

A kind of window opened in the rain, just as if the cloud had been hitched aside like a curtain, and in the space between we saw a landscape that took our breath away. The high ground along which the road ran fell away through a black woody belt, and beyond it, for more miles than you can imagine, lay the whole basin of the Black Country, clear, amazingly clear, with innumerable smoke-stacks rising out of it like the merchant shipping of the world laid up in an estuary at low tide, each chimney flying a great pennant of smoke that blew away eastward on the wind, and the whole scene bleared by the light of a sulphurous sunset. No one need ever tell me again that the Black Country isn't beautiful. In all Shropshire and Radnor we'd seen nothing to touch it for vastness and savagery. And then this apocalyptic light! It was like a landscape of the end of the world, and, curiously enough, though men had built the chimneys and fired the furnaces that bred the smoke, you felt that the magnificence of the scene owed nothing to them. Its beauty was singularly inhuman and its terror - for it was terrible, you know - elemental. It made me wonder why you people who were born and bred there ever write about anything else. So we walked on through a landscape that was like a spoiled photographic plate.

Frances Brett Young, Cold Harbour, 1924



The Days of The Brades

I used to live in Brades Village. My mother worked at Parkes sweet factory, as did two or three aunts. That was the way it went back then, one relative got a job, then another was introduced and went to work there. The nearest factory to our house was what everyone called The Brades, with its dark exterior looming high above me, imposing along the length of Brades Road, as far at the post office and newsagents. Opposite the factory was Brades Tavern pub, another impressive old dark brick building. I didn't know what they made at The Brades until much later. Until I was 27, when we moved to Rowley, I don't think I even saw workers come and go from the factory. I never heard the sounds of industry coming from the inside – but the walls were castle thick, quietening any sound of workers toiling away within. I remember afternoons when the sun shone on the Brades facade and the deep shadows. All those huge windows that looked as if they'd never been cleaned. I remember other days when rain scudded down, making the scene all the more dark, grey and gloomy. Is anybody really in there, I used to wonder? It was a mystery to me, as I walked past every day, on my way to school or work.

My first job after leaving school was at Myers, in Langley Green. Best factory, best job, best canteen, best food, good people. Happy memories. The variety of the job! Sorting samples of Bulldog clips, doing pegboard displays for exhibitions, packing leaflets for orders, running errands for the bosses, typing addresses on envelopes, and my favourite – opening the post. I was curious where the letters came from, all those clients overseas, far-away places. I had pen friends myself in different countries, Sweden, Poland, Turkey, Bangladesh. I enjoyed writing to them and liked to see all those different coloured postage stamps.

My worst memory was from the time I worked at Cuxson & Gerrard in Fountain Lane, winding finger bandages and packing them. The noise of the wide cotton spinning machines, to fro, to fro, to fro, the cotton mill hellhole where it had to be hot and humid for the cotton thread. (The cotton would rot and break if there was no humidity.) The dust, the big overhead heating pipes, steam dripping on our heads, our backs cold from draughty metal windows, feet ice-cold from standing for hours on end on quarry stone. The flattened cardboard we had on the floor hardly warmed our feet, even in summer.

It was piece work. We were paid by the number of units we produced, regardless of the time it took. I was really too slow to earn the day work rate, so I had regular tellings off. One week, I won the Bandage Room Weekly Raffle. The prize was a cosmetics bag, an incentive from the supervisor. She was stern. I was so scared and embarrassed collecting my prize. After all, she was always reprimanding me for working far too slow.



You see, it turned out I suffered from double vision, so I had problems with co-ordination. You had to work the clamp, turn the handle and the wheel, bring the cotton down, fold it, wrap it, then apply glue to the edges of little pieces of greaseproof paper to hold the wrapper together. So I never made the piece work rate.

But, like millworkers of old, there was one thing that made my experience of that factory worth it. We had the annual works outings. One was to the Isle of Wight and my mother came along. I remember the train pulling out of Oldbury station and the excitement. Once we got there, we saw beauty, a paradise, and the year after we returned for a wonderful holiday there.

