

A photograph showing the backs of two people wearing white, ruffled dresses. Their arms are raised, and their hands are clapping together in the center of the frame. The background is a solid, muted green color. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, italicized serif font.

*summer follies and
ha-has*

paul farmer

summer follies and ha-has
by
paul farmer

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introduction

When I was a member of the Cornish live literature collective Scavel An Gow we were booked to perform at the first Port Eliot Festival, then specifically a literature festival.

It was odd. There were few ticket-buying members of the public there - the festival web site specifies seventeen. It rained. A lot. The roof of my van leaked and I didn't sleep much.

With a lot of time on my hands I wrote, reflecting the unfamiliar stately context and the, um, *unusual* variety of people who were guests and performers at festival. *Summer follies and ha-has* is the result, a collection of the prose, poetry, stupid jokes and other things stimulated by that strange time.

For various reasons little of this has had any previous exposure – *an englishman's garden* was published as part of the *social systems* exhibition at the Exchange Gallery, Penzance with Eloisa Cartonera; and *monsters* and *when did the man become that* have been performed a couple of times in live and radio readings, but all the rest is new to the world.

I hope you enjoy it.

summer follies and ha has

it was a strange idea
for a way to make a living
but he's doing very well
he finished his City and Guilds,
you can see his NVQs lined up on the wall,
and he said, dad
I don't want to spend my years in everyday
the future is the pointless and the futile
as the planet spirals into hell and heatwaves
people will turn into Neros and all will fiddle
you don't want Building Regs when you're steaming full ahead
both for oblivion

so he borrowed some money from his uncles
and put big box adverts in
The Lady
The Sunday Telegraph
GQ and Woman's Weekly
"Follies and Ha Has
Out of your Dreams and into your Garden
Expensive But Inevitable"

the orders flooded in
six months later he was employing an assistant
and now it is ten
three teams work constantly
they build magic towers with rhyme but no reason
and structures hidden below the ground
for the owners' satisfaction of knowing they are there.

when did the man become that?

when did the man become that?
the barroom role of dormant monster.
awaiting the urge to rage and to terrify
he frightens with his fragile calm
and the women of the party
attractive, intelligent
keep a loose grip on their dismay
available for instant use.

his is the business of the pimp
surprised but skilled
in the manipulation of the armoured kindness
of these women's wish that he be worthy of them.

my peebles hedgerow

Believe it or not, this hedge is my life's great project. It stretches continuous, without a break, uninterrupted, one long whole, from here to Peebles in the Scottish Borders. There in that northern valley bearing road and river is the other end of this hedge.

How is it done? How can there be no hedgelessness? Surely, you say, some motorway, canal or railway line mounts some insoluble blockage?

But no.

The hedge is fully fledged from Britain's edge to Britain's edge, to the best of my knowledge, I give you my pledge, across moor, swamp and sedge to Peebles itself, within smoke sniffing space of Glasgow and Edinburgh, by way of Cirencester, Hinckley and Boston Lincs., tricking its way through the nation's capital itself by way of jealous gardens and public parks.

Does this hedge seem controversial to you? No. Here it fails to provoke. But in Peebles my hedge is the biggest issue. They fear it carries through its running root many forms of sick evil sucked en route from the soil of England, seeding the quintessence of that modern country. They fear intolerance, blinkers, a back turned to the world and shoulders shrugged. The Peebles folk, simple as they are, plain, honest folk, fear walls of the mind may be contagious, that the Daily Mail is communicable. They see my hedge's boughs as secret, silent fountains of despair, of post this, and pre that. They wake at night and hear it sing of lost empires, hear paralysing regret and resentment sighing and shushing in the Scottish breeze. They fear this bush has memories.

Of course, in Cornwall we are more accepting, perhaps less fey, than our Gaelic Celtic cousins. We make nothing of my Peebles hedgerow. We erect no barriers real or conceptual against essential England. We are too hospitable. Or just too hopeless.

my folly

I build my tower from statements of intention
I build my tower from artistic vision
I build my tower from ideas of townerness
I build my tower from memories of fairy stories
I build my tower from belief that I should have a tower
I build my tower from my wish for physical things
I build my tower from an ideology that there should be towers
I build my tower from wishes
I build my tower from an urge to build
I build my tower from the thought that I might like to
I build my tower of rejection of the ground
I build my tower from an urge to escape flatness

oh I was wrong

I know I have wronged you
and you so innocent
forgive me please
do not make me play croquet well into the evening
with relatives too young or too old to be interesting
it was I who unleashed that rampaging idea
that somehow escaped over dinner
but other companies would have coped with it better

where
is your father's
savoir faire?
such language my love
choked my erstwhile co-croquet-istes
and departure for hospital
before your guests have risen
would have caused remark in town
even now.

