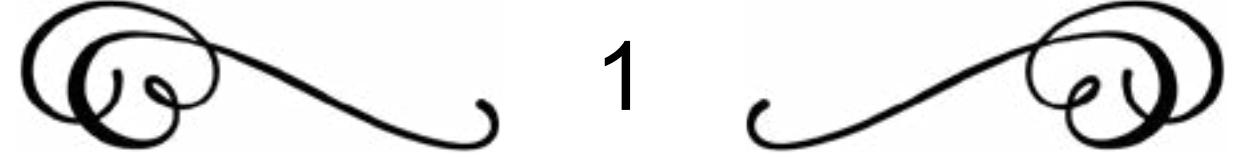


Narrative Poem by Stanley Wilkin



Alone, at 10 Cynthia Beaton made her last cup of tea,
Outside the stars bruised the stormy sky,
The only sound was the mumbling sea
Striding up the shore. She never wondered why
She loved this place, the salt-saturated sea breezes
The whispering boughs of the Ash, the old oak's desperate wheezes.

Returning to the lounge, she re-opened her book.
Silence had fallen, glue, camouflage and grunge,
There to both conceal, and facetiously mock,
A fearful presence no solace could expunge.
Concentrating deeply, savouring the words, her thoughts assuaged
She did not notice the presence, reading swiftly, calmly engaged.

Her head caved in. The weapon bounced absurdly
And landed on the floor. Her flooding blood
Flashed against the nearest wall darkly.
Her lifeless eyes plunged onto the passage she had just read,
The wind howled in the garden, screamed against the sea,
Distant dogs yelped. Her post-mortem exhalation drifted free.



2



"I can't see how they got in." Inspector Quail said, trying the door,
 "Everything is locked tight." He turned towards his colleague
 Afflicted by the wind's continuous roar
 Raising his eyebrows in professional pique.
 "I just can't see how they got in." He repeated. "Any idea?"
 Sergeant Bob Caine dolefully shook his head. "Not yet. Nothing obvious
 here."

Sergeant Caine fought the urge to smoke. He'd given up a month ago
 Yet still the addiction rampaged through his brain.
 Giving him tempting dreams that left him feeling low,
 At times the cravings almost driving him insane.
 He hated murder much preferring the sublime cunning
 Of fraud, or identity theft. White collar crimes usually excluded running!

An old lady with a flattened skull
 Was not his idea of spending the day
 Violent death being what it is, the smell
 Lingered in the cottage, failed to go away.
 "Maybe they were here all the time."
 Sergeant Caine said, stepping briefly outside -
 His enduring habit to hide

Amongst the trees and in the agitated air.
 With downcast gaze the lachrymose sergeant thought of his wife
 Tucked up in bed with her lover, his hands lost in her hair
 His manicured hands choking his life.
 When the body was finally removed pathologists
 Gathered skull fragments from carpet and sofa
 Tiny splinters coated in blood.



3



Relieved to be home, wet, miserable and cold
 Inspector Quail switched on the TV in the half-light
 Feeling both desperate and old.
 His wife called out in the lonely night
 "Frank, is that you. Are you home?"
 He wondered if she too would end up alone.

"Yes, dear. I'll be up soon." Would she
 End up with head caved in, brain spread out across
 The room? If he died first would she thirst for company,
 Or spend her years at a brain-diluted loss
 Unaware of his departure
 Thinking he was in the house as she wandered unaware?

Judy was not the complacent housewife of his thoughts.
 Spending her days on Tinder, she honed her physique in the gym
 Extending her mind with carefully selected books,
 Running every day on the beach, she remained implausibly slim,
 And seemed neither young nor old,
 Having the caustic wisdom of age, while youthfully bold.

Sex had ceased between them years before
 When Judy turned forty-five. For her, since their marriage
 In fact, the act had seemed something of a chore
 To be endured, an activity she chose to coldly disparage
 As, with Frank, a misuse of energy and time
 Even when, gloriously endowed, in her exuberant prime.