Looking back, now that I know what they made at The Brades factory, all those hundreds of thousands of axes and other powerful tools. I reckon I would have a use for them back in the 1970’s – to demolish some of those factories and to end the terrible working conditions. I’d have used those axes, and I’d have axed every brick, wooden door at Cuxson & Gerrard, demolished those outside iron steps that were slippery in the rain and ice. It was years later that I was going by on the number 4 bus and I saw the bricks of that building where I’d worked, they were scattered about, demolished.

It was the kind of morning when a sort of mist lingered in the bright blue sky, beautiful really. I asked myself the question, ‘Why all the drudgery there, the sacrifice of workers’ health?’ Yet the old was becoming something new. The Brades factory walls now faced the freshly built maisonette housing of Brades Rise and the blocks of flats. Soon enough The Brades itself was to be demolished. Now this area looks quite modern, not in keeping with a village tradition. No longer will you find a Black Country wench in her long pinafore looking down from canal bridge. The Black Country changing, its industry faded.

~ Jackie Adams

NOTES:

The image on the previous page, sourced from the Warley News of June 1956, was originally captioned: ‘Two charming employees of the Brades and Nash Tyzack Industries Ltd compare axes. Left is pictured the Kelly axe, one of the most modern of its kind... and right we have a ceremonial axe belonging to the Household Cavalry, two more of which are to made by the firm, for shipment to Canada.’ The Brades was the local name for the oldest firm of edge tool makers in the district, William Hunt & Sons, founded in 1796. In 1962, they were acquired by Spear & Jackson. Production stopped at that site in the early 1980’s.

Parkes Classic Confectionary in Langley were founded in 1904. They exported sweets to India, Ceylon, Burma, South Africa, Singapore, Canada and Belgium. Continuing into the 1970’s, the firm eventually merged with Bluebird Toffee.

Myers of Vicarage Road, Langley Green, were ‘Manufacturers of office requisites, writing instruments, mathematical instruments, display appliances, small metal pressings and importers.’

Cuxson & Gerrard were founded in 1878 as a manufacturer of surgical dressings and are still in operation today, though without the working conditions recalled by Jackie in ‘the good old days.’

