

## Philip Levine

### An e-mail and three poems

We – my wife & I & our three sons – arrived in Barcelona in late summer of 1965. We stayed in a hotel called Mare Nostrum that no longer exists although the space does, at the southwest corner of Ronda Catalunya & Aragon – right across Aragon from that great grocery & wine shop that is still there. I had about \$7,000 US to last a year. That Barcelona was very different from today's; the sense of repression was enormous, the anger I smelled & felt in the bars & cafes flavored everything. The air was as bad as the air above Detroit where I grew up; the city was grim, gray, & totally familiar. (You wouldn't believe how small the citizens were then; in a clothing store on Gran Via a clerk told me they had nothing in the store to fit a man as large as I was – 5 foot 10 inches & 165 pounds). We stayed until July of '66.

We came back in '68 with even less money stayed 10 days, & then went south for almost a year.

I don't know how many times we returned, but only once while Franco & the dictatorship survived, & that time with our youngest son – then 15; we came thru Andorra in a rented car, & found a hideous Andorra – packed with shiny new cars & BMW motorcycles & noise & even smog. In '65 it had been a quiet, Catalan town with five tourists and my family.

I've lost track of the returns we've made. We came with our oldest son & his lady in the early 80s; the atmosphere had changed almost beyond recognition, though the place didn't look as good as it does today. We stayed in the Plaza Real amidst winos & junkies & pickpockets. No one fucked with me.

Came when the city was undergoing change for the Olympics. Rented a car & drove to northern Italy & back.

I came back again in '95 to read at the spring poetry festival at the Palau de Musica.

I came three years ago to read at a small poetry festival in Lleida.

And then this last November for two weeks. It was a birthday present for my wife.

## Alba

On bad springs bouncing and swaying down  
 the coast road south of the city to a spit  
 of land overlooking the sea, they trucked  
 the merchant princes and their courtiers  
 in their gunmetal suits and soured white shirts.  
 Portly, substantial men, manufacturers  
 of camshafts, holiday bunting, antacids,  
 dispensers of bifocals and mornings  
 of benzene mists, architects of newspapers and  
 cardboard communes stuttering up the slopes  
 of Montjuïc. Prodded, they limped, shoeless,  
 over the rocky ground to where the land  
 stopped at last and the waves broke far below,  
 deafening the air, and waited, some hopeful,  
 smoking, some silent, some whispering, a few  
 kneeling alone, praying, while the militiamen  
 squatted facing them, their heads falling  
 in and out of sleep. The warm wind  
 —the one they call the Levante—that blew  
 in the first scraps of dawn from Africa  
 churned the waves below from black to cobalt.  
 All at once the men were herded  
 to the land's edge and shot dead. I'm told  
 on good authority there is a lesson here,  
 one I am in need of. For González Brilla,  
 twenty-five, the militia commandant,  
 his head wrapped in a red and black scarf,  
 the lesson was clear. Before the ragged volley  
 called in the day, he shouted it out,  
 but with the wind swirling, the waves breaking  
 and those about to die abusing their gods,  
 no one heard. (Within a year Brilla himself,  
 bound and gagged in a damp cellar  
 off Calle Montcada, was shot just once

above his unfurrowed nape, and left no written record.) On the ride back to Barcelona it is reported—and now in print—he told the driver that the air of Spain was clearer now, although both men stank of cordite. Years later his comrade, Ramón Puig, told the English historian that the night before the executions—while oiling his Astra 9mm taken from the body of a Guardia officer—Brilla had rehearsed his speech: “You, the guilty, who are about to die, to leave the stage of history, behold ... behold ... something or other” was all Puig could ever remember. The widow, Mercedes Brilla Robles, swears he never spoke that way in his whole life. White-haired, shrunk to almost nothing, she lives on state welfare plus foreign contributions in a village south of Perpignan. Her Spanish is ragged now, her Catalan and French perfect as she speaks of her girlhood days as an anarchist rebel, the urban communes, the battle for the telephone exchange, the government betrayals, the journey of the defeated on foot across the mountains in February of '39, the iron hunger in the French camps, the terrible war that followed, even her years as a hairdresser. Unfortunately she can go on forever. I know. When by accident I found Ramón Puig three weeks ago in a ward of the tiny public hospital in Santa Coloma de Gramenet he remembered nothing, not even the war, the people armed, the glory days of '36, and what came after,

much less Brilla's words. Then by pure luck,  
seventeen kilometers south of Castelldefels,  
this bright spring morning, we found the place  
where the road—impossibly narrow and steep—  
hugs the coastline as it twists and climbs  
until a brief widening appears.  
My wife and I stopped and parked the rental car.  
Hand in hand we walked to the edge  
of the continent. No gunfire echoed  
from the past, or if it did, the sea  
silenced it. To the south, Sitges  
with its fake Irish pubs and swanky new hotels,  
to the north Barcelona barely visible  
in its familiar, rosy shroud, dead ahead  
the ancient impossible sea moving  
slowly toward us as it broods on itself.  
Can we hear them now, the words of Brilla,  
the elusive lesson worth all those lives?  
Above the cries of seagulls, the message comes  
translated into the language of water and wind,  
decipherable, exact, unforgettable, the same  
words we spoke before we spoke in words.

## Picture Postcard From The Other World

Since I don't know who will be reading  
this or even if it will be read, I must  
invent someone on the other end  
of eternity, a distant cousin laboring  
under the same faint stars I labored  
all those unnumbered years ago. I make you  
like me in everything I can — a man  
or woman in middle years who having  
lost whatever faiths he held goes on  
with only the faith that even more  
will be lost. Like me a wanderer,  
someone with a taste for coastal towns  
sparkling in the cold winter sun, boardwalks  
without walkers, perfect beaches shrouded  
in the dense fogs of December, morning cafes  
before the second customer arrives,  
the cats have been fed, and the proprietor  
stops muttering into the cold dishwater.  
I give you the gift of language, my gift  
and no more, so that wherever you go  
words fall around you meaning no more  
than the full force of their making, and you  
translate the clicking of teeth against  
teeth and tongue as morning light spilling  
into the enclosed squares of a white town,  
breath drawn in and held as the ocean  
when no one sees it, the waves still,  
the fishing boats drift in a calm beyond sleep.  
The gift of sleep, too, and the waking  
from it day after day without knowing  
why the small sunlit room with its single bed,  
white counterpane going yellow, and bare floor  
holds itself with such assurance  
while the flaming nebulae of dust  
swirl around you. And the sense not to ask.