to mount an attack
over the dinner table
is outré
even a heart attack

and some might say it was a good idea
I have heard that people die for ideas like that
no I don't mean your father
our sort of people don't die over ideas
the relationship of ideas to our kind
is that of moles to mallets
a messy business, necessary
to protect our enjoyment of these magnificent lawns

so I did not intend that we should give a home to this idea
just to entertain it for the evening
and play with it
send it home with a sight of something better.

owning

Robert: daily he's nouveau riche; so much goes again to those who already have. He's the kind that appeals on charity commercials, dressed in his louche clothes to infer a lifetime of careless giving in the presence of pop stars, with the kind of notoriety the professionally stupid mistake for "street cred". So Robert appears at Downing Street parties, shaking hands with fellow charlatans.

From the launch pad of his father's contacts book, he began his career in the music business right at the top. Daily he achieves the economic impossible by telling others to 'do this', then going to America and coming back to find it done; ignoring the carnage of lost friends, all feelings replaced by hate in those same faces. Meanwhile he makes millions.

His brother Roland, film industry meta mogul: how they hate each other. Robert stole Roland's wife Roisin, Notting Hill non-Irish. Though her red hair springs wild and Celtic it is at a cost of a hundred pounds a week. She calls Robert Roland at all the worst times.

Robert goes off to the USA for a short business year. When he comes back he has a lovely daughter, Robertina. Roland, while Robert was away, has bought a country home in something called Cornwall. How Robert laughs. But when they visit Roland, helicoptering in on Friday afternoon, Robert knows envy and must have Roland's life as he had Roland's wife. Roland will not sell. By Saturday evening Robert has engaged an agent to discover something better even than this palace where Roland parades round in gaiters and a Barbour jacket, a broken shotgun over his arm, assumed unloaded until Roland snaps it closed and unleashes both barrels into a beech tree. All are showered in leaves and boughs. Roisin receives a cut to her forehead and little Robertina screams and screams. Robert is so jealous he grabs the gun and attempts to shoot up an oak but it seems to be broken or perhaps he doesn't have the knack.

In the end it is Roland who finds what his brother seeks: a mighty house and acreage quite near his own demesne. The brothers meet on the lawns of Robert's paradise to be, which is poorly maintained but potential-rich. The two great houses face each other across a village and many miles of country.

I'll take it, says Robert, already on the phone to the most stylish of makeoverists.

Renovations, repairs, renewals and removals are undertaken in Robert's absence on another business sojourn in the continent that is his spiritual home. Many of the local houses are within the power of the estate he has bought. He has them vacated, demolished, incorporated within higher walls. He wants absolute privacy in which to exercise absolute power and legs. He wants to own everything he sees, whatever he does must never be overlooked. All paths are challenged and closed, great lawns laid, whole shrubberies transplanted, glades of trees, a new landscape with follies and ha has, entirely private. On his return late one dark night he finds Roisin and Robertina in great house glory, as prepared as the grounds in frills and flounces, every stitch the trophy family, like those heads you see on great house walls.

In the breakfast room the next morning they pick at strange food, kedgerree and devilled kidneys.

Is this vegetarian? asks Roisin.

Through the French windows they see the corner of a lake, the water gold in the early sun, a small sailing boat tied in the last of the morning mist.

Roisin, says Robert, you must go out in that boat, an Avalon vision in silhouette trailing your hand in the golden water to leave a v-trail of silent ripples, the only mark of your passing. Roisin does so, goose bumps on bare arms in her diaphanous morning. She hoists the sail, sits at the stern haloed in sunshine and departs in the ghosting wind to disappear behind shrubs.

Robert is enchanted, delighted with the life he has purchased. But then baby Robertina breaks the spell, crying for something he cannot imagine. He calls Roisin but she has voyaged away in romance. A rope hangs from the ceiling. He pulls it. A woman enters to find Robertina alone. Robert has left the building.