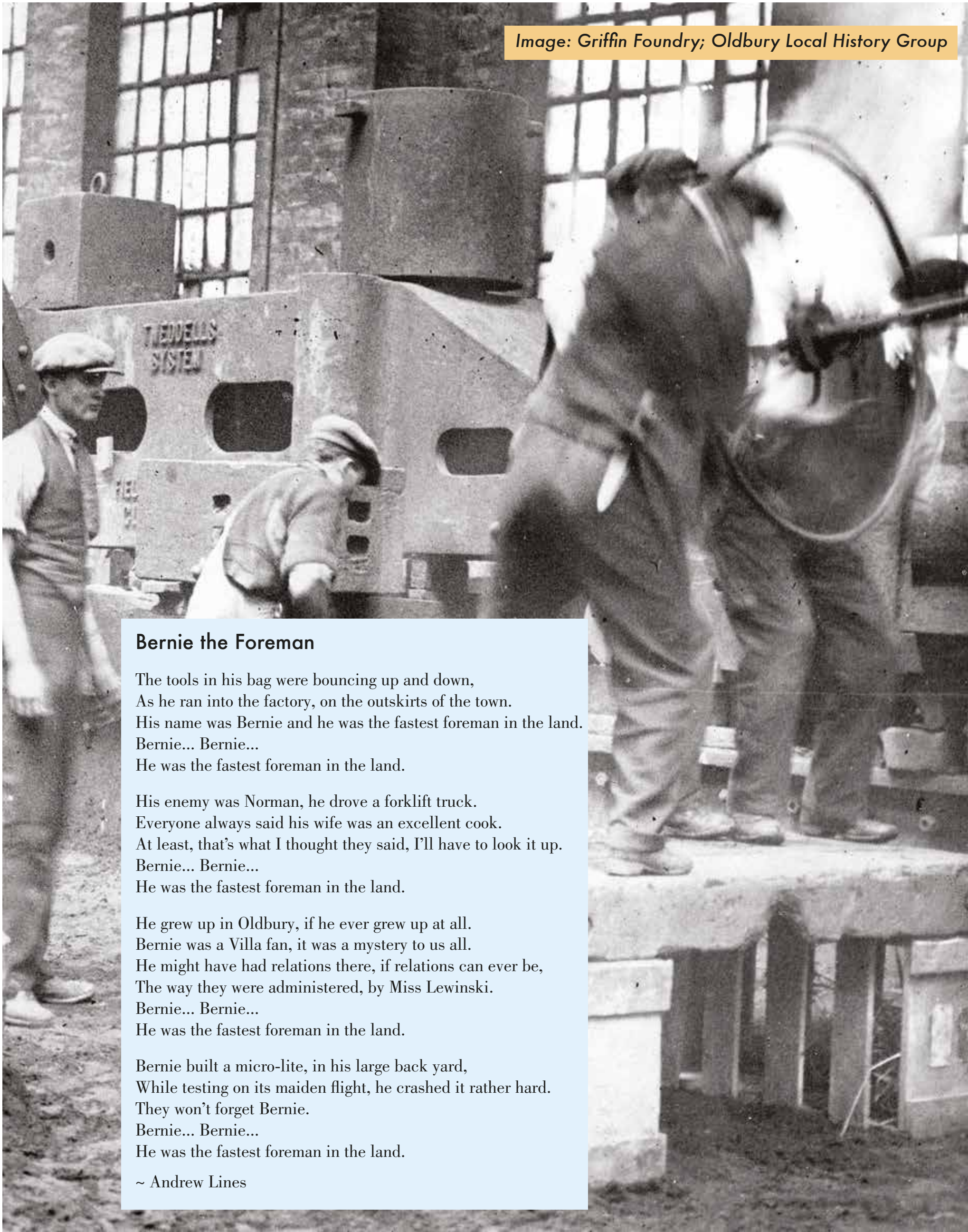


Image: Griffin Foundry; Oldbury Local History Group

Bernie the Foreman

The tools in his bag were bouncing up and down,
As he ran into the factory, on the outskirts of the town.
His name was Bernie and he was the fastest foreman in the land.
Bernie... Bernie...
He was the fastest foreman in the land.

His enemy was Norman, he drove a forklift truck.
Everyone always said his wife was an excellent cook.
At least, that’s what I thought they said, I’ll have to look it up.
Bernie... Bernie...
He was the fastest foreman in the land.

He grew up in Oldbury, if he ever grew up at all.
Bernie was a Villa fan, it was a mystery to us all.
He might have had relations there, if relations can ever be,
The way they were administered, by Miss Lewinski.
Bernie... Bernie...
He was the fastest foreman in the land.

Bernie built a micro-lite, in his large back yard,
While testing on its maiden flight, he crashed it rather hard.
They won’t forget Bernie.
Bernie... Bernie...
He was the fastest foreman in the land.

~ Andrew Lines

It's how it used to be for us kids
Walking down the street to school
The sound of metal clanking around
The smell of the local iron foundry in the air
Skipping past the works of molten lava flowing hot
Casting the sands of time

Black Country, black smoke and the smog
Kids in shorts and long grey socks walking past
Workers cooling down with pop from the milkman
Some supping their tea with hands full of butties
Longing for the dirty hot day to end
Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter
The same all year round for the Iron Clad gang

Bang, bang, bang
Goes the sound of the machinery day and night
Clouds above their world turned black
The work never stopped
As the Black Country poured out its
Blood and hot iron on a daily serving
Cobbled streets for worn out feet
Long houses and streets piled up together
Workers boots leave the dirt outside
As they rest their weary bones
Ready for the heat and sweat of another day

Lorries arrived through the gate
Loaded up the spoils of the day
Exhaust fumes smoking up the streets
One by one, day after day
And so it began again and again
Workers arrive to the siren and leave to the siren
Boots hit the streets like a marching beat every night
Fed and watered by the pinny wearers of the house
A brew and a kip keeps the Black Country moving through time



Chains made us great
Roofing kept us dry
We drove over the gratings
Smelting was the business
From the pudding furnace
To just pigs pudding
Don't forget pig iron from the rolling mills
Created in the chafery hearth of Rood End Road

Blisters on the hands by the blisters of iron and steel
Then some off the blacksmith's forge
Iron and steel would sail the seven seas or sink in it forever
Local iron men and women forged the gates to protect us
And so the heavy chains that bound us together
They bound the workers of the Black Country forever
We made and we baked to keep the work flowing through the gates
Water paved the way to delivering our network of products
Horses and diesel drove the heavy-laden barges
They moved to a crawl heading out and into the world
Now it's just for the fun of having a boating holiday
Has it been easily forgotten?

