chrome and diffused neon; lively friezes of leaves and flowers in cream and brown ceramic tile; wooden cabinets of various sizes, styles and coordination. Cinema? Club? General emporium? My imaginary friend – where did he come from? out of the attic? – would live here and show me round.

A lady receptionist looked up from a stack of exercise books and smiled patiently. "May I help you?"

"Er. Yes. Good morning. My dear lady spouse has prevailed upon me to visit your establishment, and may I say what an impressive institution it appears to be upon first acquaintance, in order that I might obtain a more contemporary manner of speech. I wonder if it possible for that thing to be arranged?"

"Certainly Sir. Would you be a darling and wait here whilst I ask for an assistant to attend to your mission. He will be here soonest." I obeyed of course, but being called *darling* made me start wondering what other undiscovered attics there were.

The variety and previously unnoticed details of the decor were amplifying the puzzling effect of the words in the window. Where is your imaginary friend when you need them? This was like being unexpectedly left money in a will - Of course you can use it, but time, precious vanishing time, is needed to discuss and dispose of the loot. A framed poster with a crude woodcut of a cat 'My cat Jeffry', some lines of verse, and the modern headline *My electrical skin is felt* hit that spot where a voice inside tells you to look for the attic and see if you friend has come across this before. I can't say why there was a holographic display with the word *Disbelief* floating in space but I wanted to know the answer. I don't think of myself as a philistine, we were all a bit saucy-gauche at Oxford, but ... well this was worth having an imaginary friend for. I'd come to

visit him and we'd slice scents, steal inscriptions from tombs, apprentice ourselves as blacksmiths and come over all faint at the thought of the female form.

At this moment a dapper middle-aged man took my rocking-horse by the reins. "Good morning to you Sir. How exactly may I render you a service?"

Exactly? "Er. Yes. Hello. Are you the assistant? Um. It has been decreed by the mem-sahib that my manner of speaking is not very modern. *Antediluvian* was her description. She has forcefully intimated that today would be an ideal opportunity to rectify this state of affairs. Accordingly I have been dispatched to your establishment forthwith in order that I may acquire something more colloquial."

"Of course sir. The distaff side often take interest in these matters. Where they lack accuracy they make up with instinct." *Make-up with instinct?* What had make-up got to do with it? After the window break-through and the treasure maps of the foyer this confused me. Then my friend explained: This was an *English* shop so I should expect words to be on the loose.

"If Sir will accompany me I'm sure we can find what your lady wife is looking for - and what Sir would be very happy with also".

Whilst at breakfast I had been distinctly uncomfortable about this fanciful expedition, but now I'd found the explorer's instinct and was looking forward to dangerous and exotic adventure. The words in the window, the art in the foyer. Let slip the dogs of war. It is a far far better thing that I do now etcetera. "Lay on MacDuff!"

The assistant set off briskly, leading the way through a jumbled series of corridor-rooms on slightly different levels being a cross between a national museum and backstage of a theatre. Every space has vague height and light and purpose and safety. Every mechanical device is intrusive, hard or sharp or dangerous. The pace didn't allow an opportunity to ask about the exhibits, or maybe these were storerooms, but when we had to negotiate a crowd of mannequins wearing corsets I discovered that 'fashions for grammar could never be completely thrown away'. Erratic and mysterious side corridors were filled with heaps of abandoned furniture. The bottom of a staircase led up into a blank wall. Before I could ask about this the assistant stopped, turned, and put a finger to his lips before continuing with an actor's tiptoe. Instinctively I looked behind to check the coast was clear, I hadn't done this since the village players put on the *Pirates of Penzance*:

"With cat like tread upon our prey we steal

In silence dread, our cautious way we feel"

My sotto-voce rendition was terminated by the most weary put-down: "Tar - ran - tara Sir" as we came out into an atrium full of shouting men in tweeds attacking small blackboards with the gusto of bookies on the rails at Newmarket. The assistant pulled me along hugging the wall.

"Ignore them sir. Keep going – they're reformers – the only thing they agree on is the need for a single standard." We passed a market barrow where the proprietor bawled-out "Shavian Scrabble - For'y le'ers for fluen' phoned'ics" under a sign identifying him as *Georges Glottal's*. Noa Webster had his barrow piled with jars of *Organik spelling huney*. We exited through a doorway into the cool quiet gentleman's outfitters I'd been expecting since breakfast - only an hour ago!

