



# CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE

*by Ian Barker*

# **Can you tell the difference**

**Ian Barker**

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Also available in physical book form - see website for details.

## Acknowledgements

It seems to me that for any poet the process and inspiration for their work is brought about by many events both in their own personal life and history as well as that of the wider world with all its horrors and beauty (sadly, still in equal measures of the former to the latter); however the ability to practice the craft is made measurably better by the support and camaraderie of fellow poets and, of course, the more sensible family and friends who keep well away from spewing words on to a page and into the ears of captives.

By tradition I ought to thank some of those who encouraged me either by their shining example of how it should be done or by their actions or by being some of the best friends I could wish for.

*In no particular order I'd like to wave an ink-stained sheet of thanks to:*

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centres, tents in festival fields, stately homes and crazy clubs in Coventry and so so SO many great adventures together.

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Thanks as well to Mark's wife Denise for her poetic patience with all of us in Bardcore and her unstinting support of Midlands poetry. So many poetic friends; Lionel Welch and his beret, Alex Schmidt-Toms, Lyn Rivers and so many other poet friends that I shared good times with when I lived in the UK. Thanks also to Matt Mason and Sarah for being so welcoming to me as a new boy here in the US that first time at Barnes and Noble along with Marissa Gill (who uses the word 'aplomb') and Heidi Prariesong.

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A special eep eep to the Monkey-Father Matthew Michael Taylor a.k.a. MMT - his Monkey Kettle magazine has breathed life into clay for many years so that poets spring from it, he now

does a similar thing for the local music scene..keep on keeping on mate.

## About the author...

Ian Barker for many years wrote under the pseudonym of "Alex Sykie" in the belief that no-one would ever want to read poetry written by someone with such a pedestrian name as "Ian Barker". It turned out, however, that despite the name quite a lot of people wanted to read and hear his work (and could never spell "Sykie" properly anyway).

Born in London, England in the 1960s Ian grew up in the British home counties and Midlands. He has performed extensively in the UK at various open mics, public events and festivals. In November 2009 he emigrated to Omaha, Nebraska, USA where he regularly confuses people by pronouncing everything in a "pretty accent" once freaking out the local librarian by making the only request in living memory for a complete set of Kerouac and Frank O'hara anthologies.

You can read more of his work and contact Ian at his website: [www.omahapoet.com](http://www.omahapoet.com)

*Original "Alex Sykie" Biography from the Omaha Poet website*

Alex Sykie was born in desperate times during the 1970s as a product of the breakdown of the marriage between his grandparents.

His mother and father, although both male and physically sharing the same body are intellectually very different and have rarely been on speaking terms since the year before they both left school.

Alex has an unusual family pedigree which contributes somewhat to a romanticism which in the past has been found to be very useful to him albeit in a rather unhealthy manner. He is, genetically, an Englishman with Welsh, Irish, Gypsy, Jewish roots but his heart belongs to America. His great-grandfather was a hawker (trans: an itinerant who went from door to door selling goods also known in England, perhaps unkindly, as a “rag and bone man”) who spent virtually all of his life as a bare knuckle boxer and would win what were in his day considerable amounts of money fighting in travelling events like the Appleby Horse Fair. He squandered the only shred of respectability by chance when he lost a modest greengrocer’s shop he owned in a game of cards forcing him to return to his horse and cart plying his trade from street to street.

With this kind of family folklore to prop up the early part of your childhood it’s surprising that, so far, Alex has managed to remain out of prison and away from mental hospital although on some occasions it has been a quite narrow escape.

Intellectually Alex is a pastiche of many cultures and disclaims religious beliefs in favour of a whole world view which is most closely aligned to Buddhism whilst being nothing at all like Buddhism. Put simply; live and let live, do at least one good thing every day – just because you can. Tell no-one you did it.

Alex has an unhealthy penchant for absinthe which he mixes with many types of soft drink but can recommend coconut, lime and pineapple juice with a dash of Angostura bitters. Please ensure that if you attempt to do the same you only purchase genuine absinthe containing sufficient quantities of good quality Thujone or you are never likely to attempt to cut off your ear in the style of Vincent Van Gogh whilst singing "Vincent" (by Don McClean) out loud very badly at 2am accompanied by your ukulele, all of which Alex does regularly.

Worryingly, all of the above autobiography is almost entirely true.