The blacksmith's forge and the sparks fly
The hammer hits hard as the steel was rolled
Cooling sprays of water as steam filled the room
Over and over the sword was forged
Polished and admired, gleaming
And fit for an officer and a gentleman

Horse's hooves and all the workers of the canals needed shoes
Bits and rein to pull the boats as fishermen waved them by
Tunnels and more dark tunnels through miles of waterways
The longest in the country for the good old Black Country
Iron hulls ploughed the depths and moved our industry all around
Our Black Country skills are what made us proud

~ Chris Allen

Image: woodcut by John and Janet Ross, 1961

Sports day



Image: Sport Field, Accles & Pollock, 1948, from their in-house magazine 'Apollo'; Sandwell Community History and Archives Service

Sports Day

I told my mom last week that I have been asked to enter into the 800 metre race, a run that takes you twice around the track for sports day. Don't get me wrong, I am fairly fit, I have come 2nd twice in the 1,500 metres, done well with cross country, but in truth I am not a long distance runner, I don't have the stamina, me, I'm a sprinter. I have never lost a 100 metre race and my team always comes first in the relays, my best time, 13 seconds flat. My teacher, Mrs Pugh, said if I keep on training at that speed I could make it to the Olympics one day, wow, imagine that, the Olympics.

I remember a few months ago, I had to join the third years in their PE class because my class had gone on a bike ride and I can't ride a bike for love or money. But that was fine, the day was fine and all the boys were at the top of the field playing cricket, well, they was when they wasn't watching me speed along the track like a runaway train. That was a good day. The only time anyone is interested in me was when I am running. Other than that, no one wants to know, not me, the smallest girl in the class, who always sits by herself and never answers the questions. I can't even pronounce my R's properly but none of that matters when I am sprinting, no one can beat me, believe me, plenty have tried... and failed.

So today, as I get myself ready, warming up for this 800 metre race I can feel my nerves. There isn't usually this many people about when I am running, but today, I am feeling the pressure, I feel like I am on stage and my heart is going ten to the dozen before I even start. I take a few deep breaths while I complete my warm up, stretching my legs, winding my hips and reaching out and up with my arms, letting my muscles unfold.

The day is warm, the sky is blue and the smoke from the factories are pumping rubbish into the air, but that is nothing new.

My mom, little sister and brother are standing around the track. I glimpse them and they wave, I wave back with a nervous smile. All I can hear is voices and I wish they'd just go away and let me run in peace. What's worse is that Joanne is in this race too. She thinks she is better than everyone else and when I look at her parents I see why, her dad owns a BMW, and her mother is wearing what can only be described as a dead animal around her neck.

I hear my name called over the PA system and suddenly I feel sick. They want us all to get lined up on the track. I am the first to get there so I am positioned on the inside, which suits me fine. I look up and close my eyes for a moment, I



breathe steadily, I focus on the ground and clear my mind. I step into the starters positions and wait for the “On your marks, get set, GO!”

Unlike everyone else in the race, I take it steady, I am not jogging, but I am not sprinting either. I hear my breathing and the voices from the sides fade, everyone is racing off in front, and I am last. Lorraine gets to about the 200 metre mark and she has to stop and walk, her stamina has gone, she needs to take a breath and I run past her. Kelly is fitter than the rest of us and she takes the lead, Joanne has stopped completely at the 400 metres, she is clutching her side, I take over and run past her and smile. A few others have slowed down, they are no longer sprinting and so I take over them too. I am coming up to Kelly and we are neck and neck. Then at the last 100 metres, all that energy I stored for keeping steady rushes through and I sprint, I run and I don't look back, my breathing is easy and I see my feet literally leaping from the ground as I push through the finish line, the crowd roars with cheers, claps and whistles. Kelly was right behind me, there was only a half a second in it.