Like me you rise immediately and sit  
on the bed's edge and let whatever dream  
of a childhood home or a rightful place  
you had withdraw into the long shadows  
of the tilted wardrobe and the one chair.  
Before you've even washed your face you  
see it on the bedoiled chiffonier — there,  
balanced precariously on the orange you bought  
at yesterday's market and saved for now.  
Someone entered soundlessly while you slept  
and left you sleeping and left this postcard  
from me and thought to close the door  
with no more fuss than the moon makes.  
There's your name in black ink in a hand  
as familiar as your own and not  
your own, and the address even you  
didn't know you'd have an hour before  
you got it. When you turn it over,  
there it is, not the photo of a star,  
or the bright sailboats your sister would  
have chosen or the green urban meadows  
my brother painted. What is it? It could be  
another planet just after its birth  
except that at the center the colors  
are earth colors. It could be the cloud  
that formed above the rivers of our blood,  
the one that brought rain to a dry time  
or took wine from a hungry one. It could  
be my way of telling you that I too  
burned and froze by turns and the face I  
came to was more dirt than flame, it  
could be the face I put on everything,  
or it could be my way of saying  
nothing and saying it perfectly.

**On The Murder Of Lieutenant Jose Del Castillo  
By The Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936**

When the Lieutenant of the Guardia de Asalto  
heard the automatic go off, he turned  
and took the second shot just above  
the sternum, the third tore away  
the right shoulder of his uniform,  
the fourth perforated his cheek. As he  
slid out of his comrade's hold  
toward the gray cement of the Ramblas  
he lost count and knew only  
that he would not die and that the blue sky  
smudged with clouds was not heaven  
for heaven was nowhere and in his eyes  
slowly filling with their own light.  
The pigeons that spotted the cold floor  
of Barcelona rose as he sank below  
the waves of silence crashing  
on the far shores of his legs, growing  
faint and watery. His hands opened  
a last time to receive the benedictions  
of automobile exhaust and rain  
and the rain of soot. His mouth,  
that would never again say "I am afraid,"  
closed on nothing. The old grandfather  
hawking daisies at his stand pressed  
a handkerchief against his lips  
and turned his eyes away before they held  
the eyes of a gunman. The shepherd dogs  
on sale howled in their cages  
and turned in circles. There is more  
to be said, but by someone who has suffered

and died for his sister the earth  
and his brothers the beasts and the trees.  
The Lieutenant can hear it, the prayer  
that comes on the voices of water, today  
or yesterday, from Chicago or Valladolid,  
and hands like smoke above this street  
he won't walk as a man ever again.

Pulitzer prize-winning poet Philip Levine (Detroit 1928) is the author of sixteen books of poetry, most recently *News of the World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). His other poetry collections include *Breath* (2004); *The Mercy* (1999); *The Simple Truth* (1994), which won the Pulitzer Prize; *What Work Is* (1991), which won the National Book Award; *New Selected Poems* (1991); *Ashes: Poems New and Old* (1979), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the first American Book Award for Poetry; *7 Years From Somewhere* (1979), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award; and *The Names of the Lost* (1975), which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize.

## Studio 54 Barcelona

Jeff King

‘**W**ho’s the black private dick that’s a sex machine to all the chicks? Shaft. John Shaft! Can you dig it?’ Isaac Hayes’ wah-wah driven floor-filler boomed out of the wardrobe-sized speakers at Studio 54, Barcelona. ‘Stew-dee-oh’ 54 to William Ballinger and Godfrey Hogan, the sole English punters in the house. ‘Es-too-dio’ 54 to everybody else at the club, including the glammed up Spanish girls; ‘las senior-eaters’ as the oafishly monolingual Godfrey called them. Slaughtering other people’s languages is a uniquely democratic phenomenon, common to parliamentary democracies and fascist dictatorships. In 1976, disco music wasn’t quite as universal, but it soon would be.

Studio 54 was located at the bottom end of Calle Marqués del Duero, though most locals still referred to the broad avenue as Paralelo, its pre-Civil War name; choosing to spurn the Francoist nomenclature which honoured the Carlist general who suppressed a Catalan uprising in 1849. Unlike the Manhattan original, Barcelona’s Studio 54 couldn’t boast a location surrounded by prime real estate. The fabled discotheque at 254 West 54th Street was two blocks from Saks Fifth Avenue and the Rockefeller Plaza; its bastard child in Spain held centre stage in downtown, downmarket Barcelona. The dingy streets of Paralelo and Pueblo Seco didn’t boast the notoriety of the neighbouring Barrio Chino but their dilapidated apartment blocks were crammed with a similarly transient populace: political agitators, pickpockets and pimps; wannabe poets, pseudo-philosophers, and more prosaically, the dirt poor. Barcelona 08001 was not a postcode for the aspirational, unless your aspirations ran to fumbling a hooker of indeterminate sexuality or a slow lingering death by absinthe.

Across the road from Studio 54, straddling the corner of Marqués del Duero and Calle Conde del Asalto, soon to be rebaptised as Nou de la Rambla, stood a tall, crumbling building which housed the infamous Bagdad Sex Club. Tonight’s star attraction was Christa Leem, a Catalan stripper whose party trick was to burst out of a giant phallic-shaped cake and then invite spectators to lick her clean of sticky pink meringue. El Bagdad’s other celebrated live acts included a supernaturally endowed dwarf known as The Tripod and an equally well-hung donkey. In the latter case, of

the four-legged variety. At 300 pesetas a ticket, it was a bargain for curiosity value alone. On this particularly balmy August night, the regular crowd of perverts, priests, patisserie chefs and zoologists was supplemented by a raucous bunch of US Marines whose assault ship, the USS Iwo Jima, was docked at Barcelona harbour. Barely nine months since the death of General Franco and with Spain's political future still an uncharted map, it wasn't clear who the Iwo Jima was conspiring to protect, but any Deep Throated conspiracies the exuberant grunts from Indiana, Oklahoma and Orange County had on their minds tonight bore no relation whatsoever to the Watergate variety.

Perched on booster seats in front of all the fresh-faced Bobbys, Leroy's and Jimmy-Rays from small-town America, occupying most of El Bagdad's front row, were Sneazy, Sleepy, Dopey, Doc, Happy, Bashful and Grumpy. Presumably there as cheerleaders for their Lilliputian peer with the extra leg; or on hand as willing understudies if The Tripod had an off-night. At least that was the apocryphal tale that would sweep the lower decks of the Iwo Jima the following morning. To complete El Bagdad's off-kilter mix, the dress circle was reserved for off-duty policemen from the nearby precinct in Calle Conde del Asalto. The notorious police station was directly opposite The London Bar and La Gran Cava café, where homosexuals were routinely harrassed by men in uniforms; valiant upholders of justice who deemed bestiality good clean fun, but same-sex flirting a capital crime.

