

From the Back Verandah

It is now five and half years since I first asked the question in this column (it was Issue 9, September 1998):

I'm trying to find out when pencils began being graded as "H" for "Hard" and "B" for "Black" . . .

It could be that there were two stages in this labelling of pencils: originally they may have been marked "BBB", for example, then at some later date this got abbreviated to "3B", etc. I suspect, too, that this method may be confined to the UK and its old dominions, because there seems to be a different grading system in the United States, which goes "1, 2, 3 . . ."

Until recently, no reader had come forward with any assistance, so the other week, on the off-chance, I checked the Internet again — and guess what? I'd missed it. Yes, someone had done the research and "put it up on the Web", as they say in the modern classics. In 1997!

Much as I'd like to, though, I'd better not use too much of his copyright material, so what I'll do is quote directly as little as I need from it.

First, for those of you with Internet access, here's the name of

the site: It's at a page called *Pencil Hardness/Softness Ratings, or Grading Pencils*, and its author is Doug Martin. The address is <http://www.pencilpages.com/articles/grades.htm>.

The relevant information:

In the early nineteenth century, English pencil makers began using a letter designation for varying hardnesses . . . Different schemes were used to expand the range of grades, such as 'BB' and 'BBB' for successively softer leads, and 'HH' and 'HHH' for successively harder leads.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a combination letter-number system had been established and was in use by nearly all European pencil makers, and was also used for some American-made pencils . . .

At the same time, a number-only system was in use, particularly in the U.S., which is still in use. The table below indicates approximate equivalents between the two systems:

#1	--- B
#2	--- HB
#3	--- H
#4	--- 2H.

But there is much more fascinating detail than just this on the site, so interested Bikwilians should take a look.

— Fizzgig

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Back and Forth

This is the last issue of the “*Bikwil* year” (I wish I could find a single word for that), so I’d like to (a) thank you all for your support, and (b) foreshadow a bit of what’s to come next year.

In particular I want to thank you for the steady stream of contributions that I’ve been able to include in these last six issues. Thanks, of course, to our stalwart regular contributors Bet Briggs, Jennifer Paynter, Fizzgig and Harlish Goop. Thank you, too: Diane Dees, Eileen Marshall, Michael Buhagiar, Kerry Worgan, Lars Porsenna, Col Choat, Lavinia Godfrey, Clare Hansson, E. Roy Strong and Greg Bogaerts.

Quite a list that, and you can be sure that many of those names will be appearing again next year. Other things on the agenda include:

- ◇ more *Up-front Popularizers*
- ◇ further Internet explorations
- ◇ lots more about language
- ◇ new poems galore
- ◇ new *Memorable Moments in Music*
- ◇ several personal reminiscences in our new *Hooked on Jazz* series
- ◇ a puzzle or quiz or two
- ◇ and if it can’t be avoided, more jokes, *Dreadful Doggerel* and trivia.

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This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly.
It should be thrown with great force.

Dorothy Parker

My handwriting looks as if a swarm of ants, escaping from an ink bottle, had walked over a sheet of paper without wiping their legs.

Rev. Sydney Smith

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

Happiness? A good cigar, a good meal, and a good woman – or a bad woman. It depends on how much happiness you can handle.

George Burns

Those are my principles. If you don't like them I have others.

Groucho Marx

His eyes today have that unmistakable look which is to be seen only in the eyes of confirmed bachelors whose feet have been dragged to the very brink of the pit and who have gazed at close range into the naked face of matrimony.

P.G. Wodehouse

Hang on.

Wait there.

I seem to have wandered from the parlour back into the operating theatre again. What a truly rollicking good time we must've been having among all those metallic gadgets.

That reminds me, speaking of time, of what cosmic philosopher Douglas Adams wrote in his *Life, the Universe and Everything* about the punishment about to be administered to the nasty people of Krikkit for their intergalactic war crimes:

The planet of Krikkit was to be encased for perpetuity in an envelope of Slo-Time, inside which life would continue almost infinitely slowly. All light would be deflected round the envelope so that it would remain invisible and impenetrable. Escape from the envelope would be utterly impossible unless it were unlocked from the outside.

You may be asking yourselves what, if anything, the planet of Krikkit has to do with a visit to the dentist? Simply that the way out from the dentist's waiting-room also depends a lot on forces beyond the control of those inside.

And listen to this. I've been unable to trace its author, but like Adams' judge he or she was fully

cognizant of the unhurried passage of time in such detention centres:

It is widely held that time passes at the same rate everywhere, except as predicted by relativity theory. Anyone who has sat in a dentist's waiting-room will realise that this is false. Dentists' waiting-rooms are specially equipped with a device which slows down time in order to enable the patient to savour the anticipation fully.