Striding into the garden in a green greatcoat and broad-brimmed hat, he picks up his new shotgun with cartridges in both barrels in case the opportunity arises to shoot up a tree. The boat is lost to sight from the near shore, just the ripples of a rising wind, the trees beginning to thrash. He sets off to walk round the lake to find Roisin. But the lake is often bounded by dense bush. Robert is forced away from the water into rough grass. Soon he has lost the lakeshore, misled by the lies of the land. His grounds are

immeasurable. After hours of roaming he comes upon a grass plain. Only Massey Ferguson could quench its waving grasses. Soon he finds himself lost, no boundary in any direction. He learns to steer a straight course by keeping his back to his trail of flattened grass, and walks for hours.

Night comes. He is hungry and thirsty. He starts to call.

Help me Roisin! Roland, where are you?

But he grows frightened by the echo that seems to come back off the night itself. He rushes on, falling over grass stems like octopus limbs, tangling and entangled, fighting these things that seem aware of him and wish him harm; though theoretically they belong to him, everything belongs to him, everything! Has he not made it so? This land, this world, this murdering universe! He lays about him, hissing the shotgun like a scythe, in a crisis of ownership.

The events of that night were discussed in the village.

I heard un shouting for his wife, said Nigel Tamblyn.

Whats her name you. Roisin. In our garden, middle of the night.

He'd walked right through our fence, said Margery. Come right along the whole line of houses, everyone out trying to stop him. Tore my bleddy nails off.

Sweeping round him with that shotgun, dangerous as hell, said Ted. We never knew it was loaded, mind.

That's what I saw from the window, said policeman John. By the time I got my trousers on he was gone. I thought he must be making for his brothers house and I was right. I just got the car out, that's when we heard the gunshots.

The Cornish people looked at their drinks, shook their heads, and pursed their lips. Forgot Robert.

the art of conversation

I love the art of conversation
I watch it for hours
in my silent, solitary room
chat shows
warm and real.

monsters

big faces
big clothes
too much personality -
the ultimate privilege

placed on platforms
chaired by friends
they recite themselves

their normal monologue amplified
drawled in accents incognita
decades smoky
whisky cracked
heroin slimmed
rolling stone skin
famous for the beds they shared
songs they caused
clothes that lay across them

no worlds beyond the rims of their own eyes
no attention spanned.

shrubbery celia

accompany you into the shrubbery, Celia?
I don't mind if I do

but do not crease my diamante dressed for dinner
with that movement of your legs

and please do not do that rubbing thing
because it leaves a stain

That's the trouble with you ladies
it's self self self morning noon and nighty night

you who bear the garden stigmata
like trophies of romance

(if that is the word for these casual days)

How can I render the ultimate bon mot
with mulberry leaves in my hair?

His Lordship's table hums like a compost heap
and shimmers with comings and goings

interaction is no longer passing the port
but any port in a storm

and that shiny pseudo silk they are wearing this year
leaves terrible burns in unfortunate places

so take my stand on the removal of underwear
oh come on Celia, the lower items at least

the awful symmetry of the zip and the gusset
so blatant and so vulgar.

an englishman's garden

If an Englishman's home is his castle, an Englishman's garden is his empire. At home in the Home Counties, when his wife went he subsumed his self in gardening; for an Englishman's wife is his lady and he her baby, while an Englishman's grief is his bitter irony. The patch around their Surrey home he wracked with hollyhocks, rambling rose rampaged all around the door - for an Englishman's door is his armour and so is an Englishman's sports jacket. Not a space was wasted, the land scaped and scraped, teased and tamed into florid subservience.

But the high new brick wall was only symbolic. Soon the mean new private estate came knocking at the gate, and paperwork came demanding his garden to allow an access road.

This was the last straw - for an Englishman's house is his Property, and an Englishman's wall is his self-belief. The mean spirit abroad had eased away his wife and had now come to dance on the grave of his life. There was an unbearable density not only of these new dormitory homes but of the outlook that informed them, each quantity surveyed, penny weighed and OK'd, the profit judged to a nicety in which the iron taste in his mouth did not figure.

The England of his childhood was gone, and an Englishman's land is his honour, an Englishman's history his only romance.

That crux coincided with an article in the Telegraph, 'The Wide Wilds of Siberia' that told of a million square miles of wild unwanted nothing. Here was space enough for an Englishman unwanted in his own shires; here was a place to store the symbols of an English past - for an Englishman's past is his finest work of fiction. He sold his house for a Lottery sum to float free of bricks and mortar and buy a plot of Siberia five times the size of Hampshire. Forsaken by Actually Existing Socialism, hectares became acres under the iron law of Gardeners' Question Time; for an Englishman's BBC is his inner voice, which fact alone explains so much.

