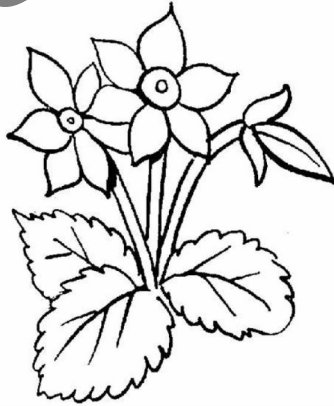


Gum Arabic

SAMPLE



Alan Morrison

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Cyberwit.net
HIG 45 Kaushambi Kunj, Kalindipuram
Allahabad - 211011 (U.P.) India
<http://www.cyberwit.net>
Tel: +(91) 9415091004 +(91) (532) 2552257
E-mail: info@cyberwit.net

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Gum Arabic

‘Populist politicians build their base by constructing an in-group—in this case, hardworking, white Britons—and pitching themselves as the champions of this “oppressed” group. They then blame the out-group—Muslims, migrants and scroungers—for the hardships every-one else is suffering’.

Grace Blakely, *The New Statesman* 14th August 2019

Daily he’s cursing
Under hostile breath
At the ever-increasing
Numbers of turbans,
Hijabs, niqabs,
Burqas embarking
In dogwhistle-daylight
On his local high street -
“*Bank robbers*”
And “*letterboxes*”
He parrots the prime
Minister, for he’s one
Of Boris’s blue collars...

Does he ever think
As he takes a lick
Of the cigarette paper’s
Seam of Gum Arabic
That his daily smoking
Habit is dependent
On acacia sap

Harvested in African
Islamic countries,
The Sudan, for instance,
Once a vast dusty
Theatre of war
In our far-flung
Colonial campaigns,
Pith-helmeted
Imperialist exploits,
Way back when
We fought hedged
In *zarebas*
Of thorn and scrub
In dusty squares
Awaiting the mass
Charge of Dervishes
In turbans and white
Robes, *jibbas*,
Patched with squares
And rectangles
Of various colours,
And the greased-haired
Hadendowa -
Rudyard Kipling's
'*Fuzzy Wuzzy*' -
Screaming towards us
In the name of the Mahdi
(Muhammad Ahmad
bin Abd Allah),
Kalifa, Osman Digna...

Not so far removed
From today, history

Repeating itself
Like a muttering
Old man, now foreign
Service helmets
Are a different shape
And camouflaged
As the uniforms from
Khaki to disruptive
Patterns, *daguet* fatigues,
But the principle is
Still the same, foreign
Interventions in
Sandy dominions
Against fearless
Insurgents fighting
For a Caliphate...

(As I write this
An American drone
Assassinates
Suleimani
And Mohammed
Ali Ebrahimi
Known by the *nom*
de guerre Abu
Mahdi al-Muhandis;
And all of this
Has an impact
Domestically...)

Does he think,
Does his subconscious
Cast back through

Ancestral memory
As he takes his
Daily lick
Of Gum Arabic...?

His daily hate is
Spoon-fed him
By the red top
Newspapers
Which smear his
Familiar enemies
Framed for him -
“*Scroungers*”, immigrants,
Muslims, Gypsies,
“*Corbynistas*”
(There’s no smoke
Without fire...) -
Make him hate them
Even more than
He hates himself,
His unaffordable
Life, his property-
Worship, his
Prostration before
Home ownership,
His fruitless pursuit
Of fulfilment
Through consuming,
For the red tops
Know if you throw
Enough mud some
Is bound to stick
Like Gum Arabic...

Nasturtiums

for V.S.