The self-proclaimed 'Harem of Bagdad' was an apt symbol of Spain's fledgling liberalization, reflecting as it did the national mood referred to as el Destape - 'undressing'. Like much of the country, Barcelona was shedding its old clothes, both literally and metaphorically. Spanish celebrities (qualifier: heterosexual Spanish celebrities) were queuing up to display their progressive credentials by disrobing at the drop of a hat. Posing naked on the front page of this week's *Interviú*, a brand new magazine which combined the ideology of a Marxist flyer with the pedagogy of a *Penthouse* centrespread, was Spanish icon Marisol, now twenty-eight, but a national treasure since her days as a child star in innocent comedies such as *An Angel Has Arrived* and *Marisol Goes To Rio*. The latter was a remake of Walt Disney's *The Parent Trap*, in which Hayley Mills plays the dual role of identical twins who conspire to reunite their divorced parents. Even that Disney treacle was considered too risqué by a Catholic hierarchy which considered divorce sacrilegious, and in the 1963 Marisol remake, the father is conveniently killed off before

the opening credits and replaced by an irreproachable suitor; an unmarried uncle in Rio de Janeiro. The scions of Franco's film industry, whose value system harked back to the Spanish Inquisition, also made sure the movie's finale took part in a suitably pious setting, under the monumental statue of Christ the Redeemer which dominates the Rio skyline.

A whole generation of Spaniards would come to remember the day Marisol posed naked for *Interviú* (August 12, 1976) in the same way Americans of a certain age recall where they were when JFK was shot. For older, more conservative Spaniards, the affront of Marisol's nipples was akin to discovering that Shirley Temple had graduated to burlesque shows in Las Vegas. Whether you were for or against, excited or enraged, one thing was clear; change was afoot in Spain. However, seismic shifts in values never come at a uniform pace. Neither was it all 'Burn baby burn, disco inferno!' on the entertainment front. Barely five hundred metres from Studio 54 on Marqués del Duero, the marquees of the Apollo and Molino theatres announced music hall acts who were palpably oblivious to the 'Spanish Transition': slapstick comedians in the classic mould of the Marx Brothers and drag artists dolled up like Carmen Miranda. Packing them in at The Apollo this summer were showgirl Teresita La Mojada - Little Wet Teresa - and camp crooner Escamillo, who'd filched his emphatically inappropriate stage name from the handsome toreador of Bizet's Carmen. Top of the bill at The Molino was legendary drag artist Johnson, who despite sounding like an effete Englishman from an Ealing comedy was, in fact, an Argentinian christened Paco Barnaba with a penchant for pyramid-high Egyptian headwear. Like the acts at the variety theatres, most of the patrons were a musty throwback: middle-aged men with Brilliantine hair, pencil moustaches and dark glasses. Men who needed little encouragement to slip photos of General Franco out of their wallets or show off their fading Falange membership cards. Men who would reminisce about Spain's five decades as a beacon of Christian values. Dyed-in-the-wool fascists who would rage against the cowards who were leading the country to the dogs now El Caudillo de España por la gracia de Dios, The Leader of Spain by the grace of God ... el Generalísimo, was not around to 'eliminate' the Reds, degenerates and Catalan-spouting dogs.

Like its Big Apple namesake, Studio 54 Barcelona had originally been an opera house then theatre, and its art nouveau décor still hinted at bygone luxury. Circling the teak wooden dance floor were diner-like booths, the

seats upholstered in faded mocha velvet. The enormous mirror ball hanging over the dance floor was of Guinness Book of Records proportions, though slightly at odds with the more ornate chandeliers around the sides. Deep purple, velour drapes framed the upstairs boxes, though unlike 54 New York, the balcony wasn't the stage for coke-fuelled sex, merely the launching pad for fearless teenage boys imitating Mark Spitz on the diving board. The particular Catalan twist on the time-honoured dancehall prank was that the divers would reach the balcony in the first place by climbing up a triangular-shaped human castle with a height spanning four or five people from the dance floor up. The same team of helpers would then link arms firefighter-style to catch the derring-do jumper. Fatalities were rare, but bumps and bruises were considered a badge of honour, to be flaunted like love bites or rare US imports on Tamla Motown.

The club's interior may have been relatively glitzy, but its clientele were as lumpen as the surrounding city blocks. Crowding Studio 54's main hall, plus its two nicotine-stained 'White Lounges' with Tiffany swag lamps, were the teenage offspring of parents from Murcia, Cádiz and Extremadura. Mums and dads who had arrived on 'The Immigrant Express' at Barcelona's imposing art deco French Station in the 1950s and 1960s with all their worldly possessions in a battered suitcase or wrapped-up in improvised bundles tied with string. Legions of Studio 54 kids had been christened Montserrat or Jordi by their eager-to-integrate parents, but despite the venerable Catalan names these Montse-come-latelys inhabited a different planet from the Cucis, Catis, Pepas and Patis of uptown Pedralbes and Sant Gervasi; preppy youngsters whose parents had done very-nicely-thank-you under Franco. The boisterous Studio kids were mostly Barcelona born-and-bred, but in the eyes of the self-proclaimed Catalan elite, they were still charnegos – 'dark-skinned, subhuman, dirty Southern immigrants'. Regardless of their political persuasion, most people who lived north of Avenida del Generalísimo Francisco Franco (Diagonal) considered El Chino, the Barrio Gótico, Born and Barceloneta as a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah.

Barcelona's downtown disco scene was the private domain of sequin-clad shop girls and red-blooded factory boys in cap sleeve T-shirts. For Harlem and Brooklyn, Tottenham and Brixton, read Carmelo, Clot and La Mina. In 1976, well-bred Spaniards were still tapping their loafers out of time to The Beatles, while punk was still a private club whose acolytes numbered in

the low hundreds; none in Spain, where the so-called 'Madrid Happening' was still half a decade away from its camp fruition (captured lovingly on Super-8 by a young Telefónica clerk called Pedro Almodóvar). Post-Franco, there had been a sudden burst of alternative rock magazines launched in Barcelona – Star, Vibraciones, Rock Comix – but they had burst out of a time-tunnel, their pages dominated by Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Frank Zappa and Carlos Santana; artists who were either long-dead or artistically moribund.

Like Studio 54 New York, its Iberian facsimile boasted queues around the block on Saturday nights, but this was simply a case of popular demand. There were no Bianca Jagers, Liza Minnellis, Andy Warhols and Rudolf Nureyevs on the VIP guest list. Not even their watered down local peers. Tonight's grubby list on the back of a Fortuna cigarette packet featured just five names, none of them remotely famous beyond their own living room: Jordi Caixa, a minor official from Barcelona Town Hall; Salvador Dilly Dally, a transvestite from Seville in civvies for the night; Ramon Pagès, a footballer who played for Barcelona's reserve team; and the aforementioned Englishmen, William Ballinger and Godfrey Hogan.