For an ultramodern approach to delicate amusements of being a dental patient may I suggest you visit the Internet and look for an Australian site called *Leading Edge Dental*. The address is <http://www.edgedent.com.au>. It's very funny and deserves your restorative attention.

Now, look.

You've already let me know that you've heard plenty of terrible dentist jokes over the years, but as I surreptitiously sneak a glance at my normal-speed watch I see that I can just sneak in one more short one before we move into question time.

Here goes.

"Doctor, I have yellow teeth, what do I do?"

"My best advice is to wear a brown tie."

Web

It's Weird and Wacky Web time!

If you love garden gnomes, please don't visit *Die Screaming with Sharp Things in Your Head*. On the other hand, provided you have a sick sense of humour, rush right over there. You can even buy a Die Screaming mug at their shop. Or a pair of boxer shorts. Or a baby's bib already.

"Who do the aliens choose, and why haven't they chosen you? If they won't contact you, contact us!" *Alien Abductions Incorporated* is out of date (1999), but who cares if you're having interstellar fun? Contribute yourself! Surely you have a personal abduction story that you'd like to share?

The Ultimate Build Your Own Cow Page is already up to Version 2.0. Come see "the most modular



Line

cow in existence". One might question whether this site is worth the time wasted. *And* it's out of date. Mind you, aren't we all?

Headache, anyone? Try *Find the Black Dot*.

"Language Removal Services is a pioneer in the arena of language removal for vocal applications. Our laboratory is, we believe, the only one of its kind in the world." But what do they do? Prepare yourself for a surprise. People who have received the LRS treatment include Gertrude Stein, Maria Callas, Robert Hughes, Noam Chomsky, Sylvester Stallone and Princess Diana. My favourites, though, are Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Mingus.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.bifrost.com.au/hosting/gnomes/>
<http://www.alienabductions.com/index2.html>
<http://members.tripod.com/~spows/cow.html>
<http://udel.edu/~jgephart/fun2.htm>
<http://www.languageremoval.com/>

May I Never Cease to Wonder

May I never cease to wonder
when, sun appearing at sea-sky brink,
light breaks like soundless thunder
and earth opens like a flower to drink
sun's beauty and beauty render.
For world in morning light is Eden
and I'm new-born and innocent again.

Wonder is for children. Men
engage in calculation, tending
the garden of the universe to glean
the nature of Nature, rending
as they probe the Many from the One.
But a child who is as bud becoming
flower, is harmonious with sun
and garden, is a living wonder
wondering at earth's splendour.

Eternal with sun's spinning
light, I would be as child, remain
the mind becoming, bud beginning,
opening every day to praise again,
to grace the garden blessed with innocence
and render in my growing, love and radiance.

— Bet Briggs

water from the bottle on the table. It tasted and smelled of chloroform. Then he opened the door into the corridor and called out in an irritated voice: if there nothing very important to prevent it, would Herr Brecht kindly make haste — he was suffering.

And immediately the bald forehead, hooked nose, and grizzled moustaches of the dentist appeared in the door of the operating-room. "If you please," he said. "If you please," shrieked Josephus. The senator followed on the invitation. He was not smiling. "A bad case," thought Herr Brecht, and turned pale.

While on the topic of confined birds, here's Wodehouse again, this time in *Very Good, Jeeves*:

Barring a dentist's waiting-room, which it rather resembles, there isn't anything that quells the spirit much more than one of these suburban parlours. They are extremely apt to have stuffed birds in glass cases standing about on small tables, and if there is one thing which gives the man of sensibility that sinking feeling it is the cold, accusing eye of a ptarmigan, or whatever it may be that has had its interior organs removed and sawdust substituted.

Yes, creative writing about the dentistry experience is everywhere — some of it quite serious. But who wants to get serious about this, having come so far in a different frame of mind?

Here is a romantic extract from Alan Coren's *Your Teeth in Their Hands*. This was first published

in *Punch*, and has been reprinted several times since:

The Hon. Fenella Strume-Clavering's lovelorn eyes gazed down, intoxicated, as Garth Genesis's lithe fingers probed and caressed the dark, secret places of her mouth. They were the fingers of a dentist: strong, lean, tanned. Virile. Her heart pounded.

"Spit," he said.

She turned her exquisite head, bent over the bowl, unable to spit; a single tear rolled down her nose and splashed against the immaculate porcelain.

"You realise, madame," said Genesis levelly, "that there is absolutely nothing wrong with your teeth?"

She looked away from his unfathomable blue eyes.