Forsaking the spade after four futile days, he bought cast iron ploughs with blades like anchors, dragged in teams by tractors the size of double decker buses that appeared to run on treacle. The language was a problem, but an Englishman's voice is his cudgel, and an Englishman's language is universal inasmuch as he understands it always everywhere. Having arrived at the beginning

of spring, in mid-August, he considered it too late to lay out vegetable beds this year, though an Englishman's potato is his Picasso, and he had no luck with peonies, though an Englishman's flowers are his inner woman. The fuchsias were laid low by the first frost on August the twenty-fourth.

Clearly a rethink was due, for an Englishman's flexibility is his – oh fie! For he prides himself on his stiff uppers, his unbending will and tailoring, his iron constitution and his cut glass voice. No! Siberia would be laid to garden whether it would or would not. With the subtle cunning of the Light Brigade, with the open mindedness of Lady Thatcher, all that winter in his Dacha, lukewarmed with imported Esso Blue, he made his plans. And by the end of his second season his land was indeed an immense English country garden, each element of which was formed of spruce. There were lawns of tiny spruces; there were dappled glades of spruces; there were trimmed, trained borders of spruce; a raised bed of spruces; a spruce herb garden conveniently near the kitchen door around which climbed rambling spruces resplendent with small rosiform flower-like spruces. At last his garden was as spruce as he.

An Englishman's heart is his alarm clock that one day speaks to call 'Time Gentlemen Please' in the accents of the golf-club Stewart. They say you survive Siberia only until the frost that burns through your skin one day reaches that heart.

At first there were frequent returns to the mother country, for an Englishman's mother is his guilty secret. His time at home was spent in visits to samizdat surviving branches of Timothy White's for all kinds of bodily lubricants necessitated by the Siberian chaps and chafings that brought exquisite pain to unimagined parts; and in pilgrimages to garden centres to dream spruce-free daydreams. Back in the winds of the steppes the spruce flayed away at his reason, swaying in mass unison, like his nightmare vision of their communist past, until he came to suspect them of conspiracies worthy of Vladimir Ilyich himself; of strategies worthy of Trotsky; of the iron will of Stalin, Man of Steel. And as was the case with that besmircher of the great Revolution, it was his former friends who became the subject of his pogroms. Pantechicon convoys were shipped from Dover, long lines of lights destroyed the Ural nights, each symbolising the passage of thirty tons of John Innes No. 3. Mile long tankers scraped the straits of Hormuz and Ton Kin, queuing to discharge in Vladivostok and Port Harcourt, filling west bound pipelines with endless imperial gallons of Baby Bio.

The Englishman is lost to us now, clad in wolf skins, howling over the tundra housed only in his Audi Estate. He is immune to the screaming winter, the punch sun gun of summer; immune to the thunder, immune to the lightning, for an Englishman's car is his Faraday Cage. Gardening like a virus, he paints the map red with an everlasting autumn of Virginia creeper, empire building through strategic shrubbery, causing the irreversible decline of the Siberian native. For these are no go areas for uninitiates, on whom is lost the subtle sign language of hedging plants and borders, the cottage-garden thorns of empire-building rose, tundra given over to decking, mighty river to water feature, a jardinière at every peak, mountain slope laid to lawn, and everywhere the 'Keep Off!' signs that they, in their Capitalist innocence, respect. Parkland palings frustrate huskies and entangle droshkys from Kara Sea to Chukchi, from the Arctic to the Himalayas, from the borders of Europe to old Cathay. From Archangel to Ulaan Bator, from Don to Bering Sea, all know their place because each has been given a badge that clearly states it.

And he, he is their lord and master, a new Great Khan - privateer, buccaneer, cavalier, gardeneer; for an Englishman's delusions are, of course, true.

ha ha bonk

he didn't think it was funny at first
the joke finished and
apart from some groans
there was no reaction
he had even resigned from the audience early on
saying he had heard this one
but then there came a gurgle
and we looked round to find him shaking silently
then he threw back his head and laughed
and we laughed at his laughter
and the joke became a success
to its teller's relief
but the man kept laughing and laughing
he could not seem to stop
he turned red
he turned blue
we shouted advice to make ourselves heard
but all we could think of were tactics
against hiccups and nosebleeds or a lady's fainting fit
beside which, he was beyond our reach
his body jumping and heaving in the agony of humour
until suddenly - bonk!
his head had fallen off.