The latter two NVIPs (not very important persons) were perched precariously on swivel stools at the downstairs cocktail bar, sticking out like hippies at a bullfight. Billy Blunder, as he was known to friend and foe alike, was a tall, coat-hanger-thin blond kid. Chain-smoking Godfrey was a short, Joe Frazier lookalike with Jheri curls. The Smokin' Joe clone looked a decade older than his scrawny sparring partner, but, in fact, the otherwise odd couple had been born within two weeks of each other in November 1955. Godfrey was born on the third of the month, the same day *Gyys and Dolls* premiered at Grauman's Chinese Movie Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. A so-so musical which had clearly suffered an identity crisis at the casting stage, it starred the tone-deaf Marlon Brando in the singing lead and ten-stone weakling Frank Sinatra as a bruising card sharp; which may explain why Godfrey had spent most of his life stumbling around arse-backwards. Like his friend, Billy Blunder was born at the North Middlesex Hospital, within mugging distance of London's North Circular. His premiere - November 20, 1955 - was the day Bo Diddley became the first African-American to appear on that bastion of WASP culture, The Ed Sullivan Show. Which may or may not explain why Billy on the dance floor offered a convincing impersonation of a rabbit blinded by headlights. Or to be more exact, strobe lights. Twenty

years later to the day, on November 20, 1975, just three weeks after Billy Blunder had first moved to Spain, General Franco had the good grace to shuffle off his mortal coil. Never before had so many people treated Billy to free drinks on his birthday. Factories and schools were shut down, officially to mourn, but in Franco-hating neighbourhoods, relieved Catalans dashed home to indulge in the madre of all parties. For every candle lighted by a pious mourner in Barcelona Cathedral or the Santa Maria del Mar Church, a bottle of cava was popped open somewhere else in town.

Billy and Godfrey's decidedly secular mantra was, to paraphrase Sunrise's obscure disco anthem, 'Young, free and single, I just wanna mingle'. Or as Godfrey would chant like a Gregorian monk in between blowing smoke rings in nightclub pews, 'Twenty, well-hung and full of Jamaican cum'.

In truth, neither of the young North Londoners looked remotely eligible in their standard issue soul boy gear. Billy was wearing a cherry red jacket with lapels so wide he was in danger of taking flight if he ventured onto higher ground. Much as he loved fun-fairs, Tibidabo was strictly off-limits, which was a shame because he could have done a passable impersonation of The Red Baron alongside the hillside fair's main attraction; the famous red aeroplane. The flapping bell-bottoms were a colour-clashing tangerine, but Billy's lobster red face matched his jacket to perfection. Most Barcelona city dwellers avoid the August sun like the Spanish plague, preferring to sip their vermouths at café tables in the shade of overhanging Gothic parapets, or under giant parasols. Cocoa-coloured Godfrey didn't have to suffer for a suntan, but like most Brits abroad, Billy preferred the Mad Dogs and Englishmen approach ('Suntan lotion is for poofs!'); posing, artist's model still, bare arms spread wide on the arms of his aluminium chair, face lifted skywards as if challenging the sun to a rumble on the football terrace.

Luckily for Billy, a combination of the shadowy lighting of Studio 54's cocktail corner and his dark sunglasses meant he was oblivious to the vermilion dazzle when he looked in the mirror behind the row of Martini bottles and posed his favourite question, plagiarized, like his ever-present shades, from TV detective Kojak. 'Who loves you baby?' If mirrors could answer, and even more improbably round these parts, speak English, the response would have been a resounding 'Nobody, Rudolph!'. Rounding off the ill-conceived fashion collage, the stack-heeled boots were an unnecessary accessory for a stick-thin guy who stood 6 foot 3 inches in his bare feet. Billy liked to boast that his sartorial role models were 'Soul Brother Number

One' James Brown and Warren Beatty's randy hairdresser in Shampoo. But as step-dad number two, a dapper lagger from Hackney, was fond of observing, the overall effect was more Star Trek meets Steptoe.

Billy Blunder's equally hapless fashion companion was wearing an avocado green, spandex shirt (soggy spandex at that; Godfrey could sweat for England, even on a midwinter's day in Tottenham), a canary yellow cravat, and beige Oxford bags with a waistband so high it trespassed into navel territory. Godfrey was labouring under the delusion that his space walk platform shoes were a bonus, converting his modest 5' 3" into a more manly 5' 6". Sadly, when going toe to toe with girls wearing even more gravity-defying heels, the metamorphosis metamorphosed back into the Incredible Shrinking Man. In normal circumstances Godfrey would attempt to gain a few more inches by wearing a funky hat like the one James Brown sports on the album cover of *The Payback*, but Studio 54 had a strict 'no headwear' policy, so his pimp hat was stuffed in his back pocket. Back in England, the only men still wearing hats were either black (the red, gold and green tea-cosy being especially big in Tottenham) or their 'pals' in blue uniforms. By contrast, the streets of Barcelona resembled a 1940s film noir, where no man would venture down the mean streets without a homburg, panama, or snap brim fedora for protection. Just about the only hat not stuffed in anyone's back pocket tonight was the traditional Catalan barretina, a dead ringer for the Jamaican tea cosy. Minus the gold and green.

Godfrey and Billy may have been keen to mingle, but if looks had anything to do with it any semen-bearing tiddlers launched by the out of place Londoners were likely to sink without trace in the deep end of their flapping bell-bottoms. And if the dog's dinner soul boy apparel proved an insufficient disincentive, there was always the stench of cheap aftershave to deter girls who were both colour-blind and desperate.

Both friends were nursing dubious-looking cocktails. Neither was overjoyed about the choice of tipple, but it would have been churlish to refuse as they were on the house courtesy of Nacho, the bouncer who'd put them on the guest list. When Nacho wasn't throwing pugilistic feints on the door at Studio 54, he was holed up in a pokey room with Billy's flatmate, a stripper from Somerset called Gladys. Or tossing tequila in the kitchen, fantasizing about the day he would get a job mixing the drinks at Studio 54, or, in his wildest dreams, at Boadas, the legendary cocktail bar opposite the Canaletes fountain at the top of the Ramblas. 'I may be a modest doorman,'

Nacho was fond of stating in portentous tones, ‘but a man has to have ambitions in life.’

Boadas had once been the haunt of the likes of Pablo Picasso, Tyrone Power and Francis Bacon, and was still a draw for aspiring artists and literary-inclined tourists. Picasso lived briefly in Barcelona in his teens, had a famously iron constitution, and lived to the ripe old age of 91 in his adopted France. Power and Bacon, on the other hand, both died in Spain. The Hollywood heart-throb died in Madrid in 1958 after suffering a heart attack while filming a strenuous dueling scene for *Solomon and Sheba*. Thirty-four years later, the British painter drew his last breath in the same city after a forlorn attempt at reconciliation with his final lover, an aristocratic Spanish art dealer, fifty years his junior. Bacon spent the last six days of his life in a Catholic Clinic in Madrid, wheezing oxygen from a bottle and nursed by nuns. This latter circumstance must have been especially galling for such a vociferous atheist, though as the twentieth century’s greatest figurative painter and an incorrigibly louche character, he would probably have appreciated the irony of dying alone in a shoe-box sized room adorned with nothing more picturesque than a carved figure of Jesus on the cross above his bed.