"Yes," she whispered. "I know. But I just had to come. I had —"

American humourists have also been fond of the dentist:

For years I have let dentists ride roughshod over my teeth; I have been sawed, hacked, chopped, whittled, bewitched, bewildered, tattooed, and signed on again; but this is cupid's last stand. They'll never get me into that chair again. I'll dispose of my teeth as I see fit, and after they've gone, I'll get along. I started off living on gruel, and by God, I can always go back to it again.

That is the concluding paragraph from equally republished S. J. Perelman piece, *Nothing but the Tooth*.

Not so long ago I learned a very handy gambit you can use if you become unbearably frustrated with the age of the magazines presented to you. You should pretend to read avidly, then suddenly look up and announce in a dark and confidential whisper to the other pleasure-seekers present, “How about that? O.J. Simpson has been acquitted”, or some such antediluvian piece of news.

Just watch the reactions. Will the receptionist fall about in hysterics behind her desk? Will the children giggle? More to the point, will you have enhanced the collective buoyant mood?

Age aside, what selection criteria could possibly be at work with these periodicals? Take my Mr. C.’s assortment, for example. I use the word “assortment” loosely, I should say, since every single item on his timber table was an issue of that venerable Australian periodical *The Bulletin*.

The old large one, of course, with the literary Red Page and the Seppelt’s ad. Such a dreary magazine to have lying around for children nonchalantly awaiting his seductive summons, but there it was, to be taken or left.

Dickens, writing on the subject of dentists’ waiting-rooms, referred to them as “horrible cool parlours, where people pretend to read the *Every-day Book* and not to be afraid”.

Afraid? Afraid? Afraid of what? Even Thomas Mann’s poor old Senator Buddenbrook was not afraid, just in pain, but he too had trouble coping with old jokes:

He entered a yellow-brown house in Mill Street and went up to the first storey, where a brass plate on the door said, “Brecht, Dentist.” He did not see the servant who opened the door. The corridor was warm and smelled of beefsteak and cauliflower. Then he suddenly inhaled the sharp odour of the waiting-room into which he was ushered. “Sit down! One moment!” shrieked the voice of an old woman. It was Josephus, who sat in his shining cage at the end of the room and regarded him sidewise out of his venomous little eyes.

The Senator sat down at the round table and tried to read the jokes in a volume of *Fliegende Blätter*, flung down the book, and pressed the cool silver handle of his walking-stick against his cheek. He closed his burning eyes and groaned. There was not a sound, except for the noise made by Josephus as he bit and clawed at the bars of his cage. Herr Brecht might not be busy; but he owed it to himself to make his patient wait a little.

Thomas Buddenbrook stood up precipitately and drank a glass of

Mary Bennet

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Although my father had an eye for a handsome woman — how else to explain his choice of wife? — feminine finery interested him not at all. Accordingly, he had forbidden all dinner table discussions on the progress of my new gown and the aids to my appearance — the smart new haircut and the regular application of Gowland to improve my complexion — and took no interest in any of the other preparations for the Musical Evening (partly, I suspect, because they were of such concern to my mother).

But on Friday morning, the day of the concert, as we were sitting down to breakfast I saw Jane go up to him and whisper, and shortly afterwards he turned to me and said: “So, Mary. Your concert is tonight. And are you thoroughly prepared for your ordeal?”

“I hope so, sir.” (I never knew how to respond when he quizzed me thus. Elizabeth was able to deflect his irony, challenge his assumptions — always with grace and good humour of course —

and he permitted it because he loved her. The rest of us, even Jane, were not granted the liberty.) “We are to play Mozart’s Two-piano Sonata in D major.”

He nodded. “George is to play the other instrument I take it?”

“Yes, sir.”

As always when he gave me his attention, I felt myself becoming awkward and stiff. In my imagination I was again three years old: his look conveyed such contrary feelings — pity and malice both, or so I fancied.

Now I watched him slice off the top of his egg and prayed he would turn his attention to someone else, but Lydia’s evil genius prompted her to ask: “Shall you be going to the concert, Papa?”

“Oh I think not. Unless —” He was looking at me once more. “Unless Mary would be heartbroken if I did not.” I had not the least idea how to respond to this and judged it safer to be silent. “While Mary is making up her mind then, I should be obliged if someone would pass me the salt.”

It was this sort of treatment — the inference that I was

slow-witted, the slighting of my accomplishments, my music especially — that made me harden my heart towards him. (Much later, when I was suffering from melancholia, I was to find the means of similarly wounding him. In response to enquiries after my health — for I was for a time most seriously ill — I would recite a bit of stale old sermon in a flat voice calculated to convince him I had neither feelings nor wit. His bemused expression gave me — I confess it — the most exquisite satisfaction.)