4

His office was where Frank's real life began
 His home where it ended.
 The station was where he could relax and plan
 His home where his dreams quietly upended.
 Amongst his colleagues he was listened to,
 In a job in which he knew precisely what to do.

Frank pored over the evidence. 10 pages of investigation,
 Stabled together in plain covers
 Facts, theory and imputation
 Focusing on theft, lunacy and unidentified lovers.
 Throughout the day he read and re-read,
 Pulling together the victims last hours, drawing together each thread

Every so often, he made coffee or went with Bob outside to smoke.
 Murder, he religiously decided,
 Was a dark snake that broke
 Through the sedate, falsely derided
 World of cottages and hedges
 Dancing daffodils and sedges.

Its drama gives it a false glamour-
 Dinosaurs appearing from the undergrowth
 Chewing flesh, reeking with death's succinct aroma
 Blood dripping from each prominent tooth;
 A young terrorist sporting a powerful gun,
 Caring for no one;

The black-uniformed handsome soldier standing erect
 Who recently slaughtered a family
 But somehow spruce, well-tailored, his effect
 Establishes respect, lust and empathy.
 As with murder, some people are curiously blind
 To the stench of the killing kind.

Putting down the file, he grimly pondered
 Watching the twirling seagulls along the seashore
 Tracing every possibility he wondered
 If the murderer had indeed arrived before
 The victim, waiting in some upstairs room
 Secreted within the evening gloom.

He imagined, or knew, the murderer lurking there for hours
 Peering occasionally from a hide-e-hole.
 Waiting patiently until Cynthia came home. After her meal she showers
 Leaving empty dishes in a plastic bowl
 A cornucopia of left-food-smells wafting to where the murderer waits
 Chewing on their anger as fanciful injustice grates.



The suspects were few. Frank studied each computerised profile
 Jotting down notes with his pen.
 Turning the lot into a single compressed file-
 Thinking on the contents, opening them again!
 Two clear suspects from the half-dozen identified
 Stood out. In green, each reason for suspicion was specified.

The first, Cynthia's brother, Boris, a reclusive barrister, lived further into town.

Although a habitué of his oak-trimmed office, he was occasionally found
 Drowning his many sorrows in a bar. Meeting conviviality with a frown,
 A gruff, unpleasant clearing of the throat his only sound.
 With admirable contradiction, at home he loved the versatile company
 Of young men and girls, for whom he paid a considerable fee

To a South London madam he had known for fifty long years.
 Now bereft, his money unwisely spent,
 Or wisely according to your viewpoint, he fears
 That bailiffs, a breed apart, will at length be sent
 To take all his worldly goods; his curiosities, knick-knacks,
 Easily priced antiques, the wonderful contents of his wine racks.

The second suspect, her ex-husband, an MP by profession,
 Lived in a tidy mansion on the other side of the bay
 With his new wife, a trophy of his long-honed social position,
 Emblemic of his capacity to get his own way.
 The Inspector placed him to the top of his short list.
 Politicians, it was widely known, with maleficence routinely exist.

Did this elderly lady (sixty when she died) have lovers
 In this quiet, wind-blasted town with four pubs and a hotel?
 Have trysts? Did pulsating quivers
 Rock her carefully prepared locale?
 He pondered over these issues for days
 Sifting through the evidence in a thousand ways.

Fingerprints collected and catalogued
 Neighbours, friends, relatives interviewed
 Each bit of evidence logged
 Each event and chance encounter reviewed,
 And no nearer a solution, all obvious suspects had alibis
 Or were sustained by a comforting carapace of lies.

The only solution? A stranger, a chancer, a thief
 Caught in the act, who panicked, killing her,
 Not taking anything away, but leaving grief,
 Skulking now in gnomish fear
 Their rawly organised nerves soothed by the usual array
 Of beer and drugs. Keeping conscience at bay.



The murderer opened the door, white gloves shining in the moonlight,
 With their own key. Frank knew they closed it gently, locking it again,
 Walking slowly up the stairs. The grinding waves shuffled inexorably that
 night
 Across the wind-buffeted shore, stray streams of water zig-zagging into the
 fen.
 Upstairs they heard only the seas extended hush
 In parts, bleak, barren, remorseless and lush.