Living in shoe-box sized apartments was the one thing genteel English expats never got used to about Barcelona life, finding it even harder to cope with than the language, driving on the wrong side of the road, or having to buy underwear at *El Corte Inglés*, a pale imitation of Marks and Spencer which had a lemming-like hold over the Spanish middle classes despite a product range that artfully combined mediocrity with poor value for money. But for the likes of Billy, dragged-up in a tiny hovel on the twelfth floor of a council block in Tottenham, the lack of personal space was hardly an issue.

When he had first moved on to campus at Essex University in 1973 he’d felt like royalty in his very own bare-bricked cubicle with his very own cot. The odd family holiday in Clacton aside, the William Morris Tower at Essex was the first time he had slept in his own room in anything but a bunk-bed! His room in Barceloneta was even bigger than his university digs; big enough to swing at least two cats. ‘Bloody luxury,’ he’d told Godfrey when first inviting him over for a weekend. Through Billy’s bedroom window, you could just about make out the ships’ masts in the old fishing port beyond the line of grimy, abandoned warehouses on the other side of *Paseo Nacional*. Even allowing for the bars on the window, it was a more appealing panorama

than Enfield, the only place he could see from his bedroom window in Tottenham. The only downside to the apartment was that Nacho only had six LPs; five by the Rolling Stones which he would play on a loop, like muzak in the hotel lobby from hell. His standby disc was Tammy Wynette's Stand By Your Man, which he would play for hours on end every time Gladys stormed out after one of their blazing rows. The Stones – or 'los Rollings' as the Spanish dubbed them, for no good reason that Billy could make out, other than that they were clueless about English *and* music – had actually appeared in concert a couple of months earlier at El Monumental Bullring in Barcelona. Billy had made an ingratiating show of appreciation when one of Nacho's friends presented him with a complimentary ticket, but the very next day had sold it on for four times its face value and invested the profit in a bunch of cassettes by Kool & The Gang, The Fatback Band and James Brown which he used to drown out 'Mike' Jagger's nasal drawl.

Billy had once caught Nacho red-handed in the kitchen stirring a Manhattan with a dildo, another reason he was not overly keen on cocktails. Back home in London he barely touched alcohol, his liquid intake restricted to calorie-saturated, gold-top milk delivered by the man from the Unigate Dairy in Tottenham. At Studio 54, he'd opted for a Mojito because it was the only drink on the menu he recognised. Godfrey had gone for The Cockroach because he was partial to tequila, and when not on holiday, practically lived on cranberry juice and fried chicken. There was no chicken in The Roach but two out of three wasn't bad. Neither of the pair looked entirely sure what to do with their drinks in strange-shaped glasses, cocktail bars not being a notable feature of Broadwater Farm, the sprawling council estate that was their habitual stamping territory. Suck loudly through the straw? Sip from the side and risk dribbling half the contents down their best threads? Use the umbrella as a spoon? At least back home Babycham came in a bottle.

'God', whispered Billy Blunder, leaning into his friend, almost sliding off his burnished red stool in the process, 'I was wondering, why do black men always keep their socks on in dirty movies?' Given that the average Spanish disco kid was more likely to speak Esperanto than English, the whispering was unnecessary. Lost amidst the crashing din of The JB's rhythm section as James Brown's Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine kicked-in, it also rendered the enquiry unintelligible. Billy repeated his query.

'Say what?' This time Godfrey had caught the question. His furrowed

brow reflected incredulity, not incomprehension. He cupped his left ear, beckoning Billy to repeat the question. As he did so, the cigarette which lived behind that particular flap of tissue dropped into his cocktail.

'You heard me,' Billy repeated, 'why do Afro chappies always keep their socks on in porno films?'

Godfrey made that hissing-cum-sucking between the teeth sound, unique to West Indians expressing disdain. 'And why exactly are you asking me, fool?'

'Well, do you?'

'Tsssh. Last time I looked at my CV I'd never been an employee of the adult entertainment industry. Unless one of your sissy boyfriends secretly taped me bangin' your mama.'

Billy laughed aloud, spitting his pink cocktail umbrella into Godfrey's V-shaped glass, where it joined the rogue ash from the stray ciggie. Given that Billy had lost track of his mother long before he'd lost the nappy habit, he wasn't about to take offence at the jibe. 'Even mummies are allowed one mistake!'

'Cha. All the ladies swear that once you've had black you never go back.' Godfrey threw the offending umbrella back into Billy's Mojito.

Billy winked. 'Once they've had black nobody wants 'em back! Now answer the question. Do you keep your socks on when you're nailing the baggy lions?'

'Baggy lions!' snorted Godfrey. 'Let me ask you a question, Blunder bwoy. Why you always trying to talk like a nigger?' It wasn't an entirely unreasonable query. Despite a complexion that was more dairy cream than Baileys Cream and an accent that was more Kings Cross than Kingston, Billy's conversation was peppered with Jahs and jamdungs, natty dreads and natty congos, I-mans and Ja-mans. However, he wasn't about to argue the point when he had more pressing business to pursue. 'Bloodclat. Don't change the subject. Why do the brothers keep their socks on when bonking?' Billy attempted the dismissive Caribbean teeth-sucking. In his case, it produced more spittle than sound.

Whiping the phlegm from his gheri curls with his cravat, Godfrey replied. 'Unlike your sorry self, I am not an expert in naughty films.' Now Billy knew full well that Godfrey was a regular at the Friday night, double-X sessions at The Rio Cinema in Stoke Newington. In fact, he clearly remembered accompanying his friend to the Linda Lovelace epic

*Deep Throat* and having a long discussion afterwards about the meaning of the word tingle from the film's tag line: 'How Far Does A Girl Have To Go To Untangle Her Tingle?' This was not an untypical argument. Four years after Chuck Berry's 'My Ding-a-Ling' had topped the pop charts they still hadn't agreed on what a ding-a-ling was. Coincidentally, *Deep Throat* had premiered in Barcelona earlier that month, four years after its release everywhere else in the western world, including Perpignan, just across the Spanish border. For years, Perpignan had been the site of weekly pilgrimages by coachloads of Catalans, desperate to feast their eyes on must see movies like *Deep Throat*, *The Story Of O*, *Last Tango In Paris*, and for the more high-minded, *Clockwork Orange*, all banned in Spain while Franco had anything to do with it. Even mainstream Hollywood blockbusters took forever to reach Spain under the dictatorship. *The Poseidon Adventure* and *Herbie Rides Again* had both premiered at plush cinemas in Paseo de Gracia this very week, despite the fact both films were two years old. In the former case, paranoid Francoists might have been afraid of allusions to a sinking ship, but Herbie the love bug? What kind of threat did a garrulous Volkswagen Beetle pose?