My guide politely excused himself with "One moment sir. Mary will be with you in a moment." I could do with time to gather my thoughts. A Robinson Crusoe washed up in an underwater grotto. Soft uplighting, currents of cool air, a sensual sandy carpet

and many colourful display cabinets relaxed and entranced. And deep joy! as a mermaid in an emerald gown and long flowing golden hair, well as near a mermaid as you can get in an outfitters, glided towards me from the back of the shop.

A languid hand waved gently to indicate a deep armchair in invitation, or was it command, and she sat opposite. "My esteemed colleague tells me you are desirous of a more modern manner of speech."

Fighting-off complete entrancement I replied: "Errm – yes. Errm – are there different styles?"

"Why yes, of course. We have many speech styles from Canadian drone to Indian sing-song; puttering from Australia to West-Irish owl-call. But might I be bold enough to suggest what you want is a 50-year language spruce-up rather than a complete stylistic come-about."

"That's just-the-ticket! If I may say so, you're a very perceptive young lady."

"You're so sweet – and too kind. I take it this would be for everyday use?"

"Correct. You have hit the nail square on the head my dear. First time. Spot on."

"Now to be right up to date there is: Avant-garde. Garde. Post-garde. Shocking street. Vacant whatever, and a plenitude of daily slush-mushes. Might I suggest that Sir eschews these and looks at something a bit more mature."

"Proceed. You have my full attention - And also I'm listening to what you're saying lovely temptress!"

"I shall treat that remark with the charm that it deserves you naughty boy. Which brings me to suggest a very popular style which I'm sure would suit you perfectly Sir. How about 'Mature rock star'? Very easy to grasp, with a jocular gravitas and a pleasant direct manner. Ideal for 'smoothies' like yourself sir."

"What do I get? I mean a book, or cassettes, or lessons?"

"Oh no. We're up to date here. Have you ever been hypnotised?"

"No."

"Well, you sit in a chair, and in a couple of minutes it's done. Then there's half an hour trying it out and wearing it in to see if there are any alterations needed. That's also an opportunity to pick up accessories to go with it. Speaking of which of course it'll make you feel a lot younger so you may need to update your wardrobe. Admittedly it adds to the cost but the improved effect is well worth it in so many ways."

"Err.. I've never paid for English before. How much will this cost?"

"Oh yes you have sir – just without knowing. The only free English comes from your mother and brothers. Schools, books, libraries, magazines and adverts are all paid for somehow. And then there's radio and television broadcasting – we all have to live with the cost of that. Now the 'Cliff' works out at a very economical 375 pounds complete; including vocabulary, intonation and non-verbal sounds. We also include a comprehensive printed gestures and safety guide."

"Safety guide?"

"In case you find the style trying to take over your life. When your friends are impressed with your new style there is a temptation to go overboard and everything gets a bit silly. However in your case sir I'm sure that Sir is more likely to be lively and outgoing than silly."

The effect of a few words from a girl who knows what she's talking about is underestimated. How could she see through to the inner me? *Lively and outgoing* is exactly how I'd describe my real self. "All right - I'll take it." I couldn't wait to be hypnotised by those lovely dark eyes.

She stood up, but before I could rise from my deep chair she put that gently paralysing female hand on my shoulder that says *wait here until I return to devour you*, and addressed the assistant: "Lutwidge, please be kind enough to go through the formalities with this gentleman" and flowed out through the back of the shop.

"An excellent choice the 'Cliff' Sir. Clean and energetic - very à la mode."

"Just a moment! *à la mode* is French! This is an English shop."

"Originally Sir yes, but there is a continual exchange of words between languages and this is now proper English – As English as Welsh Rarebit."

Didn't the world just get a bit more complicated? Window words and woodcuts and a regiment of grammatical straightjackets are savoury amusements but *as English as Welsh Rarebit* was hot sauce. Before I could pick the bones out of this he continued:

"Just a few calibration questions Sir. We have to get the strength and details correct. Inside leg measurement?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'll explain in a moment Sir"

"Hmmm 31 inches"

"Lovely, thank you. What we wanted to know was how metricated you are - so it wasn't the measurement itself but the units you think in. Second - Sports at school and current sporting interests?"

