

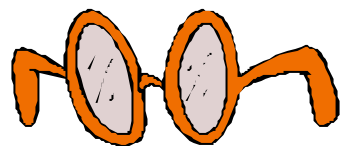
AFFLICTIONS



UNCLE EDWARD'S AFFLICTION

Uncle Edward was colour-blind;
We grew accustomed to the fact.
When he asked someone to hand him
The green book from the window-seat
And we observed its bright red cover
Either apathy or tact
Stifled comment. We passed it over.
Much later, I began to wonder
What a curious world he wandered in,
Down streets where pea-green pillar boxes
Grinned at a fire-engine as green;
How Uncle Edward's sky at dawn
And sunset flooded marshy green.
Did he ken John Peel with his coat so green
And Robin Hood in Lincoln red?
On country walks avoid being stung
By nettles hot as a witch's tongue?
What meals he savoured with his eyes:
Green strawberries and fresh red peas,
Green beef and greener burgundy.
All unscientific, so it seems:
His world was not at all like that,
So those who claim to know have said.
Yet, I believe, in war-smashed France
He must have crawled from neutral mud
To lie in pastures dark and red
And seen, appalled, on every blade
The rain of innocent green blood.

By Vernon Scannell



Mrs Midas

by Carol Ann Duffy

It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows. So I opened one, then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow. He was standing under the pear-tree snapping a twig.

Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky, but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked a pear from a branch, we grew Fondante d'Automen, and it sat in his palm like a light-bulb. On. I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?

He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed. He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready. He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne. The look on his face was strange, wild, vain; I said, What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.

I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob. Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich. He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks. He asked where was the wine. I poured with a shaking hand, a fragrant bone-dry white from Italy, then watched as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.

It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees. After we'd both calmed down, I finished the wine on my own, hearing him out. I made him sit on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself. I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone. The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears: how he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted. But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold? It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,

as the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least,
I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.

Separate beds. In fact, I put a chair against my door,
near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room
into the tomb of Tutankhamen. You see, we were passionate then,
in those halcyon days; unwrapping each other, rapidly,
like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace,
the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.

And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live
with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue
like a precious latch, its amber eyes
holding their pupils like flies. My dream-milk
burned in my breasts. I woke to the steaming sun.

So he had to move out. We'd a caravan
in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up
under cover of dark. He sat in the back.
And then I came home, the woman who married the fool
who wished for gold. At first I visited, odd times,
parking the car a good way off, then walking.

You knew you were getting close. Golden trout
on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch,
a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints,
glistening next to the river's path. He was thin,
delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan
from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold
the contents of the house and came down here.
I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,
and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead. I miss most,
even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.

THE SINGING FOOT

by Spike Milligan

Woy Woy, Australia.
September 1967.

I have an Uncle. His name is Herbert Jam. He was 52. He worked in a laundry. One Christmas Eve he was homeward bound on a crowded bus when he heard what he thought was the sound of music coming from inside his boot; indeed, what was to make him famous had happened, his right foot had commenced to sing. Poor Mr. Jam tried to control the volume of sound by tightening his boot lace; it only succeeded in making the voice go from a deep baritone to a strangled tenor. At the next stop Mr. Jam had to get off. He walked home to the sound of his right foot singing "God rest you merry gentleman". Fortunately, Mr. Jam knew the words and mimed them whenever people passed by. It was all very, very embarrassing. For three days he stayed off work. His favourite T.V. programmes were ruined by unexpected bursts of song from the foot. He did manage to deaden it by watching with his foot in a bucket of sand, but, alas, from this practice he contracted a rare foot normally only caught by Arabs and camels. Worse was to come. The foot started singing at night. At three in the morning he was awakened with selections from "The Gondoliers", "Drake is going West" and "A Whiter Shade of Pale". He tried Mrs Helen Furg, a lady who was known to have exorcised Poltergeists and Evil Spirits. She tied a sprig of witchhazel round his ankle, intoned druidic prayers and burnt all his socks in the bath, but it wasn't long before the strains of "The Desert Song" came lilting up his trouser leg again. On the recommendation of his doctor he visited the great Harley Street right-foot specialist, Sir Ralph Fees.

"Come in, sit down," said the great man. "Now what appears to be our trouble?"

"It's my right foot."

"Of course it is," said cheery Sir Ralph, "and" he went on, "what appears to be the trouble with our right foot?"

"It sings."

Sir Ralph paused (but still went on charging). "Your say your foot sings?"

"Yes, it's a light baritone," said wretched Jam.

Sir Ralph started to write. "I want you to go and see this Psychiatrist" he said - at which very moment Uncle Herbert's foot burst into song! "Just a minute" said Sir Ralph. "I'll get my hat and come with you."

The medical world and Harley Street were baffled. For the time he had to make do with a surgical sound-proof boot and a pair of wax ear-plugs. Occasionally, he would take off his boot and give the lads at the Pub a song, but Mr Jam was far from happy. Then came the beginning of the end. E.M.I. gave him a £500,000,000 contract for his foot to make records. A special group was formed, called "The Grave"; the billing was "Mr. Jam with One Foot in the Grave". He was the news sensation of the year! But, it became clear that it was the right foot that got the fame, not Mr. Jam. E.M.I. opened a bank account for the right foot. While his poor left foot wore an old boot, his right foot wore expensive purple alligator shoes from Carnaby Street which cost £50 a toe. At parties he was ceaselessly taking off his shoe to sign autographs! Mr. Jam was just an embarrassment to his right foot! One night in a fit of jealousy Mr. Jam shot his foot through the instep. It never sang again! Mr. Jam returned to the obscurity of his job in the laundry. He was 52, happy, only now he walked with a slight limp.