Billy ignored Godfrey's fib about his X-rated cinema-going habits. 'You've seen plenty of blaxploitation movies,' he insisted, 'so you know John Shaft keeps his socks on. And have you ever seen Huggy Bear take his socks off?'

Godfrey yawned, lighting one cigarette with the dying embers of his previous one. It was a luxury he could afford here in Spain, the country where smokers died of cancer and went to heaven... that is, right back to Spanish terra firma. Not only was tobacco here dirt cheap - a third of the cost in England - but it was considered socially acceptable to ponce fags off total strangers in the street. The first couple of times this had happened to Billy he'd been dumbstruck. In Tottenham, the demand 'Give us a fag, mate' from a complete stranger was inevitably followed by 'Give us your watch, gold chain or bag of records'. But once Gladys had told him bumming cigarettes from strangers was perfectly acceptable in Barcelona, he adopted the custom with relish. Well, the scrounging part of it. He still blanked people who had the audacity to ask him.

Billy refused to be distracted by the gathering smokescreen as Godfrey toked wilfully at his ninety-seventh Fortuna of the day. 'For chrissake,' he implored, 'even the chubby pimp who beds Pam Grier in Foxy Brown kept his socks on. Pam Grier, the Black Amazon Goddess, the Queen of Women.

That's just plain wrong!

Godfrey was a patient man, but he had his boredom threshold. 'And if I say yes, I keep mine on, does that prove your theory? That all black men keep their socks on when they have it away?.'

'It would add to the accumulated scientific evidence.'

'Yeah, right. Like just because you have posters of David Cassidy on your bedroom wall that means every pasty-faced sissy in the world ...'

'Had ...'

'What?'

'Had David Cassidy pictures on my wall. When I was thirteen.'

'Have, had, whatever.' Godfrey mimed a wet wank on a Sunday. 'And I suppose you take your socks off while you choke yourself blind watching *The Partridge Family* on the telly? That would explain why you're always wearing those over-sized Kojak shades, even indoors ... to hide the fact you can't see the end of your nose.'

'C'mon, we're discussing your feet, not my nose. Socks on or socks off?'

'Cha.' Godfrey sucked his teeth again. He was dissing Billy, but he could just as easily have been targeting Studio 54's deejay, who was now spinning the too-naff-for-words 'Get Dancin' ' by Disco Tex & His Sex-O-Lettes. One of the defining characteristics of Spanish DJs was their inability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Catholic tastes were one thing – and when in Barcelona and all that - but just when you were beginning to think, 'Wow, Marvin Gaye, this guy's on the money!' or 'James Brown, now we're talking!', the DJ would have a taste bypass and throw on 'Kung Fu Fighting' by Carl Douglas. Or worse, Boney M... 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary's Boy Child, spare us!'

Billy ignored Godfrey's vexed expression, and got back into his own particular groove. 'I've obviously hit a nerve, cotton socks man. I'll take your refusal to answer as a yes.'

Despite the scowls, the yawns and the teeth-sucking, Godfrey was not remotely annoyed by this verbal sparring. In their salubrious North London manor, arguing was either a sign of entrenched friendship or impending fisticuffs, and if truth be told, Godfrey was constitutionally incapable of falling out with his gangling companion, no matter how irritating the autistic interrogations got. He smiled, 'It's too damn hot to wear socks in this city anyway. How do the Pedros put up with this heat?'

'Not by wearing socks while they're giving Lola the showgirl one, that's

for sure. Actually, I tell a lie, the guys here are really big on pop socks like the ones their grannies wear. But they try to get away with it by calling them executive socks.’ Billy grimaced, ‘Bloody disgusting, all those ankle hairs sticking out through the nylon pores. I’ve even seen Nacho prancing around the flat in black socks and old-fashioned garters. That’s only one step away from black stockings and suspenders!’

‘Enough already with the socks,’ spat Godfey, retrieving his cocktail brolley from Billy’s glass. ‘Can we get back to the task in hand? Name the Celia and I’ll blag her. Go on. Any Celia in the club.’

Back home, ‘Celia’ was their code word for ‘girl’, which enabled them to talk about the opposite sex furtively, even at close quarters, as in ‘I really fancy the Celia stood next to Winston’ or ‘I wouldn’t touch your Celia with a bargepole’. Before he had moved to Spain, Billy Blunder spent the nights he wasn’t at discos sneaking-off to all-nighters of black and white classics at The Scala Cinema, behind Tottenham Court Road. His personal favourite was the 1945 tear-jerker *Brief Encounter*, which he’d seen at least a dozen times. Which was approximately half-a-dozen times more than he’d had sex, at least sex with another person. The soft spot for *Brief Encounter* was a result of his infatuation with demure English rose, Celia Johnson, in the role of a tormented housewife who, after much anguished soul-searching, limits her fleeting tryst with Trevor Howard’s stoic doctor to a brushing of hands across a table at a railway station cafe. How Pam Grier and Celia Johnson could rate number one and number two on any young man’s wacking-off list was a mystery wrapped up in an enigma, albeit an enigma Billy didn’t need to decipher for Godfrey who had no idea who Mrs Johnson was, but cheerfully agreed that ‘Celia’ was a useful tactic for blindsiding girls at Upstairs at Ronnie’s, their regular haunt in the West End. Such diversionary tactics were unnecessary in Barcelona, but old habits die hard.

‘Forget about pulling a Celia, man,’ said Billy. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, this isn’t Totts, this is Barcelona, and there is no way in hell one of these señoritas is gonna get it on with un negro. They’re Catholics, for God’s sake.’

‘All the more reason why they should kneel down at the altar of God... (long pause, several smoke rings) ...frey.’ The lapsed son of Jamaican Methodists smirked and then crossed himself for effect, touching his nose first instead of his forehead, and then going right when he should have gone left, and vice versa. Billy, who’d heard the lame punchline a zillion

times, shook his head benignly. If his plan came to fruition tonight, Godfrey would end up genuflecting for all he was worth.

'Forget it,' he insisted. 'These are proper Catholics, not slutty altar girls from Highgate Ladies School.'

'And?'

'And, you heathen, everyone knows that Catholic girls in Spain won't contemplate sexual intercourse until they've been walked down the aisle and blessed by the Holy Trinity.'

'Marvin Gaye, Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali?'