They used to say “*be nasty to nasturtiums*”
For these flashing red and orange flowers thrive on neglect,
Blossom hardily in dry soil with little watering –
Except as comes naturally with noncommittal rain;
Unsociable but boldly coloured, growing on their own
(No commingling except with unassuming weeds)
Especially well when picked and arranged in a vase –
Nasturtiums have been known to drink water so fast
That other flowers bunched with them wilt from thirst,
But this is no malice, more a clumsiness, a quirk,
An unintended consequence from brutalising bloom;
Nasturtiums are the ruffians of flowers, harsh
But beautiful, indefatigable, self-reliant, tough
But fragile, as glass, monstrously sensitive
To unfamiliar comforts– with little nurturing
They grow up to expect nothing, are wise in
Their distrust of fuss, fragrances and strangers;
They suffer for their feistiness but are successful
At flourishing where other plants wither –for
They know nothing but harsh environments,
Are most at home in inhospitable beds; bashful
Flowers; cautious, hyper-vigilant, they mostly
Dread the wind that shudders through their petals,
Though this shuddering’s disguised behind carefree façades;
A fundamental guardedness camouflaged against
The greenest gardens, lushest foliage –of all
Flowers nasturtiums are the most traumatised...

The Lady in the Cabinet

for V.S.

I gave you *The Yellow Wallpaper* to read –
About a woman who imagines another woman
Trapped behind the walls of an attic bedroom
Sequestered for a quaintly termed ‘rest cure’
From her ‘temporary nervous depression’;
A woman trapped in the patterns of a damp attic’s
Musty sulphur wallpaper; I suppose part
Of my hope in bringing you here to this quiet
Thirties-built rented maisonette was to help you
Heal, take *your* ‘rest cure’, but there’s no real
Cure for the years of abuse you endured
That seem unreal as bad dreams, nor for the drip-
Drip residue that endures ever since and leaves
A mustardy aftertaste, a sting in everything,
Reverberating to numbness on your tongue
Whenever you attempt to articulate anything
Relating to it, verbally relive it in alternative
Versions trying to find one which the soul-moving-
On can almost-accommodate; the chronic
Psychical scars that can only be patched up;
The punishing repeated lashes of flashback;
The scratching rut of trauma; the mental stains
That catch on fabrics of the present, tarnishing
All textures, scratching and scarring them...
After clawing halfway through Charlotte Perkins
Gilman’s unsettling tale (almost a prose poem
On menopause warped, phantasmagorical Gothic-

Psychological allegory -O how grotesquely
Inadequate these hermeneutical terms
Just as those psychiatric plaster phrases applied
To your scars - '*emotionally unstable personality
Disorder*'- terms that trap us behind nursery bars,
Or brocaded wallpaper creeping with damp
And blotchy with mould spores, bloated with dust
And moisture, an appalling poultice pressed
Against our lips, smothering our mouths, or,
Salted, wrapped around your red-scarred arms),
You latching on particularly to that part
Depicting the wallpaper patterns as tangents
Plunging into nothingness, hurling themselves
Off their own scrolled edges, committing
Suicides in curlicues (metaphorically speaking,
Of course), but then abruptly truncating it,
Partly for lack of concentration, partly for it
Being written in your third language –after German,
Arabic– and pitched in baroquely expressed
Maple-dripped prose so typical of Yellow
Nineties literature (the Mauve Decade in Gilman's
America), cryptic turns of phrase, you spoke
About "*The lady*" you saw who was "*trapped*"
Inside the wooden cabinet I'd bought from
A charity shop to house my accidental collection
Of porcelain miniatures, refugee figurines –
Cheap replica Furstenberg, Meissen, chipped
Serendipities; you spoke of how the lady was
Menacing, of how she faintly knocked on the cabinet's
Glass at night, wanting you to let her out; so,
Draping the throw from the couch over the cabinet
At least kept her strange gray face from sight,
Although you'd still hear her tapping faintly on