My mom, sister and brother come straight over to congratulate me, I am out of breath and so I bend with my hands on my knees willing myself to stand upright. The sweat is pouring from me and I must stink to high heaven. But that doesn't matter, my mom gives me a hug as says, “I knew you would win, your trouble is that you don't believe in yourself enough.”

As the day came to an end, and I had showered and dressed back into my jeans and T-shirt, Joanne, the class bully walks over to me. “You're still as thick as two short planks and I am still better than you.” I raised an eyebrow and I could not help my smirk. “Not on the track, you're not.”

~ Angela Garratt



A Butterfly On My Shoulder (A Black Country Fantasy)

Through the latent prism of a burning smog-enveloped past, espying the early pioneers, map and compass at the ready, invisible to the naked eye. Saluting the pacemakers, the ground-breaking risk takers of yesteryear, sweat pouring dreams of innovators and lightning-bolt eccentrics.

Here she stands, waits, gesticulates, apron smudged, indicating time on a pedestal, sign-posting the seed that grows, aided by tears, blood, wrong footing and heart straining.

Uncalculated, unbroken, the golden ribbon, strapped, taut, a gift of light, entwined, merged, the seasons ebb and flow through a kaleidoscope of half-coloured memories, children's games, circuses, broken glass, falling leaves and abandoned days. And still she observes, by chance or practised vision, we will never know, the soul, the very soul of the hidden self-saturating the misted lens with a thin sheen of hope.

The ships sailing to destinations far and wide on a sea of deep blue promise.

A mermaid singing, a phantom orchestra performing for the assembled crew.

Chains and leather, products of a tireless imagination, lie stacked and ready for use below deck.

A thousand hearts beating, the sun rising, extending its fiery influence over town, city, hill and dale.

Still she stands, bridging the gap between time and space, lost in cursed concentration, moods swinging pendulously to and fro between light and dark, night and day.

And here is a stillness observed, a serene, ceremonial stillness, a uniqueness noted and preserved. She is suddenly lost, lost in the ever moving spotlight of recorded time, real time, an indistinct time of long ago, and a time yet to come.

Empires fall, war beckons, unseen chariots guided by infant hands rush henceforth into the unforgiving maelstrom.

Unseen, unheard, the symbolic lion roars at the edge of the sub-terrestrial world.

And now she sees again the mist unfolding, revealing, breaking the very laws of time.

A childhood witnessed, her very own in fact, dawning, a caterpillar metamorphosis, a butterfly emerging, queen of her exquisite wings, a psychedelic brushstroke of honey and jam, buttercups and untied shoe laces. Here was a life of playground, backyard, rope-skipping, innocence, love hearts and insect bites. Bicycle rides along heat-blanketed, heat-shimmering country lanes.

This anonymous Miss or Mrs played a small but vitally important role in the day-to-day routine of working life. And now she sees, in all its grey-landscaped, smoke-filled, industrial glory, the recent past, the worm in the fog-blown room, wriggling to free itself lest it be sliced in half by the celestial gardener with his celestial spade.

She is a member of a stoic group, a sleeves rolled up army of factory working females blowing cobwebs from a male dominated world.

And now she sees the ultimate Earth Mother, suckling her bawling young.

A calm descends, the calm of darkness and death, peace and bullets spent.

Through this opacity, behind and beyond the observed light, filtering through the fields of dew kissed grass.

Here is the final observable scene, she cries hidden whispers and closes the door.

~ Dave Edwards

*Image: Wartime work at Accles & Pollock, 1940's;
Sandwell Community History and Archives Service*

My New Test Subject

I looked into the sad eyes of Monty, the caged monkey, and slammed my fists on the table. ‘Lilian, I love my job, but it’s appalling what we have to do to these animals, appalling. They don’t deserve to be treated like this.’ I turned to Lilian, my assistant, expecting her to agree with me, but she started to laugh.

‘You what, how else are we going to test our products. Would you prefer to kill a thousand people for the sake of one monkey?’ Lilian turned her back on me and continued to wash the specimen jars.