Interminably present in the finite universe
 Of land and water, forever moving to the same vast rhythm
 Into which all deeds, good and bad, immerse
 As if repeating the same ponderous theme.

They had not meant to kill
 Just searching for another easy thrill.

The phone rang shrilly. As the intruder watched, Cynthia
 Lifted the receiver with an exhalation of relief,
 Smiling broadly as she listened. She responded with a joyful hiss
 “My darling, how I miss you too. When we’re apart, I strangely feel grief,
 When you’re not here, even for a week, it’s like a sudden death, my dar-
 ling, my sweet,
 That is only lifted when we again meet.”

She listened awhile and then replied: “I long to hold you
 Too. Once more. Make love again in the shallow caves. Swift
 But tender caresses as the sea pours into
 Our protective gloom, flooding our senses with each flourishing lift-
 Our flesh connected to flesh
 In one panting, twice-backed mesh.”

The murderer grew angry hearing the excitement
 In her thrilled, loping voice-
 Becoming obsessed with each stressed element
 Incongruent thoughts presenting unalloyed choice,
 As a false sense of betrayal withered reason,
 And Cynthia’s actions became comparable to treason.

Watching her return to the living room to read
 The murderer crept quietly downstairs
 Clutching a bronze candlestick found by the bed
 And softly circumnavigating the dining chairs
 They stood in the shadows haunted by pain
 Before driving the candlestick into her brain.

7



In a small town, interviewing each adult
 Was easily accomplished. And necessary.
 Friends and neighbours were ordered not to bolt
 Too soon from town. Each watching the other, alert and wary.
 But alibis remained frustratingly secure
 Each stated event able to endure

With the squad's heavy-handed investigation,
 Even Judy was questioned, as no one was omitted.
 She conceded taking a lazy stroll towards the railway station
 And back, wandering about the shore. Whatever it suited
 On that hot Autumn night to do
 In the close air, from 10 until 2.

In the star-clouded darkness she met
 Her lover; they clasped hands and walked along
 The water's edge, drowning in flooding moonlight
 And the seagull's insistent, warning song.
 They briefly embraced. Sea spray kissed
 Their grasping bodies, the recurring waves hissed.

They quickly parted, promising to meet
 Later that week. She knew Frank would be busy sorting out
 A case of petty theft or drink-induced GBH, his feet
 Resting on his office desk, eyeing some babbling lout.
 Their un-used home the tested incubator for her affairs
 Their bed where her awakened passion vehemently rears.

8



An MP can kill. It had happened before.
 Covered up by governments, by PMs over tea.
 MPs killed wives, husbands, friends, competitors galore.
 Killing for gain, revenge and even occasionally for free.
 Clever enough to easily conceal their crimes
 Murder according to the times,

With clever alibis and twists they deflected, arrest stalled.
 Frank, mindful of the brief celebrity he would enjoy,
 Had The Hon. Beaton brought in for questioning, reporters informed,
 Collected him himself like an infant lunging for a toy
 One promised to him since a boy,
 One he would nurture, then destroy.

The Hon. Beaton had once killed a woman,
 But never discussed the misadventure,
 It happened years before in Croydon
 When he was young and immature
 A randy kid without self-control
 A kid without a proper soul.

Downing glasses of lager and wine in a deadbeat bar
 They'd kissed and fondled by the loo,
 At 1 in the morning they stumbled out into his car
 And were fucking by 2.
 In West Wickham they'd stopped and in a copse parked
 Trying fifty different positions, the car steadily rocked.

After, wet and stained, they'd smoked a joint
 And left the car, looking up at the stars,
 Eyes frosted over. He took her hand at that point.
 Within him ignited homicidal fires,
 And his hands grasped her slender throat,
 Laughing joyfully as she began to choke.

In minutes she was dead.
 Bemused by his action, he buried her body
 In a nearby ditch, pouring leaves over her head.
 The terrain was murky and muddy
 His bright expensive clothes showered with dirt,
 Ruining it all. Utterly destroying his blue, embroidered shirt.