The glass in spite, a faint knocking slightly
Muffled through the woollen throw; then when
I asked you to explain in what sense you "*saw*"
A lady in the cabinet you said you "*saw her*"
In your "*mind*" and that she was you, not your
Reflection, a nocturnal doppelganger with
Independent spontaneous expressions, trapped
Behind the glass, trapped inside the cabinet of your mind,
As if you were on display, confined,
A rigid figurine in your own right, reified –
Yet it felt cheapening putting it in such a figure
Of speech, a pathetic attempt to capture spiritual
Disfigurement... In spite of how deeply I pitied
Your difficult tilt of mind, tried to help you catch
The pieces of your splintered consciousness,
How much I sympathised, how my heart broke
Like the Gothic wooden clock you bought me for
My bereft birthday that dark summer plunged
Under shadowy boughs of dark thoughts,
Black leaves of bereavement, stung until numbed
By nettled nerves, festering mental burns
Of a breakdown which shook me to the core,
The broke clock whose pendulum just couldn't keep
A soft enough rhythm to sustain its rusty swing,
Its' brittle rocking, still echoing... faintly knocking...
I couldn't help appreciating the metaphor...

Two Yellow Birds from Hyderabad

For Prakash Kona Reddy

Dear Prakash,
My far flung friend
From Hyderabad
Hindu-Catholic
Heartfelt socialist
Poet, academic,
Philanthropist,
Documenter
Of lower castes
And untouchables
In priceless poems
And magical prose,
You reinvented
Yourself for
The bookshelf,
I have never
Forgotten that day
You visited me
In Hove going
Out of your way
Before you attended
The conference
Up in the big smoke,
When you brought me
Beautiful artisan
Gifts crafted by
Impoverished hands

Of Hyderabad,
I still have those
Two exquisitely
Painted yellow birds
Sporting grey beaks,
Crested heads
And zebra-striped
Wings, perched on
A miniature tree
Textured like bark,
A nest in-between
Cradling two eggs
Strewn with dry grass
On its green plinth,
Which I've kept ever since,
Perched on a shelf
Yet to take flight...

Silence, darkness, emptiness, sleep,
And long for nothingness –
You will always feel,
Always know,
There is something bearing down on you,
Something you cannot escape,
Your own shadow...

Feeding Martin Eden

No one wanted to know him while he struggled
 To make it as a writer, putting all his figurative
 Eggs in one basket, devoting every waking
 Moment to his unlikely calling, days clattered
 Away at his hired Blickensdorfer typewriter,
 Turning down blue collar jobs, pawning clothes,
 Rags and belongings, fighting in writing against
 The cage of his barred class, ostracised by
 Most who'd pretended to know him, even shunned
 By kith and kin, *A prophet hath no honour in...*
 And all that...; defamed as a loafer, all anyone
 Could say to him each day -instead of greeting
 Him- was *Get a job*, an echoing mantra garbling
 Into one long gibbering shibboleth, parrot-call
 Of some obsessing jobjob bird: *Getajob getajob*
Getajob getajob! 'Get a job! Go to work! Poor;
 Stupid slaves... Small wonder the world belonged
 To the strong. The slaves were obsessed by
 Their own slavery. A job was to them a golden
Fetish before which they fell down and worshipped'...

Now that he isn't in need of feeding
Everyone's feeding Martin Eden

And when he was starving, going without meals
 Sometimes for days at a time, subsisting
 On tins while writing, writing, writing,
 Almost alighting spiritually, no one so much as
 Offered him a dime or invited him for dinner –

But since he had finally made it, broken
The mould of circumstance and accomplished sudden
And unexpected literary fame on the back
Of manuscripts he'd beaten out of himself
On empty stomachs and rationed cigarettes,
Rejected manuscripts piling up under his
Rickety writing table, his boomeranging cargo,
Doing the rounds of publishers at great expense
Of stamps and envelopes –when he imagined
Magazine editors and the publishers
Using well-oiled wringers that robotically
Opened up envelopes of manuscripts to flip in
Pre-typed rejection slips then automatically
Reseal them and return them to the senders'
Addresses, unread... Now every Tom, Dick and Harry,
Every society hostess and well-heeled family,
Every social circle of this half-civilised Hell
Of a corner of San Francisco invited him
To dinner of an evening, now that he had made it
As a writer, but not just any old writer,
An acclaimed and handsomely remunerated writer
Who could more than afford to clothe and feed himself,
And more besides, everyone was feeding
Martin Eden now that he had *A Name*...