‘That one monkey is still a living and breathing creature. How can you not care about these animals? Don’t you understand that it is our duty to treat them well, instead of using them for our own personal gain?’

Lilian faced me. ‘Maybe if you put this much passion into your work we could have a product that worked. And then we wouldn’t have to test it on these poor monkeys so much.’ My mouth fell open. ‘There are only two reasons why animals are on this planet. One,’ she pointed up a finger at me, ‘to be our pets, and two,’ she held up another finger, ‘to make useful test subjects, so they grow two heads instead of us.’

‘Don’t you think that’s wrong?’

Lilian threw her hands to her hips. ‘No, I don’t. You know, I always knew you were a weird one. Why are you worrying so much about animals? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you had a very special kind of relationship with them.’ She winked.

‘How dare you? Get-out-of-my-lab,’ I said, teeth clenched and fists gripped. All my life it had infuriated me how little human beings cared for their fellow creatures.

Lilian’s eyes widened. ‘Are you firing me?’

‘Yes, pack your things and go.’

‘Well, I didn’t like working here anyway, especially with a weirdo like you.’ Lilian huffed and stomped out of the laboratory.

Since Lilian had left, I struggled to rid myself of the rage which had begun to ravage me like a virus. I hated testing on animals, but I knew I would have to if I wanted to keep my job. But one day, Lilian’s words returned to the front of my mind. “How else are we going to test our products? Would you prefer to kill a thousand people for the sake of one monkey?” Yes, I had finally found my solution.

After weeks of observing Lilian’s daily routine – she passed the park every evening on her way home – I decided it was time to put my plan into action. During one January evening – it was a Wednesday, I think – I waited by the

park entrance, hidden by a tree. In a bag, I had some rope, and next to my bag lay a large rug – Lilian was five foot three at the most, so I knew I could easily wrap her in the rug. In my hand, I held a bottle of chloroform and a cloth. When I noticed Lilian’s ridiculous blonde beehive bounce pass, I hastily poured some of the chloroform onto the cloth and called her name.

Lilian stopped and turned. ‘Oh, it’s you. What do you want?’

‘Come over here a minute. I have something to show you.’

Lilian huffed and stomped over to me. ‘What do you want?’

‘You.’ I grabbed her by the neck and covered her mouth with the cloth. She scratched my hand, but I held her firm, and after five minutes she passed out. Checking the area, I laid Lilian on the rug and rolled her up. I then made my way to my car, which I had parked down the street.

Once home, I brought her down to my basement, which I had set up as a mini-laboratory. I tied her to a chair and waited for her to awake. Slowly, Lilian’s eyes opened. ‘Where... where am I?’ Lilian glanced down at the rope and shook her arms. ‘What are you doing? Let me go?’

‘I think not.’ I showed Lilian the bubble bath, which we had been creating. I opened the lid. ‘Now, let’s see how this affects your eyes.’

Lilian had proved to be a useful test subject. However, she passed away. It was better for her. She was blind in both eyes, boils and blisters covered her face, her hair fell out, and she regularly threw up pink vomit – poor girl.

But that left me with a dilemma. I needed a new test subject. So, my dear, that’s where you come in. Now hold still while I put this solution in your eye. I would say it doesn’t hurt, but I would be lying.

~ Nicole J. Simms





Local author and poet Angela L. Garratt started Oldbury Writing Group in 2014, with the aim of sharing her writing knowledge and inspiring the local community to follow their dreams. Unlike other writing groups, they don't write during their meetings; instead, they share their work and knowledge, supporting and encouraging each other. You can find out more details at: oldburywritinggroup.wordpress.com.

'Made in Oldbury' is a creative project exploring unique archive materials in Sandwell in relation to local industrial heritage. Organised by an artist-led group, Laundry, the project is a partnership with Sandwell Community History and Archives Service.

Laundry invited members of Oldbury Writing Group to write new pieces inspired by an exploration of materials held in the Sandwell archives based at Smethwick library. (<http://blackcountryhistory.org>)

The project has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Arts Council of England, and Oldbury Local Area Budget.

www.madeinoldbury.co.uk

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Photograph back cover: Kate Jackson.

www.laundryline.co.uk