**Ian Barker.**

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## A note about the ebook version

**C**urrently there is a huge surge in republishing and publishing of books and periodicals in the form of ebooks - in fact, you're reading one now so you're probably 'in the know'. As an author, I think it's a \*good\* thing - it gets my work in front of people wherever and whenever they might wish to read. Also, it's a relatively easy thing to do and very cost effective - it could even be argued that it's more environmentally friendly since we don't have to cut down a stack of trees or other suitable sources of fibrous material in order to make the paper and there are no chemical bleaches or glues involved. To be fair, I was never really one for saving the planet but hey, if it helps.

The only downside is that the current digital publishing industry is still taking its first baby steps into maturity. This means we're not quite there yet in being able to make the books look exactly as we could wish. For example; the formatting of text by most ebook reader devices is a little bit random and leaves a lot to be desired (and I don't single any one out here - they all have their problems). This is especially a problem for poetry. Most poems look or work a bit better when the stanzas, verses or paragraphs are laid out so the lines break at quite specific places. Unfortunately this choice of where the lines break is probably the single biggest thing that ebooks are not very good

at dealing with.

As a consequence of the limitations of the media this ebook does not try to lay out the paragraphs in the same way I would choose to were I writing them out by hand or using a word processor and a nifty little printer. The printed versions of my books have nice extras like charcoal drawings, embossed pages (because I think my poetry books should be aesthetically pleasing to the senses - I'm a bit pretentious like that) and text which dances around the page into shapes that fit the flow of the rhythm of the words. The ebooks, however, can be loaded onto all sorts of electronic devices, weigh nothing in themselves, are searchable, and are instantly accessible by the side of a glorious swimming pool or romantic beach...if you have the right kind of connection to the wired world.

Either way, I just wanted you to know...

***Ian.***

**For...**

*For my wife...*

## Bully

*For Sarah and all those who also shelter beneath his  
cape*

**W**e are not at home today to the sweet things of life. In truth, we are allowed nothing but bitterness to flavour our everything; food, drink. It coats our fingers and clings to our eyelids and blurs our vision and burns and burns and burns into our touch. It's all we, who are His disciples, can feel. It is our mark, how He shows that He possesses us fully.

Slap our smile away, strike it from our face and claw into those puckering cheeks and drag them again towards the downturn, their rightful place. He spits at us as we look towards the sky from the window where He keeps us under his pressing thumb.

Cruel, cruel master who tells us not to look that way, not to think that way not to ripple with the pleasures that He rejects.

He likes guilt. He approves of remorse. He picks at confidence and, at the first taste He grabs and carries handfuls of it and throws them howling into his greedy mouth. We are not allowed a pure sky, it must be corrupted by plunging thoughts.

We are forbidden to succeed; even at the point of success He will stick a knife sharpened on introspection deep, deep, deep

into our backs and twist it hard so we are irretrievably impaled and our insides are spun about it like spirals around a devil's fork.

Shall we start to speak? He tells us we may not. We slump into the shape He dictates as He furls around us, tears and bites at the skin of our hands to punish our protest, at the signs that leak out. Compliance is required. Compliance is expected.

Our tongues are pinched and forced back into our heads and made to knot against our throats where He will only let them sit behind the beginnings of a poker face, dour with the lines of His handiwork.

You are merciless, Master, merciless and a cruel bully who has hidden us away.

Please, not for eternity.

## Cakes and insects

**A**t the start of it all the Chef made a cake. He put in a filling, of jam and cream, warmed up his big Chef oven and the cake began to bake.

Placed on the side, left to cool, insects crawled over it, had insect fights, lived strong, happy lives, no wars, some battles, more like struggles, but they served a purpose although the insects did not know it, and even the Chef would not have been sure.

Chef came along, added some icing, pink and white, sugary, nice, made it perfect, glossed it over, shone it like ice.

Chef added candles, a border, of green, little stick people with little stick dogs and cats with little stick houses slightly better than shacks.

The insects stole icing, crumbs and bits and built themselves up stronger, became smarter, learnt tricks.

Insects had parties, brought bottles, got lost.

Loved one another, sung songs, wrote books.

Chef lit the candles, 12 sparkly lights, upsetting the insects, who had 'intelligent' fights and debated the meaning of candle lighting, into the night.

Insects planned rebellions, hoarded cake, built fences. To ensure cake protection; learnt to raise strong defences.

Insect life got more complicated, and took on more 'dimensions'.

Then someone ate the cake.

The insects learnt to live on the crumbs left behind on the table.

Lived weaker, deeper lives and told tall stories of imagined crumbs the size of an insect house.

Until there were no crumbs left.

And the insects died.

And not even the Chef cried.