*Now that he isn't in need of feeding
Everyone wants to feed Martin Eden*

And it had all been for that fatal infatuation
He caught like a sweating fever by pure accident
After visiting a cultured middle-class family
Who wished to show their gratitude for his
Having saved a young gentleman son from a mauling

In a rowdy part of town, that fatal infatuation
 With that snatch of a higher '*altitude of living*'
 He had tasted one fateful afternoon
 And the vertigo he'd felt when encountering
 The innumerable leather-bound books,
 Their bulging spines heaped on the shelves
 Of that Olympian home where he feared
 His broad shoulders and clumsiness
 Of movement might at any minute knock over
 Some priceless heirloom, for this half-snatched
 Rapture and glimpse of possibilities for
 An utterly different and more fruitful future
 For himself if he could just somehow cling
 Onto this fast-rushing freight of beautifully
 Furnished thought and polished speech,
 Of luxuriating language, this fetching ketch
 Of perfected tastes and appetites, cultivated lives,
 Which would whisk him away to a Parnassus
 Of polite etiquette and better manners,
 Acquired tastes and exquisite sensitivities,
 Ultimately, then only to strand him upstream,
 A castaway from his own landlocked class...

Now that he isn't in need of feeding
Everyone's feeding Martin Eden

But by the sweated time he'd achieved fame,
 And he was being invited to dinner by everyone
 And anyone, it was too late, he'd lost his
 Appetite, not just for eating –and now after
 All that time fasting as he fought for recognition
 On precious few cigarettes, now that he
 Was eating again, something was eating him;

His appetite for life, for experiences,
And, most fatally, his appetite for writing,
The one thing that had kept him going all
Those years long after his heart had petered out
And his spirit had been sublimated into nothing
But the will to write, to self-express, to perform,
But now his many manuscripts were so much
'*Work performed*', were in the past tense,
And he'd written his last sentence, since
There would be no suicide note put down before
His departure, for his departure would be
As spontaneous as Hart Crane's after him,
And, as with that poet, a leap from a boat
Into green depths, while some aphorism
Of Swinburne's would swill around his head
As in a brandyglass, whisper in his ear as he
Drifted down, down, fathom after fathom,
It served a purpose, but unlike Crane his life,
His works –which some critics had compared
To Joseph Conrad's– were fictions within fictions,
So then, he'd tip overboard into the bottomless
Deep like another Martin, the similarly
Ammonic Decoud, in *Nostramo*, corrupted
By his own objectification of reality
And his place in it spilt into a solipsism
Introspected, then swim into his own myth,
His life sink into fiction, pockets weighted
With bars of silver, ingots of egolessness...

*Now that he isn't in need of feeding
Everyone's reading Martin Eden...*

Brown Studies

I've spent so much of my life to date
Immersed in brown studies of the mind;
There was really never a choice –I came late
In the evening of world, and always find
My mood is cooler at night on the prowl
Of silence's chill holiness –owl

Alert and twitching in moon hours, calm
As I never am in daytime, sharply aware
Of the stillness and its magical balm
That soothes and transports me anywhere
But where I am; brown studies embalm me
In comfortable numbness; thoughts pitch free

Into oceanic consciousness –I'm happy
When unhappy, or somewhere in between
Contentedness and sadness; moonlight-tipsy;
Sedated by time and numbness –morphine
Compares to brown studies' ambrosial bowl
Lips sip, soup of respite, residue of the soul...