"Rugby and cricket at school. Cricket and golf on the television and a bit of tennis at the village club."

"Cricket on the radio?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. We pay special attention to those details, that gives us two axes as reference. Now if I may suggest, Sir might want to loosen or even remove his tie. The 'Cliff' is naturally relaxed so it helps to start that way."

"Do I have to?"

"No sir. I understand that might seem a little strange now but in five minutes that'll be

an annoyance."

"I'll take it off in five minutes then."

"That's lovely sir. Now we know the strength to apply." He completed a few scribbles on a clipboard, checked his proforma through then ushered me to a bright clinical side room. "Miss Shelley will be with you in moment Sir."

"Thank you Lutwidge – Do take a seat Sir." She studied the clipboard carefully then drew up a wheeled stool in front of me and sat down. Checking with Lutwidge then me. "Are you ready?"

There was only one possible answer to that soft face and deep eyes: "Yes."

"All right then we'll put you to sleep for a couple of minutes." With a magician's hand movement she held up an invisible sphere balanced on her finger tips and gradually brought it directly between us - our eyes locked - and the sphere magnified them...
... eyelashes painted round the headlamps of my Bentley ...
... Horse riding through my rolling acres ...
... Basking in charm at a party ... with a mermaid mouthing "look school"
"Looks cool - Beautiful. We're all done... .. How do you feel Sir?"

"err.. fine hey don't call me sir ok we don't need that gear dave that goes for you too daddy-o." Lutwidge smiled encouragingly and wiggled his tie knot meaningfully.
"strewth i'm being strangled - a tie! - Some dude once told me not to wear a tie.
UNCOOL man."

"That's lovely Dave. How's your day been".

"like cool - the baby beats me at brekker 'bout whacking the willy in the Shakespear so I say banzai! i'll toddle down here to do Good Karma With You Guys."

"Does it feel comfortable sir?"

"I'm one laidback cat now the tie died. Sent it to the creme-tie-riom".

"That looks great - we might have to take a little bit in *here* – and *here*..." Those fronds of eyelashes and a shoal of eyelashed admirers swam through my aquarium eyes...
beautiful. "beautiful" "Beautiful" Helpless as a jelly being tickled by pins...

... "Beautiful". Gravity and light and sound returned to normal.

"How was that Dave? There are always some sharp edges and we don't want you 'daddy-o-ing' everywhere. When you're ready Lutwidge will take you on a walkabout to get you used to your new style."

"Sort of mellow?"

"Exactly Dave - Chill out with the magical Lutwidge mystery tour."

"Yeah! Let's jump aboard."

I blew a kiss to the lovely Mary as Lutwidge led the way out of the shop into the surprising noise and heat. Oh and the back rooms! Oh and the foyer! Oh and the window! Just a few steps away Lutwidge took me through a door marked

Amusements
Nutrition
Archaicisms
Games
Research
And
Misuse

and we were back in a quiet private world but this time of modern offices and laboratories. "Hey dadd... Lutwidge?"

"Call me Lou if you prefer."

"Oh yeah right Lou. What's with the words in the window - kind-er cool but it bugs me."

"That's a poem called a *Haiku* originally from Japan. The first line is like the reverse of a crossword clue. We are given the answer and have to work out the possible connections. *Inky characters* might suggest printed text or murky people or fictional people or people who get their hands 'inky' such as writers. Really it suggests them all together - but like solving crosswords you need a bit of practice to see the connections. So what does *shaking hands* suggest to you Dave?"

"Umm People shaking hands... And somebody with a shaking hand."

"Good. And why?"

"Why what?"

"What's the story behind the shaking hands? And does it connect with what we've got already?"

"Oh perhaps two writers are shaking hands - inky hands - and it rubs off!"

"Brilliant – I hadn't thought of that – but maybe it isn't actual ink but something else being swapped."

"Hey Lou, it could mean the writer is shaking with emotion ... And then their writing would be smudged."

"Good idea - Is it yours?"

"Well yes. Umm possibly the writer planted the seed."

"Are you ready for the last line Dave?"