And the table carried on being a table even though the insects were dead,

and the cake was gone, (all the candles were out and in the bin).

The Chef made another mixture, mixed it up and made it shaped like a cake. He warmed up the oven, and put it in to bake.

## Campbell Park Hill

**C**ome if you will, come with me and let us call out to nature for our new beginning.

Let us walk carefully so we do not step on the ants and crawling things that live amongst the gravel until we are at the crest of the big high hill in the park.

Let us stretch our arms wide at the edge of the drop and turn our palms up towards the blue sky so they catch the weight of the sunshine and head back, eyes shut, allow the beams to drip between our fingers.

Let the ancient soul trapped within us scramble to the surface and escape through our mouths as we call out an old wordless song to the valley and the little rivers below.

We shall feel the warm wind gently tug at our hair and flick our collars about us and mingle with our calling voices so they are borne like kites made of sound to the sheep in the far fields and the dog-walking people who lumber their sticks in arcs to their lolloping furry companions.

In that moment we must close our eyes tighter so we can let the glory of this simple pleasure flush out the modernity of us until we are once again cavemen at Piltdown, hunters in the rainforest and dust-covered people who dig honey from bee's

nests with a pointed stick.

## Dawn

*Inspired by the photos in Life Magazine's "Execution of French Traitors"*

**T**oes down, scuffing, the half-walk, half-carry of the dawn doomed.

The carriers huffing, with straining curses wrist under arm, between arm, down to The Place.

Sunlight is peeking through these bloody hills and streams like a white dust amongst the trees.

Picturesque and beautiful for this ugliness as the boots judder onwards sullenly and buck against the tree roots for the sake of resistance.

Up and up past the chicken wire.

Hairy string, tight against bleaching skin, tied behind cruelly; a shuddering hunch of a back buried in the dirty coarseness of the square-shouldered coat.

A quiet sobbing, mutters, regrets, toes down, scuffing.

Legs idling and too weak with fear to support even this sad sack of humanity.

Rough hands push back towards the post and bend wires against and through rings.

Pulled erect but sagging against restraint.

Humble tears drip weakly, and a croaky whispering begins.

Futility.

Humility.

“I was just scared Lord, so so scared”.

Blurry arms are raised and point for his last time.

Brutality is a noisy bang that makes the morning birds jump from their perches.

Two shots and he slumps towards the ground against the pain; and the dirty square coat starts to slowly darken and stain.

Quieter now, rasping: “I was just, scared”, then, laboured: “so so scared”.

## Memorandum

**F**or my mother, who liked their art but not their implementation.

For my father, who cried at The Sleeper and was proud of me for being his son.

For my sister, who may never understand them though they brought a lump to her throat.

For my nephew, who I hope will one day see the gods do not all play for Manchester United.

For my lover, who shines from within.

For my past, which sinned against me as I sinned against it.

For my future, however short, or long; I hope I use you well.

For attonement.

## Do not venerate the place

*Why do we get excited about a small piece of bone that 'might be evidence of occupation 1000 years ago'? Why do we put plaques on buildings because someone lived there for five years and then later became famous?*

**D**o not venerate the place.

It is passive and did not write the songs and knew no clever rhymes nor mastered meter with the well-placed feet that you so admire.

The event was a magnificent fleeting sliver of time that bloomed in our past and grew in our unintended lying to fit a need, way beyond the deed.

You set it on an altar with signs and guides and glass cabinets; but the goodness of the moment, the worth of the story, is long gone.

Gone in reality, passed. Living on in your words which are a distorted lense that bends the light of the truth so it curves to fit your purposes, however well intentioned.

Do not venerate the place, do not make it an undeserving monument where white-gloved curators must tremble at an imagined majesty and handle the crumbs of our everyday tables

with a breath-holding reverence, heavy to the touch with import and meaning which they agonise over obsessed and are tested so that they may say they have a certificate that signifies their understanding of what we were and what we stood for in every way.

We lived here in ordinary ways. We made all our mistakes, fallible and room-spinning, puking, with a depth only you see and we wished we had in our time. Your artefacts were our broken clay pipes and your big discoveries were the rotting bones of our dogs. So, do not venerate the place; lay down the next generation of legend and trails with your own flints and sonnets.

## Evil Fairy

*For those who remember the many magical nights at  
Raising The Awen*

**S**kip child.

Skip whilst you can, before the claws of adulthood drag you  
from your innocence.

Wave your rose like the wand of an evil fairy as you wish,  
and poke the poetry man so he loses his place  
and the listeners shuffle awkwardly to adjust themselves on the  
wooden seats.