But I digress. It had been settled that Mr Knowles would not be taking me for my usual classes that morning. Instead, I would go to Netherfield just as soon as my new gown was finished and spend the rest of the day there, rehearsing with George. I would spend the night there too — only returning to Longbourn the following morning.

After breakfast, I went directly to my room to gather my things together and an hour or so later Lydia and Kitty and little Susan Gardiner all trooped in without knocking to announce that my gown was finally ready. (I had just time enough to close my bureau drawer where I had been fresh arranging handkerchiefs to conceal

the first volume of *Renata*.) I was wanted in the breakfast room *immediately*, they said. Aunt wished me to have a final fitting.

Lydia's eyes were roving round the room as she spoke. Possibly she sensed that I was hiding something; she was very sharp that way. "And Mama has a present for you." Moving over to my pianoforte and picking up the music that was lying on the stand. "You will never guess what."

"And Jane and Lizzie have a present for you too," said Kitty.

"A trumpery good luck charm," said Lydia with scorn. "Mama has bought you something *really* valuable. You will never guess what though."

Lydia was now plunking notes, and Susan Gardiner — a sturdy little mischievous two year-old — was also reaching up to touch the keyboard so that I was obliged to close the lid of the pianoforte. Lydia then began her usual moan that I never shared my toys with anyone.

"A pianoforte is not a toy, Lydia."

"Anyway," said she. "We know something about somebody at Netherfield that you do not."

"Indeed?" I went to hold open the door so that they all had to

was unusual in that it was not next to the surgery, but across the main hall of the building, through which other tenants regularly passed. This two-storey edifice, originally a small mansion, was a good thirty years old even then, and the waiting-room furnishings could easily have been of the same or earlier vintage.

Indeed, there was a veritable hodgepodge of furniture just begging to be added to an antique dealer's catalogue: a long settee for impromptu family gatherings, four roomy leather armchairs of the gentleman's club variety, each with a smoker's stand — even a tasselled standard lamp that had seen better days in some elderly *châtelaine's* boudoir.

Among this throng of fittings was an equally old-fashioned low wooden table inlaid with a leather edging and decorated generously with deep scratches. This is where the predictable waiting-room magazines put their feet up — as did the odd pair of hob-nailed boots.

It's that reading matter that lingers longest in the memory, actually, and I've begun to wonder whether there might be a hidden agenda here, when every dentist's ante-room contains out-of-date

periodicals. Do Dental Registration Boards believe that you will be more distracted from the pleasures to come by old rather than current issues? Who knows?

What I do know is that I am not the only person to have been aware of this eternal truth. In Wodehouse's *The Fiery Wooing of Mordred* (in *Young Men in Spats*), for instance, Mordred Mulliner and Annabelle Sprocket-Sprocket were subjected to outdated magazines in a dentist's waiting-room, Mordred "turning the pages of a three-months-old copy of the *Tatler*", while Annabelle "listlessly perused her four-months-old copy of *Punch*".

More explicitly, there was a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* in November 1980 who knowingly referred to "the wearisome unfunniness of back numbers of *Punch* perused in the dentist's waiting-room".

Hear, hear.

Someone else has even gone so far as to conjecture,

Maybe the magazines one finds in the dentist's waiting-room are put there to indicate how long the dentist has been practising.

Maybe.

No. What I was trying to suggest was that the shape of her mouth was completely new to me. I must have looked quite baffled because she smiled encouragingly, and the more she smiled the more bewildered I became.

Anyway, this led her to speculate whether I had inherited her dental features. Her guess proved all too accurate. To the casual observer it would have seemed that in the school holidays I had nothing better to do than enjoy myself in Mr. C.'s rooms.

(I call him Mr. C., but no amount of anonymity is really good enough for him. I suggest it's better for all concerned if we draw the circumspect curtain across the man himself, and concentrate instead on what he did and what he employed to do it.)

As some of you will no doubt recall, the 1940s were the leisurely years of the slow drill. Moreover, this breathtaking process involved no local anaesthesia; the only time you ever got an injection was before what P.G. Wodehouse might have called a "fang-wrenching".

Time for a riddle.

Why did the guru refuse an injection at the dentist's?

Answer: he wanted to transcend dental medication.

O.K., O.K. I can see you've heard it. Returning quickly to my old boyhood dentist, I should add that Mr. C. had no nurse to assist him, either, and had to prepare his own amalgam fillings. I can see him now, grinding away by hand, using the tried and true combination of pestle and mortar.

Yes, he put his all into his work, and I still have one or two teeth that if required could be called in evidence of his efforts. Years later, a more avant-garde dentist, at great digital risk, once prised open my clamped jaws, took a cursory peek and immediately pronounced, "Your teeth can be described only as lots of amalgam held together with bits of enamel".