"OK"

"Finally the last line of a Haiku gives us the canvas, paints and brushes so we can make something to touch and pass around. Put it all together Dave and what have you got?"

"Hmm... Poetry rocks whatever it is..."

"And what about the writers?"

"Hmm... Swap your passions?"

"Does that answer your question about words in the window Dave? A word is a word, but a thought is a window."

"That is SO cool dadd...Lou"

"Something to think about later: Does the last line *Sonnet* or *Haiku* refer only to those types of poetry? Or all types of poetry - Or all types of art?"

We'd been standing outside a door labelled *Professor Arthur Non - Neologisms* above a sign stuck to the door saying *Bonk and intramp*. Lou knocked and we went in to a large office with drawing boards and white boards smeared with multi-coloured diagrams and lists. "You're in luck. Very few people ever get to see the professor - many don't believe he exists. Let me introduce you: Professor, this is Dave who is just getting the hang of his new *Cliff*. He's very interested in your work."

"Very beamy to meet you. Have an inspeculation at this." He indicated a piece of paper taped to a board with *TICKLE THE TORTOISE* written on it. "This is fresh raw material. Do you make anything of it?"

"It sounds like it could be rude"

"Exactly, that's what we thought. So it might be turned into a euphemism, however it's early days and we're looking into the possibility that it could be better utilised as BBJ"

"BBJ?"

"Sorry, I'm so unintentional: Barmpot Business Jargon."

"But professor, don't these just happen?"

"Just happen! Goodness no. Have you ever thought about euphemisms? Did you know there are only three distinct types? A, B and C. A for *Archaic - antiseptic* such as 'I must go and make myself comfortable'. B for *Basic - bitchy* such as 'in a certain condition'. C for *Corny-camp* such as 'visit the bathhouse of the August moon'. Now would you like to see something that is a bit fierce? Come and look at this." In one corner of the office was a glassed-in room with a skull and crossbones on the door. "Be careful not to touch anything. This is where we research neutralising clichés. To be honest usually the best we can do is create a niché - that's a new cliché. For example this is a long-overdue replacement for some well known tired phrases." The professor lifted back a black cloth cover to reveal *Couldn't organise a goose-bump competition in a nudist colony*. "Just the right degree of sauce and silliness - Now all we have to do is get it into circulation."

"How do you do that Professor?"

"Aha! Given the ebb and flow in the current scheme of things that's an art and a secret which I am not at liberty to divulge to a man of your stature. QUICK! Everybody out women and children first". After slamming the door shut behind us the professor looked rather shaken. "I'm sorry about that, you see how fastulent clichés are. That has completely discommodicated me now. Anyway thank you for ambuling this way and having speaks. Do intramp again."

We were heading for the door when Lou said. "Hey prof. Should we be *extramping*, *outtramping* or what?"

"*Trampoff!* will do fine for troublers like you." said the professor with the happy smile of a man who has just achieved a childhood ambition. "Persist in your absence a little longer next time or I'll set Mrs Malaprop on to you."

"Wow that's one real gone cat. Now what Lou? And who is Mrs Malaprop?"

"The demon queen of imperious invention. The Bathsheba of blatant guessing. The Nefertiti of magnificent of miserudition. A whole Cartland of marshmallow fog.

Beware the Malaprop, my son!

The eyes that stare, the words that catch!

Beware the wandering mind, and shun

The frivolous sparring match!"

Whatever he was on about it sounded as nasty as the things you read about in gothic fairy tales; all scales, ostentatious jewellery and minced warriors who should have learned more riddles before leaving home.

"Let's see if we can catch anyone at Nutrition" Lou opened a door labelled 'Seuss Fellow: Dr Janet Anjon' but it was dark inside. "Shame – Let's try accents" and we set off again.

"What's with nutrition bro?"

"All about school – Did you like school dinners?"

"Sometimes – but cabbage and swede – yeuk! – never touched it since – or rice pudding."

"Aha that's it Dave. School English is like school dinners. For some it is the only nourishment they ever get, while for others it puts them off for life. Good poetry is fat-free but not as tasty as chips."

"Can we skip accents? I've never liked them."

"But what about your accent Dave?"

"I haven't got one!"