In two blinks and soon after the petals drop you will be too full of  
rules to rush up and down  
and giggle without a flicker of conscience.

## Free Thoughts

**T**oday, I decided not to.

Today I decided to text when I shouldn't,  
to say "balls" to the work,  
to say "sorry, I couldn't be bothered".

Today I decided to not be reliable,  
or to be a rock,  
to be undependable.

I'm going to be a bit of a let down.

Today I have risked to see what would happen.  
I decided to find what tomorrow could be.

Today I've loosed the child that cries in my head,  
to let out the loony,  
the artist,  
the freak.

Today I've unlocked the cells and the gates,  
the inmates have freedom,  
the patients run free.

## I am tongue

*TV and "txtspk" are killing our ability to string sentences together coherently.*

**Y**ou are to kill me.

I am tongue. I am expression of thought. I am revelation of conscience. I am identity and I am definer of knowledge.

You are the off switch of contemplation, creator of false drama and hanging moments, the appellant to common denominator.

You are repellent of sophistication for fear of losing the mass of imagined uncomplication.

You are budget and the science of demography and driver of simplified-greed buy one get two buy five for three commerce.

I am tongue.

I am thought into words.

I am description of the indescribable.

I am music of the soundless mind.

I am pricker to tears I am stretcher of horizons.

I am inner voice surfaced into scratched black.

I am rhyme and reason and soul into poetry.

But you are to kill me.

## Ice Scraper

Ice scraper

I woke gently, but all of a sudden today to the sound of a cartoon voice singing rhymes in a fake Manhattan accent.

The dark is hollow, lit by the sound of my snoring dog which bounced off just-familiar walls and rapped against the ice on the windows. A rumbling echo-locator beacon mapping the room.

The Omaha cold has a smell. An aroma that you don't get back in the nooks and crannies of British suburbia. Over there the cold has an odour of rotten wool or skanky grey cardboard. But here, here it is... incisive. Like the edges of a pattern cut into a good quality glass. Etched. Purposeful. It tricks you like this.

And here the wind doesn't nudge you about and flick playful flakes at you; it pinches your ears and slaps the raw open palm of its hand full and hard against your sore cheeks and tweaks the end of your nose to make it drip drip drip sniff.

Home-coming is the sound of ruddy-faced people knocking the life back into gloved hands followed by the communion of banging boots free of snow that doesn't melt. Watching are hurrying snow plows littering dirty white drifts at every road junction; sullen funeral pyres where Nebraska's December buries the bones of our long sweet lazy summer.

Up, with a cuddle for the roused snorer and a pat on the head for Toto's double before I stitch myself into my great galumping snow boots and ram my "ear hat" down hard to thwart frostbite's chances. Fingers straight and stiff in waterproof gloves; required, essential – skin dies here in minutes if you let the swirl of the wind start to snack on it. I kiss, check, keys, check and head Oates-like to the car.

Half-light twilight and the crackle of trees flexing nakedly in the chilling breeze that bites. The blipper clunks the door locks and, with an OCD glance for the right park light, full red dial, full blast fan on; both heaters set to beat the ice away from the poor shivering windows.

So I begin to scrape away winter from your windshield. Methodically because that's how my mind likes to do these things, the way I'm designed. Square scrapes, neat edges, top to bottom. The sound of the blade bounces off the garages and walls. A rasping, juddering staccato cackle of frozen resistance. No bird sounds, no traffic noise; just me and the scraper and... that...

damn...

stubborn...

frost, thicker than the glass I'm hacking it from.

## Impact

*This poem is an entreatment to seize the moment and a suggestion that immortality does not necessarily come about by following the rules.*

**W**hen I die I want to have made an impact.

Not the kind that arises from close meteor contact.

Or that sort which you get when performing the half stock-broker with double twist from the top of the nearest skyscraper.

I'm less desperate than that.

It's not enough to have littered the world with progeny who didn't take my name,

although it's a shame.

I'm not bothered by the fruits of my labour – they'll wash away soon enough, on the next technological tidal wave – I only did it for the money;

I did it grumpily and for financial gain.

There are no cocktails named in my honour.

No twists or slings or things mixed two parts gin.

No sex-on-the-beach brain-cell stunner.

No exotic fruits or names with Latin woven in to defeat the brains of spliffy students in their final summer.

They'll bury me nicely and read Dylan Thomas poems at my

eulogy.

There will be flowers,  
for a generation,  
but eventually neglect will come to stake its claim.  
Nobody will be remembered enough to blame.