Overall, I suppose, Mr C.'s tools were no more old-fashioned than that of other family dentists of the time, but for me none of his technology is easily wiped from the memory, and neither is his relaxing dental green-room, to say nothing of all the old riches that it accommodated.

The waiting space, roomy with a high ceiling and a bay window,

precede me into the narrow upper hall.

"You will never guess what."

"It is about Mrs Allardyce," said Kitty.

"You will never guess. Me and Kitty are the only ones in this family who know."

"Maria Lucas told us in confidence."

"You will never guess."

"Very well then, I will never guess." (I knew from bitter experience that the exchange could last upwards of half an hour if I did not concede as much.)

"Mrs Allardyce and Mr Frederick Purvis are betrothed."

I nearly tripped on the stairs. But I had known all along that she planned to marry Mr Purvis — why should it have come as a surprise?

"It is to be announced at your concert tonight," said Kitty. "They are to make their home in London."

I thought of George then — how it would affect him. I thought of Mr Coates, and Nonna. It would mean the break-up of the family party; they would all be leaving Netherfield. I thought of myself — what it would mean not

to see George every day, to revert to my former friendless state. The prospect was so appalling that for a moment my old infirmity — breathlessness — assailed me, and I was obliged to pause and steady myself against the banister. But perhaps it was not true — Lydia and Kitty were not the most reliable of witnesses after all. I could only hope that in this instance they were either making mischief or mistaken.

Apart from Papa and the younger of the two Gardiner girls, everyone was now assembled in the breakfast room, and as Aunt was anxious for the fitting to take place straight away and to that end had caused a screen to be set up in the corner of the room, I now moved thither directly. Given Aunt's skill as a needlewoman, I had no doubt that my new gown would fit me perfectly, and such indeed proved to be the case. Gil Pender helped me to fasten it down the back and tie the sash of matching taffeta edged with beautiful old Buckinghamshire lace, and when I emerged from behind the screen, I experienced the novel sensation of being the centre of attention. Lydia ran to seize my hand, making me turn and turn about, whereupon

everyone clapped, and Susan Gardiner (in imitation of Mama) cried out: "Oh la!"

It was then time for the gift-giving. Mama — with the most affectionate embrace (more precious to me than the actual gift if the truth be known) — presented me with a black onyx cross on a gold chain, and Jane and Elizabeth with a filigree basket worked in the shape of a four-leaf clover. Aunt's gift was a volume of Shakespeare's Tragedies — she had already made me a present of the Comedies. And Kitty and Lydia had traced the outline of a keyboard and two little mittened hands onto an oblong of pasteboard, and printed below it the legend: *Mary Playing Mozart*.

For some reason, this last offering touched me especially, and Aunt, perhaps observing that I was a trifle overset, said briskly: "Come, my dear. We must have the gown off so that Gil may give it a last press."

When I was once more behind the screen with Gil in attendance, I heard Lydia call out that there was yet another present for me — Mr Knowles having sent over a small parcel shortly after breakfast. "You will never guess what it is, Mary." A moment

later and she was again boasting that she knew something about somebody at Netherfield, and the secret of Mrs Allardyce's engagement to Mr Purvis was being confided to everyone in the room.

"Are you certain of it?" Elizabeth's voice held that unmistakable note so difficult to disguise when one's feelings are engaged. And without waiting for Lydia's reply: "Mary! Do you know anything of this?"

My voice was muffled in the folds of my old gown, which Gil was that moment placing over my head. "I knew that she was setting her cap at him. Nothing more."

And now came a clamour of voices so that it was difficult to distinguish the speaker. "Oh lord! Of course she was on the scramble for him. Purvis is rich as Croesus." — "And so they plan to live in London, do they?" — "Lydia my love! You say they plan to live in London?" — "But I understood Mr Purvis planned to settle in the neighbourhood. Else why did he purchase Thrupp Manor?" — "Ay, Sister, he bought it to tear it all down and build it afresh and re-christen it Purvis Lodge. That's why he bought it. And I

I cannot tell a lie, for the President, apparently, was nothing if not the willing experimental subject in Greenwood's hands, with history reporting that, as well as several false teeth made of elm wood, he also sported some fashioned of hippopotamus ivory.

Before he became G.W.'s dentist, by the way, Greenwood used to quite openly pay a guinea each for what were called "live teeth", that is, teeth taken from cadavers, which was a common practice right up to the middle of the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Gradually, however, dentists and patients weaned themselves off the decaying and diseased corpse tooth habit, and began using teeth from fit and healthy young soldiers killed in war. The Battle of Waterloo (1815) was a special case in point, being the bloody creator in one day of thousands of dead bodies. The result was a boon for the living, who were able to benefit from a veritable flood of dentures made from so-called "Waterloo teeth".

