



Travellers Welcome

Thighs stretch nylon, skin tops stockings,
as Betty bends for the Britvic orange.

Kenneth straightens his tie,
pulls out a tenner,
fingers his fly.

*When you're ready,
Betty love, pint of bitter,
and whatever you fancy.*

Later, in a single room
above the Saloon,

he cops a handful
in a crumpled hankie.

Behind Kenneth's eyelids,
Betty's bottom rises.

MARIA MCCARTHY





John Mackay: Interview with Maria McCarthy, 'Travellers Welcome'

John: How did 'Travellers Welcome' develop into a poem?

Maria: It started with a train journey, seeing a pub near a station with boarded-up windows. I thought about how many pubs have closed down in recent years and about the travelling salesmen that used to stay in rooms above Railway Taverns. They probably do business by Skype these days, or stay in Premier Inns. It brought back a certain era: the etched glass windows of saloon and public bars; the barmaids showing cleavage; the Kenneths getting hot and bothered. It must have been a lonely life – false camaraderie and clichéd conversation, pie, mash, pints and flirting with a barmaid before going to bed alone.

The first draft was Kenneth present day looking back at old times, wondering what Betty was doing now: 'She'd be seventy now if she's a day'. It ended up in the present tense, immediate – like Kenneth's urges. I had a lot of fun getting into the mind of a man, paring it down to the best words, rearranging them to create a visual image of Kenneth and Betty. I read my poems out loud as I work on them; it's the best way to find the music of the words. I am particularly pleased with the half-rhyme of 'stockings' and 'Britvic orange'. It started out as 'Britvic tonic'; it's far more pleasing to end-rhyme 'orange'.

John: The poem mixes humour with a tinge of sadness. How important are these characteristics to your poetry in general?

Maria: I decided recently to tackle lighter subjects, as I have written so many poems dealing with difficult personal material. The few comic poems I've attempted have serious undertones. I suppose that's how it is with humour; I find comedies such as





Steptoe and Son terribly poignant. As for my sad poems, it's therapeutic to write through pain, as long as the poetry doesn't end up like a misery memoir. A little 'comic relief' can help.

John: I like the old-fashioned sauciness, of the type you might find in a Donald McGill postcard or a Carry-On film. Who are your influences?

Maria: For this poem, I have gone back to the very first poetry book I bought as a teenager: *Penguin Modern Poets 10, The Mersey Sound* and particularly Roger McGough's poems in that volume. Lines like 'Discretion is the better part of Valerie/ (though all of her is nice)'. I did watch a lot of Carry On films in my youth, and once bought a saucy postcard to send to my class when I was on holiday during term time. I was 10 years old, and didn't understand the joke; I just thought it was a funny picture. My mum intercepted it before it reached the postbox.

John: Do you think sex, and sexual innuendo, are neglected subjects in poetry?

Maria: I think there's a lot of sex in poetry: Sharon Olds, for instance. I hadn't thought of sexual innuendo in poetry until you asked, but looking through some anthologies, I could not find any. I wonder if there's a gap in the market.

John: You write in a shed at the bottom of the garden. What effect does this particular space have on your work?

Maria: There is no internet connection; I'm addicted to Facebook and Twitter and need to be disconnected to work. Going to another place, away from the house, helps me to get to that writing space in my head. It's a large and luxurious shed. There's a sofa and comfy chairs as well as a desk. There is also a record player, so I can lie down on the





sofa and listen to something from my vinyl collection with a notebook and pencil by my side to catch any thoughts as they fall. The shed overlooks a disused orchard and I have come to write more nature-related poetry since living in the country, after twenty years of living in an urban setting. Even so, I usually find something urban or incongruous to write about. The orchard is littered with boats, abandoned cars, a trampoline and a shipping container. A Black & Decker Workmate appeared between the trees one night, when the orchard was deep with snow. I am wondering how to work that into a poem.





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Issue 14 Editorial Team:

John Mackay, Maggie Sawkins and Mike Loveday