His slacks ripped, his hair unkempt,
 He travelled back to London
 Where, showering, rearranging his recently dyed locks, he slept
 Until well past noon.
 The girl's body lay undiscovered for months, nourishing
 Numerous bright flowers. Her death, at least, flourishing.

As powerful men (particularly men) loathe bad publicity
 He said little to Frank. His solicitor haunted the station
 Moving through the shadows, calculating and fidgety
 Soothing the politician's frustration.
 The MP's solicitor covered his client
 With alibis, counter-arguments, lies, subterfuge both fixed and pliant.

Unfortunately, Beaton's alibi for the time
 Of the murder, broke quickly like desiccated wafer
 Or limped along like a calculated, ill-considered rhyme,
 His quick-thinking solicitor proffering a safer
 Explanation then his attending a constituency meeting
 That proved little more than an exchange of papers and polite greeting.

Although Frank let the MP go
 He requested his presence again the following day
 Intending to thereby show
 The eminent politician who held sway
 In a seaside town where secrets breed
 Like monstrous cabbage from fruitful seed.



Frank felt he was still working in a haze,
 Unable to focus on facts. The strangeness
 Of the victim's brother attracted the detective's gaze.
 Both his professional and private lives were a mess
 Replete with indulgence and despair, his finances
 Reflecting downward circumstances.

Cynthia's will, Frank believed, would offer
 Boris relief from his increasing poverty
 Filling his empty, stark, shameful coffer
 Leaving him once more free
 To frequent brothels, drinking and fornicating-
 Wasteful pursuits if exhilarating.

Was, Frank asked himself, such a dry, dissolute man
 Capable of a violent act through passion or need?
 Who could tell what invisible rivers ran
 What someone was capable of when the rivers were choked by greed.
 Could a desperate man destroy the brain
 Of his sister, inflict brief if unbearable pain?

Boris had an alibi. A good one!
 He was stuck in a brothel all night
 Having all kinds of fun
 Falling asleep exhausted at first light
 A temporarily happy, depleted soul
 Having achieved his thousandth orgasmic goal

Between the inviting thighs of a gorgeous tart
 With an intellectual bent,
 Who knew precisely the prostitute's well-researched art
 And knew equally well Kant.
 Habitually quoting from the philosopher's corpus
 With a blank-eyed stare, little understanding or fuss.

The long-dead philosopher, she mused mid-coitus, had
 A marked resemblance to her most frequent client,
 Boris, a singular man, both obsessive and sad
 Who sought sex like a starving man seeks nourishment.
 She admitted to Frank when he called
 That Boris had stopped by for an hour, balled

Her briskly, drank in the downstairs bar then left again,
 Going home he said, while she, demonstrated her enlightened skills
 To other slowly arriving starving men,
 With a smile, she explained that that was how she paid her bills.
 The country, going to the dogs, was expensive,
 Requiring her to turn seven tricks a day. The earning pace relentless.



His wife's fourth affair had turned Bob bitter
 Seeking revenge in familiar places
 Seducing any woman (or girl) that caught his eye from admin. officer to
 baby-sitter,
 Dispelling their disappointed faces.
 Once he'd finished, their bodies cast aside
 For fresher meat like debris re-claimed by the morning tide.

The wives of friends were a special treat
 Assuaging his residual pain
 Each animated trophy a satisfying feat
 Both a pleasure and a gain.
 Into their lives and souls he'd creep
 Induced to fornicate, not weep.

He'd been in Frank's house several times
 Recently, on official duties, also to sleep with Judy, his wife,
 Which he fitted in between investigating crimes
 And sorting out his life.
 Reasoning if his wife could stray
 Other wives could too, if he showed them the way.

Although older, Judy was surprising fun
 Chatty, jokey, energetic and adventurous
 Good in bed and good with a pun
 Always well groomed, never a mess,
 She listened to his moans without complaint
 Met his needs: mistress, muse and supplicant.

After coitus, as Judy showered
 Bob pumping and turning her pillow found
 A letter signed by Cynthia, endowed
 With vibrant, explicit expressions of love. He looked around.
 For others, his professional curiosity more ardent than his lust
 He had never been a man of easy trust.