Now, did you know that teeth can serve a musical purpose?

Of course you did.

They say that when Beethoven was going deaf he used to bend

over and bite the piano while he pounded the keys. This way he could feel the vibrations of the music through his incisors. It may have eased his hunger, but it played havoc with his mandibles, and this perhaps is why in later portraits he seems so square of jaw and furrowed of brow.

My final bit of relevant history (I know you can't wait for this) took place in 1789, when there was an unsuccessful uprising against the Portuguese colonial regime in Brazil, led by the patriot Joaquim José da Silva Xavier. It has become known as the Tiradentes Conspiracy after his nickname of Tiradentes ("Tooth Puller"), given him because he was a dentist.

OK, waiting-rooms I have known and loved.

When I was a child, my mother was very keen that the dentist saw me regularly. She herself had once had teeth that were attention-grabbing to say the least, and when I was eight she went off one day and had them out — every one of them. I came home from school and didn't recognise her at all. The expression on her face was unforgettable. Obviously she had been very moved by her exhilarating experience.

return to the present-day — in the case at hand to one's relatively more recent memories of dental delights, principally the serene contentment of the waiting-room.

Yes, sublime delights aplenty there were in my juvenile exchanges with the dentist, and they will, I assure you, be worth putting off a moment or two longer.

First of all, then, one of the earliest recorded mentions of dental theory was found on a Sumerian clay tablet of 5000 B.C. Inscribed in cuneiform, this indispensable piece of medical news states that toothache is caused by small gnawing worms within the tooth.

Dental practice, of course, predates dental theory. Recent fossil findings have revealed, for instance, that picking one's teeth is one of humanity's oldest and most widespread habits. It goes back as far as Homo Erectus, who, as everyone knows, raised his ugly head about two million years ago.

While we're on the subject of fossils, I read the other day that an archaeological site in Baluchistan has revealed what may turn out to be evidence of the earliest evidence of dentistry. Eight or nine thousand years ago these prehistoric inhabitants of what we now call Pakistan seem to have been

drilling into people's molars for the purpose of fixing tooth decay.

Ah, those ancients! They were good, were they not? A mere two thousand years later than their gnawing worms our Sumerian friends were even managing fillings, and in 1000 B.C. the Etruscans were using false teeth, mainly for cosmetic reasons.

For our next piece of history we leap odontologically forward to 17th century Europe, where many progressive methods for alleviating toothache were on offer. I don't know about you, but I reckon that none could have provided more ecstatic and spine-tingling relief than the ritual of rubbing a dead mouse on the cheek near the pain.

If you like, we can dwell upon that picture one further minute . . .

My mention of tingling there leads me neatly to the next item on my list: the origin of what I am certain is everyone's fondest memory of all — the delicious anticipation one feels in the waiting-room for The Drill. Who would have dreamt that it was George Washington's dentist, one John Greenwood, who in 1790 invented this popular electric instrument of childhood bliss?

daresay he'll sell it for a handsome profit." — "If the report is indeed true, one must wish them well. He is a good-hearted man after all, and very generous to the poor." — "He is a vain old booby, Jane. And Mrs Allardyce must be even more mercenary than I believed her."

When I came out, dressed once more in my old gown, Lydia bounded over with Mr Knowles' gift. It was a new copying book for my music, on the cover of which he had written a verse. There was an expectant hush, and I felt my cheeks grow hot at the prospect of reading it aloud. I could not bear that his offering should be ridiculed. It was a charade of his own composition:

My first denotes the cry of a kitten;

My second, the invalid's sad condition.

But wedded together — my first and second —

Who could conceive a union so fecund!

My barren verse can ne'er convey it.

Mary's fingers perforce must play it.

It was greeted not so much with derision, however, as

bewilderment — at least by Kitty and Lydia, if not by Mama. And while my Aunt and Jane were busy explaining its meaning, Elizabeth came to me and said in a low and hurried voice: "You are going to Netherfield soon, Mary?"

I told her that Mama was to send for the carriage just as soon as the horses could be spared from the farm.

"They will all be leaving, I imagine." She was breathing quick and speaking so low it was difficult for me to hear her. "The lease will be cancelled. He will give up the place entirely."

I had not seen her so agitated since the day six years back when she had accidentally pushed Jane down the backstairs at Aunt Philips' house. Perhaps she saw my surprise for she checked herself. "Do not mind me. I am not myself this morning." And then her mouth curved in a smile that unsettled me — it was so like our father's. "I daresay none of it is true. I shall not shed tears until I am certain."

As soon as I set eyes on George however, I knew that it was true.