"But you have. Everyone has, they just don't hear their own – and it's as important as smell to a dog. Can get very tribal and prejudiced. Still you're probably right, accents need study in detail if they're not to be an annoying parody. Students can often pick out where somebody lives with amazing precision just by..."

"LEWIS! Come hither and abrade yourself in my presence." A Valkyrie in pink chiffon transfixed Lou and astonished me likewise. She glided along the corridor towards us like a Dalek in a rose bush. It had to be Mrs Malaprop.

Lewis unfroze to sacrifice himself with desperate boyish bravado: "Forthwith my lady. Like an ibis leaping between the mountain peaks - your word is my bound. I hope you're well?"

"As you ask, I am in the pinnacle of confection. And who might this companion of yours be? To whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Whom you have the pleasure of, my lady, is a customer – Dave. Er I'm showing him our

assets and underpinnings. How the creative juices nurture the fruiting bodies as it were."

"Don't lecher me with aphorisms Lewis."

"No. Sorry ma'am"

Now, like a Dickensian tyrant savouring a orphan-whipping, she turned the spotlight of fear onto me. "What has this charitable gentleman been telling you?"

Suddenly I was the one who should have stayed at home. "Err. Nothing." Nightmare sweat. No breath! Don't mention the *fruiting bodies*. No not the fruiting bodies! Not giant sausages bulging with disgusting organic entrails.

"Please continue Dave - You have my full constipation."

I haven't started how can I continue? Bursting past the giant sausages to the surface I gasped. "A haiku!"

"A *Haiku!*"

"Yes, Mrs. Malaprop, there was a haiku in the window – a somewhat large, three line haiku – an ordinary haiku in fact. The first line went..."

"The lines are immaterial... ..Lewis! This is a fine kettle of filth. Haiku indeed – there's no such thing as I should know. Don't try your cloak-room and dagger games with me or the pun police will be sitting on your case. Do you want me to tell them you get up to semantics?"

"No of course not Mrs. Malaprop, but a haiku IS a Japanese poem."

"Ha! So it's not actually English. As I suspected, a traitor! By the clicking of my thumbs something wicked this way comes."

Now it was my turn to get bold and do the brotherly love sacrifice thing: "Look mama Malaprop, this guy he lays it on me straight. Dig this: If it's written in English it IS English. Like er... Welsh Rarebit. That's the cool stuff man when the literati go to party."

Lou saw we had the initiative, struck a pose and declaimed: "Hail and farewell evermore sweet lady of Shalott. with your odour of sanity, 'tis time anon as to the manner born all brothers shall extramp." The last word broke the spell for me and we scarpered-off (*scarpered!* – this Cliff was really working) in a new escapade while the Malaprop was scrabbling at the avalanche. Now somebody should think about making corridors more suitable for runners as right angles, polished floors, and fire doors stress the system somewhat! In hundred yards or so we realised there was no pursuit and assumed a rather unbelievable disguise of casual strollers who happened to like panting and looking over their shoulders.

"Lou? You remember that haiku? The shaking hands bit... Here..." We shook.

Once for being Tom and Huck up to mischief together.

Again just for reaching out and shaking hands.

Finally for something tribal handed down to us and to be handed on.

"Where's the gents, Lou?"

"We'll pass the toilets on the way back. By the way we don't have *Ladies* and *Gents* it's pretty much all unisex here." How refreshing that wash was. Or should that be just freshing? I checked up in the mirror, and hey, that open-neck collar was cool. Then I spoiled it by trying 'louche-aggressive'. Perhaps the mirror distorts, but my efforts were more a puppet Tommy Cooper than the slinkiness of the energetic sixty year-old I was aiming at. That was something definitely worth practising if I was going to meet the foxy Miss Shelly again.

Back in the quiet of the shop Lutwidge completed the paperwork and guarantee. "We have branches all over the world if you need any help." Having tallied up the bill. "That will be 375 pounds then Sir." I handed him my credit card - this was money well spent and Deirdre was going to have to look out when I got home. "Would you type in your PI number please Sir."

"Sorry? *PI number*? Come again. Don't you want me to sign something?"

"No we don't use names any more, it's all numbers. Your *PIN* sir – you know, the one people use at the AT machine."