Finding two more, he rapidly read each
 Pondering on the contents,
 Their short descriptions of assignations on the beach
 Desperate grapplings, discarded soon-found pants,
 A soul-on-soul significance
 A lust-to-lust munificence.

The hint of anger in the final exchange
 As disappointment like a surge tide poured in
 Love and hatred emerging in unstable range
 Neither losing, neither able to win.
 When Judy returned her nakedness glowing
 He advanced once more on her, smiling and growing.

11



"I suggest the murderer used considerable force"
 Dr Griff said putting his report down before Frank
 "A man no doubt." Having never surmounted his divorce
 Ten years before, soaked in booze and cigars he stank.
 The Inspector's oldest friend, the wise doctor
 Was becoming a bore.

"Either that or a remarkably fit woman."
 He continued, a smile lurching slant-wise
 Across his lips like a ferret in a chicken pen.
 Judy was powerful for her gender and size,
 Rarely intimidated by any man
 Able to end any argument Bob or Frank began.

Frank turned sarcastically to Bob: "That
 Pins it down." Turning back towards Griff he said:
 "Come on now Tim, nothing more exact?
 Height, weight? Right hand, left hand?
 Nothing more succinct to help us in this case?
 For god's sake man, you're getting slow. For your own sake, up your
 pace."

Tim turned away, his face red with humiliation.
 "I'm trying, Frank, I'm trying. In truth, it could've been you, Bob.
 It could've been anyone." He lifted his ruined face towards the sun
 Broken by age, a drunk, a has-been, a slob.
 He said; "Frank, it could have been any of us."
 He thought: "Not that I give a toss!"

12



Turning down the lights, Boris slowly closed
 His eyes. Outside birds chirped freely at the moon.
 At this time, his mind roved
 As he recovered his sense since drinking from noon
 Sleeping for hours, rising to read, eating dinner and lunch

It was 10 already. A storm began.
 The rain beat heavily upon the roof.
 The door opened. Boris smiled and the telephone rang,
 Now, he thought, it was time for the truth.
 As Judy entered he spread his arms in pleasure-
 She raised her gun, shooting the dirty old man at leisure.

As he fell to the floor, clutching his arm,
 She shot him again. The phone continued ringing.
 It stopped. Silence descended like a mocking balm.
 He screamed and screamed like the devil singing.
 She blew out his brain, smiled
 And re-joined her lover in the car outside.



"What's happening here, Bob? This was a quiet
 Town with little crime, let along crime like this. We
 Haven't had even one murder before, isn't that right?
 A sleepy town like this, caught between fen and sea?"
 Bob, taking the opportunity to smoke, went out into the air
 Thinking of Judy, wondering if she was there.

Returning, Frank looked up dolefully:
 "Take care of this one, Bob. I'm going home.
 Tonight, it's all too much for me.

I need a break. I feel like a cheerful man reading a depressing tome.
 I need a night of drinking
 Good food and good thinking.

Judy's not likely to be there,
 Off no doubt with friends. Knowing her, walking along the sea
 By now; without a fucking care,
 Without, as usual, a thought for me.
 I'll have the house to myself
 To study this matter alone like rich men study wealth."

Bob smiled and nodded,
 Wondering if Judy had Frank's gun,
 One accomplished murder having emboldened
 Her to repeat her bit of grim, psychopathic fun.
 Men and women marry strangers eagerly
 In whom we project our own psychology

Finding them kinder, nastier, cleverer, stupider than we imagined
 Panicking when we discover
 Their personalities are not designed
 To be our companions and lovers.
 Judy and Louise have their own thoughts
 Their cruel independence morals and loyalty aborts.

14

Beaton stood at the kitchen door
 Gloating like a newly-created eager incubus
 His eyes drifting from wall to floor
 He said: "Why all the fuss?
 You had me, and Sergeant Caine, didn't you,
 Why mix it with their wives too?"

Judy sipped at her wine
 Studying him from the couch
 Indicating the cocaine line:
 "Try it. Its expensive stuff. Don't be a bloody slouch.
 It's really good. My dealer swore
 It's as good as the stuff I had before."