— Jennifer Paynter

Hooked on Jazz

[No. 1]

Music came to me like a butterfly alighting on my shoulder, but jazz came up and grabbed me by the throat. I could pick out little tunes and make up melodies from age two, but I must have been about three when I first heard the “roundabout” music. We were visiting my grandmother’s home, and after the singalong someone put a record on the gramophone. I was fascinated, and jumped on to a chair to look inside the polished wooden box on legs. Inside was a little dog (His Master’s Voice) which circled round and round as the music played. I got dizzier and dizzier, and clapped for more at the end. The other side of the record set me dancing, and I realize now it was jazz. Hazy recollection tells me it was a big band, perhaps Artie Shaw or Benny Goodman. All I knew was that it was different from any other music I had ever heard.

When I was four, my mother took me to see the film *The*

Wizard of Oz. Apparently I came home and played *Some-where Over the Rainbow* by ear. That sounded like jazz to me too. From my mother and grandmother’s collection, I knew that “sheet” music was different from a newspaper, and that pianists looked at it when they played. So next trip to town from Holland Park, I begged my mother to buy the “sky” music. I can still see the cover, and I would spend hours pretending to read the music and improvising my way through this beautiful ballad.

Hand in hand with my (hated) music lessons and mastering classical pieces, I played as much jazz as I could, from hearing ragtime and boogie on the radio, or from transcriptions of Fats, Duke or Art Tatum. That indefinable “something” about jazz had me in its grip, and I was hooked forever, with a passion.

— Clare Hansson

Waiting-Room Joys

[From *Come Spin Us a Yarn, Sleepy Jack*]

I don’t know about you, but for me there are some subjects you just don’t talk about, and top of my list is anything to do with dentistry. Now, while we have many things in common, it’d be true to say that for Sleepy Jack Hanrahan no topic at all is taboo, even when embarrassment for him might ensue therefrom. So when he confidently showed me his latest piece of writing the other week, it was only with the greatest of reluctance that I was persuaded to go public with it.

What follows, then, is the full text of a paper that Sleepy Jack claims he prepared for — but, as things transpired, did not actually deliver at — the 37th Sino-Tunisian Paleodeciduous and Intermolar Colloquium held last Spring in Reykjavik.

— E. Roy Strong

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been invited here today to share with you some ideas on the topic of “The Dentist’s Waiting-Room” and all the joys that are conjured up by memories of such minimum-security enclosures.

What, indeed, could be more sentimentally prominent in one’s long-term memory than images of visits to the dentist as a child? I guarantee that everybody here can readily bring to mind a favourite childhood gum-digger recollection. I dare say, too, that it could well be a vision characterised by “an intimacy of so affectionate a

nature” (to borrow a phrase from Dickens) that, long after senile dementia has set in, it will still occupy pride of place among the mental leftovers.

Now, just in case your long-term memory — unlike that of Carl Jung, say — doesn’t often avail itself of the Collective Unconscious, it will be to our advantage, before we go any further, to outline some dental chronology.

Why? Well, if no other reason that a bit of history at the outset not only sets the stage but also makes for an even more welcome

and documents left in my grandfather's sea chest. My grandfather, Antonius Martinus Bogaerts, was born in Breda in 1883, left via Antwerp in 1911 and sailed to Canada then later came to Newcastle, Australia, where he married my grandmother, Barbara Shepherd, the daughter of a coal miner.

My grandfather died when my father was seven years old. Antonius Bogaerts was a mystery. No one seemed to talk about him at all. I can only recall, when I was growing up, one or two mentions of him by my grandmother and father. So there was the other motivation for going back to Breda; the writer's natural, or unnatural inquisitiveness, the desire to know the truth at all costs, and to write about it.

Breda is indeed a beautiful place: the Grote Market with its stalls selling everything from fish to lace, the cathedral dominating the skyline, the shops selling antique glass, the houses lining the almost medieval twisting of streets.

But the real highlight for me was meeting Hanke Bogaerts, someone I'd managed to contact via the internet. No relation but a handy person to know seeing he just happened to work in archives in Breda. Hanke had provided me

with a family history that went back to the 17th century, but details about my grandfather were sketchy. So when I got to Breda I tracked Hanke down, much to his amazement.

To say that my wife and I got on well with Hanke when we first met him would be an understatement. You'd have thought we'd known each other for years the way we talked thirteen to the dozen. Fortunately, Hanke's English was far better than my Dutch.

Hanke had done some digging and found the house, in the Einstraat, where my grandfather was born and the house, Insulinde, where my great grandparents had lived, almost at the centre of The Grote Market. It was a very moving experience to see these two houses.