'Al Green, Steve McQueen and Jimmy Greaves! ... Seriously, God', the last bloke a nice Spanish girl is going to snuggle up to in here is a black one. How many brothers do you see in here?' Billy had a point. There were dozens of black Marines across the road at El Bagdad, but here at Studio 54 a nonchalantly racist door policy - 'Sorry, no military attire!' 'Sorry, you're not a member!' 'Sorry, we're full!' or simply, 'Sorry, no niggers!' - ensured the crowd was the whitest gathering this side of Franco's wake. Godfrey had only got in tonight because Billy had persuaded Nacho to put him on the guest list.

'Godfrey,' Billy persisted, 'how many black faces can you see in here?'

'Diana Ross.'

'I meant black men.'

'Stevie Wonder.'

'He's blind, he doesn't know he's black.'

'James Brown.'

'Posters don't count.'

'Cha, you're living in the past, man,' spat Godfrey. 'This is '76, not '36. General Frankie is dead, right? Even I know that and I'm only a tourist. For someone who's been living here a year, you sure ain't up on your history.'

'It's not history, rasta. You're still likely to get baton charged here if you're black, gay or a commie.'

'Oh yeah. Like the Old Bill haven't copped me a dozen times 'cos of the sus bollocks?'

'But at least you get to vote back home. Who do you think elected the prime minister here? Nobody, that's who. He was handpicked by the King. And what do you think Mr Suarez has been doing for the previous twenty years? Working for Franco, that's what. It's like the Queen using her Christmas Speech to anoint Enoch Powell or James Bond as prime

minister.’

Godfrey thought that 007 would make a pretty decent prime minister, but otherwise Billy had lost him. ‘Cha, man. The only vote I’m interested in is the ladies vote. And, if I’m the only thoroughbred black man in the house that gives me the edge, right?’

‘The edge?’

‘Yeah, man. Novelty value.’

Billy sighed. ‘OK, but don’t say I didn’t warn you, Kunta Kinte.’

‘You warned me, Massa. Now just feed me those lines one more time. How do I say Hello darling in Spanish?’

Billy shrugged his shoulders. ‘Hola tonta,’ [1] pronounced with a reasonable accent.

‘Hola tonti,’ echoed Godfrey, less convincingly. ‘What about, You’re looking beautiful tonight?’

‘Estás muy fea esta noche,’ [2] said Billy slowly, the stress more or less in the right place.

‘Estás muy fea esta noche,’ repeated Godfrey, the stress barely in the same sentence. ‘What about, Would you like to dance?’

‘Te gustaría chupar mi enorme polla negra?’ [3] said Billy, articulating each word laboriously and beginning to sound like a Berlitz tape, though his pronunciation was still recognisable as the lingua franca of Cervantes and Julio Iglesias.

‘Te gustaría chupar mi enorme polla negra?’ slobbered Godfrey, not sounding remotely Spanish, though artistically speaking, Dali at his most surreal would have approved. ‘Seems like a lot of words for, Do you wanna dance?’ he frowned.

‘That’s Spanish grammar for you,’ replied Billy dead-pan, ‘everything is long and convoluted.’

‘If you say so, professor.’ Godfrey took a deep breath. ‘Te gustaría chupar mi enorme polla negra?’ he repeated several times, increasingly tongue-tied by syllables. ‘Yeah, I think I’ve got it now,’ he said, puffing out his chest and carefully positioning his gold medallion over his spandex shirt. ‘Now watch the master in action. God by name, sex God by nature.’

[1] Hello stupid.

[2] You’re looking particularly ugly tonight.

[3] Would you like to suck my big black dick?

'You're absolutely sure you don't wanna start with, 'Hi there, señorita. Do you speak English?' Billy wasn't throwing Godfrey a lifeline. He knew his friend wouldn't budge. He was just stretching out the fun.

'Nah, man, I wanna impress them with my Spanish. You told me the Celiás here love the English accent when we speak their limbo,' said Godfrey, mangling his own language.

'Lingo,' corrected Billy Blunder, 'Not limbo.'

'Lingo, limbo, jimbo, jumbo, whatever.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever. But when Lola's extended family is beating you to a pulp, don't come looking for me to translate your sorry arse out of trouble.'

'Tsssh,' Godfrey sucked his teeth long and hard. 'Stop cramping my style, man. C'mon, choose the lucky lady.'

'Have it your way, but don't forget our little wager; a pony for me if you're not snogging in thirty minutes.'

'You mean twenty-five quid for me when my beautiful black lips hit the runway!'

'That means proper tongue action,' insisted Billy, 'not pecking on the cheek 'cos that's how they say hello here. Even to people they don't like.'

'Tsssh!'

Billy perused the bar slowly, deliberately prolonging his friend's agony. Eventually he fixed his eyes on the only other person daft enough to risk a cocktail mixed by a barman who had spent most of the night running his greasy fingers through hair so lank you could have fried an egg in it. By comparison, Nacho's vibrator seemed a healthy option. The girl in question, clearly of a more practical vein than Studio 54's North London contingent, was using her cocktail umbrella as a toothpick. She wasn't unattractive but definitely carried a few kilos over her fighting weight, and was suspiciously hirsute in the upper lip region.

'That girl along the bar with the pink cocktail,' said Billy, nudging his friend's elbow.

'She's got a 'tache, man,' moaned Godfrey.

'That's just an illusion caused by the mirror balls.'

'She's porky, too.'

'That's just the cut of her blouse.'

'She's on her own.'

'That means she's available.'

‘Great. So she’s a porky wallflower.’

‘Stop fretting! What do you always say? I’d fuck the crack of dawn if it would let me. Now, it’s my call, and I choose cocktail Celia.’

Godfrey surrendered. He was not a man of the world, but he was a man of his word. ‘Alright. Time to make la senior-eater’s day.’ He gargled a last swig of cocktail as if it was mouthwash, slid off his stool, cracked his knuckles, hitched up his Oxford bags and positioned a fresh cigarette carefully behind his left ear. Primed to seduce, he ambled into action, one shoulder dropping at a 45 degree angle in best Jamaican rude boy style. He reached the girl, propped one elbow on the bar and leant directly into her face without pausing for breath or giving her time to even register his presence. As he launched into his well-rehearsed but linguistically flawed serenade, Billy leapt off his stool and strode purposefully across the dance floor. Fittingly, the DJ was now playing *Ain’t Gonna Bump No More (With No Big Fat Woman)* by Joe Tex to a packed dance floor. As he arrived at the door to the street, he nodded to his strapping flatmate on security detail. ‘Nach’, you know that guy I came in with?’

‘El Negro?’ grunted Nacho. ‘Yeah,’ replied Billy. ‘Well, I don’t really know him. He just latched on to me. But you might wanna keep an eye on him, he’s had a Roach cocktail too many.’

‘No trouble, I hope?’

‘No,’ Billy smiled, ‘he may be a dead-ringer for Joe Frazier, but by the looks of things he fights more like Joe Ninety.’