Beaton smiled, "By all means. I will indulge."
 He moved towards the table.
 "It looks pure. Snow pure, I'd judge.
 Mexican Snow. I thought this stuff was just a fable.
 No impurities that I can see. Fine and powerful.
 My dear, a brilliant, marvellous call."

He sniffed a line. His head spun as Judy watched.
 She smiled at his discomfiture. She laughed
 As his eyes closed tightly, he swayed, sneezed and coughed.
 She watched as he spun again, grimaced lewdly and barfed.
 He grabbed his chest, went a violet colour
 Collapsed on the table slowly turning yellow.

Judy watched as Beaton began to choke,
 Flailing, limbs shaking spasmodically,
 Judy laughed at such a transmogrifying joke
 As Beaton groaned bitterly
 Blood dripping from nose and eyes
 Meeting death with coagulating surprise.

15

The sun explored the newly-created sky
 Casting its light into red and blue
 Twisting white light into a salty sigh
 As waves across the sands flew.
 From Cynthia's cottage Louise approached
 Walking down the steps onto which sand and sea encroached.

Judy rushed towards her, ignoring Frank
 Who stood behind her slowly smiling.
 Watching from the nearby rocks Bob shrank
 Away finding this development unsettling-not beguiling.
 He watched while his superior stepped forward
 And both Louise and Judy kissed.

“It’s all done.” Louise exclaimed.
 “All are dead!” She lit a cigarette. A pinprick of fire in the dissipating gloom.
 “The bastards are dealt with.” She happily explained.
 On the beach her voice exploded as if in a tiny room.
 Bob moved closer, avoiding being seen,
 Moving closer to an old chalk screen.

Hiding him from the three apparent friends;
 And also lovers? How little he had known his wife,
 His superior and lover. Amicable, or amicable fiends
 Who smile, clasp your shoulders to comfort, then take your life?
 What brought them to the terrible decision
 To kill; regaling the murders with triumphant derision?

The three began to leave the beach
 Heading for the Eastern Stairs
 Clasping hands along the muddy stretch,
 Of Bob’s persistent presence unawares.
 They rounded Scarfield Rock, where the lighthouse once stood,
 Heading for Higham Wood.

Bob lost them for awhile, locating them again
 As they walked adjacent the Tesco in Primace Road,
 Entering the fern and bulrush fen.
 After which, only two strode
 Onto Rumsden Hills heading back towards the town.
 Frank remained in the brackish water face down.

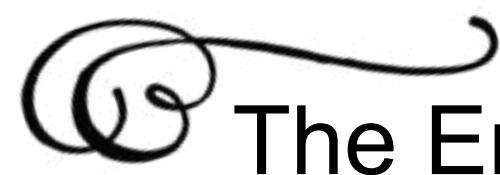


Bob was never a brave man.
 Unwilling to confront, content to compromise,
 He implemented a plan
 To circumvent the sort of surprise
 Frank had met that bleak morning-
 Death, as ‘surprise’ implies, without warning.
 Keeping his knowledge to himself, he allowed
 The multiple investigations to dwindle
 Smothered with incredulity, complexity, evidence cowed
 Into submission. The cases to mingle
 With every thousand or so unsolved crimes
 That infested modern times.

The Seaside Ripper became a matter of myth
Of conspiracy theory and television special
And Bob chose wisely to forget and forgive
 The mendacious multilevel
 Activities of his murderous wife
And with both Judy and Louise began a new implausible life.

As Inspector Caine he had newly investigated the murderous spree
Increased his salary, gained a promising new car,
 Discussed the matter when asked-for a fee-
Became member of a golf club, the go-to man in the bar,
 Judy's new (nervous) spouse, Louise's amicable ex
 Keeping the peace, doing nothing to vex.

As the years went by in that quiet seaside town
Of small convivial pubs and freshly built antiquated hotels
 The waves its beating heart, sea swell up and down,
 Of secret caves and modulated shells,
 The three, with certain reservations, lived happily
Never discussing the how and why of murder by the sea.



The End