I left Breda aware of a strong spiritual connection with the place; something I couldn't and wouldn't want to explain in rational terms. My grandfather still remains as big a mystery and Hanke is still digging.

I know I will return to Breda and I know my grandfather and his life somehow form the missing pieces that are still to define who I am.

— Greg Bogaerts

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

I recently finished *The Great Fire of London in 1666* by Walter George Bell, written in 1920. This was the first study of the catastrophe — including its causes and aftermath — that was based on research using primary sources. As such, it dispels many myths and is well worth reading.

During the course of the narration, Bell speaks of the influence of merchants in seventeenth century London, particularly those known as the Hanseatic Guild. These traders were a famous political and commercial league of northern German towns (notably Hamburg, Lübeck and Danzig) that had had a trading house in London since at least the fourteenth century.

Here's what Bell writes:

The keen Hanse merchants had played an important part in founding London's commercial greatness, and they occupied a large settlement where today, borne on high arches, the trains run into Cannon Street station. No name in

the locality bears them remembrance, but they have left in England one curious vestige of their stay. The money of the "Easterlings" was so much sought after for its good quality that a "pound Easterling", or sterling, became the recognised standard of gold coinage.

Intriguing, eh? As language enthusiast, I just had to explore this further.

First things first. An Easterling was what the English in mediaeval times called someone from the east, and they applied it chiefly to natives of eastern Germany or the Baltic coasts, especially the citizens of the Hanseatic towns.

Fair enough, but is that derivation of *sterling* accurate? Is the word for the traditional English currency standard really of German origin?

Is there more to the story? Is there less?

Let's start by seeing if the Internet can shed any light on the question.

Wikipedia, theFree Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sterling_silver), confirms this etymology as “quite possible”.

So, quoting *Webster’s* of 1913, does HyperDictionary (<http://www.hyperdictionary.com/dictionary/sterling>).

What about lexicographer Eric Partridge? Does he have an opinion to offer?

Yes, he does. Here’s what he says in his *Origins* (3rd ed., 1966):

derives from ME *sterling*, a silver penny; apparently a diminutive of Middle English *sterre*, a star — a device found on certain medieval pennies.

What’s this? No mention of Easterlings? How can this be? Surely the Internet couldn’t be wrong?

Oh, yeah?

Only one thing left to settle this: check the *Oxford*.

As you would expect, the *OED*, not content with a measly “origin uncertain”, considers in detail all possibilities for the derivation of *sterling*. It

even includes a discussion of the word’s earliest use in British Latin texts of the twelfth century.

To summarise, it offers three main choices:

- ◇ late OE. *steorling* (= “coin with a star”, from *steorra*, “star”), some of the early Norman pennies having a small star on them;
- ◇ from *stær* (= “a starling”), alluding to the four birds on some coins of Edward the Confessor;
- ◇ from a shortening of *Easterling*.

In the end, however, the *OED* opts for the “star” explanation as being the most plausible.

To tidy up the Easterling hypothesis, it tells us that the belief regarding the Hanseatic connection goes right back to the beginning of the fourteenth century and was “until recently, the prevailing view”.

Which is where we came in with the enterprising Mr. Bell.

— Harlish Goop

Back to Breda

I hadn’t been to Breda in Holland before, so why should I call this article *Back to Breda*? My return to the place, where my grandfather was born and grew up, was a spiritual return for me. Although I didn’t know that until I got off the train in Breda on the Queen’s Day holiday.

My return to Breda started many years ago when I started writing short stories and eventually some novels. Nearly all of this fiction was about Newcastle, Australia, my birthplace and where I grew up. The stories were peopled with characters I’d met in Newcastle: the cruel and kind men I worked with at the BHP, the recalcitrant but often humorous drunks I picked up early in the morning when I was driving taxis and the sleek and snide solicitors I encountered when I practised briefly as a lawyer.

After a number of years of pouring out fiction about Newcastle, I stuck my head out the front door and realized that something had changed. What had happened was that I’d written so much about Newcastle that I’d come to

know it too well. Too clearly. Something was missing in this industrial working class town and it was this missing bit that I now needed to define myself.

Many months of restlessness followed after this discovery. My discontent infiltrated my fiction and I found myself writing increasingly scathing stories about the dark side of Newcastle: the ever-present violence, the legion numbers of unemployed on the streets, the parochial view that a rugby league team defines a whole community, the battler mentality of struggling against the odds that ensured that Newcastle was treated with contempt by both major political parties because many Novocastrians didn’t have the self-esteem to expect anything better.

I had come to a personal and artistic dead end. So I went to Breda.

Getting off the train, I walked up Willemstraat, the street where one of my father’s cousins had lived sixty-something years ago. The only records I had of my grandfather and his family was a small collection of photographs