Some Arabs Are Blue-Eyed

The Street Arabs are camping out in Bognor
Rolling out their cardboard carpets on the pavements
Of the pedestrianised street, grime-singed white rags
Wrapped round their heads like makeshift *keffiyeh*
To keep them cool, damp out the pounding sun;
Some improvise tents out of deconstructed boxes,
Sleeping bags for back-props like camel saddles
With canvas pads as makeshift chairs, or head-props;
Some bear complexions of burnt orange, others
Of leathery brown, they don't want to get too
Tanned in case they rub the Bognor '*Gammon*'
Up the wrong way, whose umbrages are terrible,
Who labour under makebelieve that 'Brexit' has banished
All immigrants, refugees, and beggarly Arabs;
Not Ali Baba but Al the Barber and his red-and-white-
Striped pole signposting he's open for business once
The klaxon announces *Close Sesame* on incomers,
And Britain's cast itself adrift and '*taken back control*',
At least then the street Arabs will all be Caucasians,
Many with eyes deep blue as their black passports -
Black or blue, it's disputable, a moot point open to
Perceptions -but we digress as we regress, let us stress:
Henceforth it'll be *British* streets for *British* homeless...

Gum Arabic (Reprise)

Do I often think
As I lick the seam
Of Gum Arabic
(Or as the *RIZLA*
Packet puts it:
Paper with natural
Arabic gum)
On the cigarette
Paper that there is
The taste of chance
Associations
With the Sudan?
A place and name
That fascinated me
Since an early age
Sat with my father
As he scribbled
Diagrams
Of British squares
Surrounded by
Scrub on Basildon
Bond notepaper
His cigarette
Pluming from
The ashtray...

When I lick today
The seam of Gum
Arabic to glue my

Cigarettes together,
My slim white rollups,
The tang of strange
Connections lingering
On my tongue as I
Imbibe the tobacco
Inhale its smoke
Of the circularity
Of life and fate and
Chance associations
And that your father
Came from Khartoum
Then emigrated
First to Germany,
Then to England,
Brighton, my birthplace,
And how we now
Both live in Bognor
Regis, a moribund
Seaside town of last
Resort mostly known
For *Butlin's*, inhabited
By bigoted burgesses,
Gammon-faced
Islamophobes
Who stare at you
Because you have
Olive-tinctured skin,
Dark brown eyes
Like molasses
And thick blue-black
Hair and are clearly
Of Arabic descent

(Or you could be
Indian, Latin, from
Anywhere that has
A hotter climate),
Who ask you where
You're from, who call
Out to you asking
Where your hijab is,
Even though you are
Not Muslim but
Coptic Christian
A bitterly ironic
Quirk of fate, faith and
Difficult circumstances...

Does Bognor Cro-
Magnon Gammon
Man think as he
Licks Gum Arabic
Of how the substance
That makes his
Cigarettes stick
So he can smoke
Them is ironic...?

Glossary

Gum Arabic

zareba: (in Sudan and neighbouring countries) a thorn fence fortifying a camp or village.

daguet: French for brocket deer, referring to a form of desert camouflage.

fatigues: modern combat uniforms/battledress.

Osman Digna: leader of the Hadendowa in the Mahdist War (1881-1899).

“Scroungers”: pejorative term used by many right-wing British politicians and newspapers (the red top press) to stigmatise benefit claimants.

“Corbynistas”: pejorative term used to describe supporters of Jeremy Corbyn, much smeared and media-misrepresented Leader of the Opposition Labour Party (2015-20).

The Origami Man

brown study: old-fashioned phrase meaning gloomy or melancholy mood or daydream.

Department for Wasting Paper: a pun on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the now notorious government department in charge of the distribution of welfare benefits, which has developed over the past decade into something more akin to policing the public purse on behalf of taxpayers rather than providing support to the nation’s poorest.

entfremdung: estrangement (German) in the context of Karl Marx’s theory of alienation in the capitalist work place.