Nacho spoke what passed for fluent English in downtown Barcelona, albeit with a disorientating West Country burr courtesy of too much pillow talk with Gladys, but Joe Ninety was a pop culture stretch too far. He grunted, looking confused.

Then following Billy’s pointing finger, he peered across to the cocktail bar where Godfrey was sprawled on the ground, floored by a left hook from the toothpick girl, who was clearly more Pam ‘The One-Chick Hit-Squad’ Grier than mild-mannered Celia Johnson, who would agonise for simply yonks before bucking up the courage to ask the Lyons Tea Room waitress for a clean serviette, let alone thump an unwanted suitor. Nacho got the picture. As he moved decisively across the dance floor to the scene of the crime, pushing and shoving his way past couples bumping hips to Joe Tex, he looked over his shoulder and mouthed, ‘Hasta luego, Billy.’

‘Hasta luego, Nach’.

Billy Blunder strode down Paralelo past El Bagdad, his face sporting a grin as wide as the performing donkey's arse. Turning into Calle Conde del Asalto, he stopped dead in his tracks and looked back over his shoulder at the lurid marquee of the world-famous harem. Was it his imagination, or had the donkey grinned back?



**FIRE!!**

**15<sup>a</sup> Mostra Internacional de Cinema Gai i Lesbià**  
Institut Francès, Barcelona. Del 1<sup>er</sup> al 4 de juliol de 2016  
Organitzat: Casal Lambda. [www.cinemasibmda.com](http://www.cinemasibmda.com)

**Cine y documental de autor sin etiquetas**

Le Refuge de François Ozon  
Contrabando de Javier Fuentes León  
Plan B de Marco Tullio Giordana  
Eye wide open de Hideo Takahashi  
Je te mangerais de Sophie Lécuyer  
Blind Company de Alvin Kersh  
I killed my mother de Xavier Dolan  
El Cuarto de Leo de Enrique Buchicho  
Amphetamine de Sean  
Fela Orgasm on the Sol  
Outrage de Kirby Dick  
Fan de Neri Oxari  
Nobody passes perfectly de Saskia Ring  
Let's be together de Hanna Park Müller  
Frodo's Machos de Mikko Rinokainen  
Sex Positive de Cory Wein  
—

La mirada de... Salvades i l'hibit  
Plan Sud + Wild side + Presque rien

## First Letter from Barcelona

### Billy Mills

so much culture amongst  
the dirt – the air  
laden – the city selling  
itself on hoard-

ings designed by Miro  
to shoppers in el corte  
ingles or the de-  
formed limbs exposed

on the metro ‘tengo  
hambre’ the sign  
says I have hunger  
walking the streets in

the Barrio Gotico  
the bread is sub-  
stantiated air – ring-  
ing with ‘butano

butano’ where note  
follows note in un-  
expected un-  
suspected order as

Santa Lucia –  
clean lines after  
grandiloquent saints next  
door – the smell of the

sewer the smell of  
the sea reminding  
the desiccate river  
'are only for

those who can write  
a faultless fugue straight  
away with no need to  
correct it' attending

the dry disks of  
honesty (Lunaria  
biennis) in memory  
as the wind an-

swers 'not conspicuously'  
the strings plangency  
in a certain garden  
held as

instigator – the plane  
of a tear on the plane  
of a cheek in  
the widows palace –

fingers and bow on  
the strings the narrow  
streets turning back  
to the no longer ri-

ver the birds and flowers  
their vendors in cantus  
firmus – the burden  
of air attend-

ed in a kind of  
attenuated exile  
ordering perceptions  
(how many?

and their names?) we sit  
on the fifth floor and  
listen to pigeons  
on the roof 'with con-

venient notes' the litter  
lays down a map  
of the city as used  
regathering daily

in an order of tones  
the streets turn back on  
themselves as we listen  
to the cello

sustaining the note  
while playing gains firmness  
with confidence  
sustaining the move-

ment into another  
quarter – attending  
again the firm song  
borrowed the val-

ue implied in walking  
to come at last to  
no conclusion no  
resolution.

## The Shaman of Otavalo

Ian Orti

When the driver saw Baillardo wincing in the back seat he asked him what his problem was and Baillardo told him. 'It's my back.'

'Well then why don't we go see the Shaman of Otavalo?'

'I'm the Surgeon General,' said Baillardo. And as he felt the mountain air in his face said, 'It probably wouldn't be right; it could reflect badly or something.'

But the driver just said 'Bah,' and locked eyes with Baillardo in the rear view mirror, 'He's just around the corner.'

'Well, why not,' said Baillardo.

Lying on his stomach Baillardo pointed to his problem and the Shaman pressed the sedate mountain guinea pig along his back.

'Here is your problem?' asked the Shaman.

'Yes,' said Baillardo, and the Shaman snapped the neck of the guinea pig, killing it instantly. Then the Shaman, with his fingernail, punctured the skin of the mountain rodent, and proceeded to pull its skin from its body until its spine and intestines were fully exposed.

'Your back will be fine, but why you no tell me everything,' asked the Shaman.

'I did,' said Baillardo. 'The problem is in my back.'

'Yes I can see that,' said the Shaman, pointing to the black coloration at the base of the rodent's spine. 'But also you have these ulcers' and pointed to the three black spots on the animal's intestinal wall.

'Oh yeah,' said Baillardo. 'Had those for a while.'

## Rebus in Barcelona

*Ambushed on a recent visit to the city Ian Rankin, the creator of the renowned Edinburgh detective, answers our 20 Questions*

### **Barcelona...**

Edinburgh with heat

### **A reason to visit...**

it's a great city to walk around

### **A reason to leave...**

fear of pickpockets

### **A time to write...**

late at night...

### **A place to write...**

in a cafe or bar, with a beer or a glass of wine to hand

### **A good day's work...**

can be a single sentence or an entire story, just so long as you're pleased with it

### **A place to read...**

trains and planes

### **The first line of a book...**

'Someone – or something – had killed Barcelona. It was his job to find out why.' (I made that up: feel free to steal it.)

### **A line from a poem...**

'Her pleasure whispered through a much-kissed smile' (Douglas Dunn, 'Tursac')

**An interesting quote...**

‘When one has been threatened with a great injustice, one accepts a smaller as a favour’ (Jane Welsh Carlyle)

**Food for thought...**

chocolate; chocolate gets me thinking...

**A drink to wash it down...**

massala tea

**The role of a writer...**

To create new and interesting worlds

**A good author should...**

yet rarely does...

**A sentence should be...**

fitting to the crime

**Language makes us...**

but also has the power to unmake us

**A valuable talent...**

invisibility

**An essential tool...**

a pen, naturally

**A memorable expression in Spanish or Catalan...**

‘A la tercera fue la vencida’ (final line of ‘Los Suenos de un Libertador’ by Fermin Goni)

**A final question...**

What’s the point?