In time, my skin will putrefy and decompose  
and my best burial clothes will unravel around worms  
who'll wriggle through my eye sockets  
and romp with partying beetles who'll munch on my crusty bits  
and nest in my pockets.

In years to come, when the creepy crawly disco is done.  
When the mound above me has sunk  
and the crumbled stone at my head  
has greened with the lichen of a second generation of dead  
who will know I had a clean driving licence and paid all my taxes  
on time?

## I often pause to think of others

I often pause to think of others. Like the couple on Beak Street I saw leaning in against the March wind, pinching still-fitting 1970's smeary gabardine mackintoshes around them like over-stuffed sausage casings.

He; gaunt and with that sunken on-the-way from this life look, she; rotund and waddling with cheap home perm flattened under a clear plastic penny market rain hood whilst her free hand drags a shopping trolley between them both like an unruly and unwilling square tartan-coated pet.

She chose to wear those opaque tan tights and they are so cliché, aren't they, with her seen-better-days blue brogue comfortable shoes which shuffle shuffle and scuff along next to the groceries and the gray nearly-ghost.

He looks like a man who has resolved to hang on a day longer if he can, for her sake, or for someone's sake if not hers. I'm sure it's not for his.

His gaping-mouthed breath, like it must sound loud enough to startle although the bus window and the rattle of empty seats mask it from me, sucks his cheeks in and out with the effort and I see his eyes scrunch up unseen as he keeps up her pace which he taps out with a walking stick, stomp, stomp, stomp like

he is grinding out cigarette butts with every step.

Where do they walk so painfully in this bouncing rain? If I call, what name will make them answer? Is this yesterday's sour wine of relationships I see through the dragon puff of diesel exhaust or a glorious culmination? Or perhaps mainly their reality, unpoetic and unremarkable except to someone like me who often pauses to think of others.

## Time for a moment

**T**ime for a moment. Gentle, a definite slowing down to a stop.

I'll reach for your hand without looking to see if it's there.

A slight movement, light, with a deliberate glide to a stillness.

We'll turn to face each other on the beach. Sunset fire in our hair.

Our moment, together, share an intimate look that makes time halt.

In our eyes is understanding, the fingers that brush say it all.

Tidal current, advancing, we're joined, inviolate, inseparable, betrothed.

The wash of the purest blue green sea licks around our ankles, clear below an azure sky.

Vital moment, fleeting, cast off cares and make the bustle of life ...stop.

## Tree

**L**ean forward and close your eyes.

Press your cheek against the bark of this tree.

This tree is older than America.

This tree saw wars which were not photographed  
and were described in books we can no longer read.

This tree was here before your grandfather  
and will see your grandchildren fade from the pages of unwritten  
history books.

This tree stood amongst an infant electricity,  
listened to the telephone grow up

and saw democracy stolen by the greedy naughties.

This tree has roots in a soil that was soaked by Pepy's Autumn  
rain

and baked by Keat's summer sun

...and you want to cut it down?

## **We give that to you**

**Y**ou can be anything you want, we give that to you  
you can squander your money, or get filthy rich too  
(though the poorest can be President, he is equal to you),  
but before it all, friend, you're an American too.

You can walk into danger and shrug off alarm.  
You can use, if you want, your right to bear arms.  
You can say God is everything or deny he exists too;  
you can be anything you want, we give that to you.

You can starve in your millions or eat nought but cake.  
You can drink to St Patrick and tour drunk, state to state.  
Green beer if you choose it, Irish jigs, all for you  
but before it all, friend, you're an American too.

You can extend hands of friendship to an unclenched fist  
and vote for a change to dodge financial abyss.  
You can be anything you want, we give that to you  
but before it all, friend, you're an American too.

## Where the children played

**T**his is where the children played. Do you see? Where the streaks run down the wall near the broken tarmac where the hopscotch pitch was drawn?

This is where they swang their ropes, jumped in time to tunes they sang, skipped their feet and clapped out the beat: “one, two, buckle my shoe”.

Oh, and here there stood a climbing frame, they used to climb and play some game on turrets they conjured in their mind of far-off castles and knights of old they'd heard in bed-time stories their parents told.

Across that path, behind the wire (or course in those days it was not on fire) there stood a type of slide on which they'd glide and scream with breathless joy “look, I'm fast, whee!”

Ah, and here, amongst the rubble, you can just make out, the shape of of the old swinging boat. With seven places for happy faces; it bucked and jived and tossed about.

Here, just here, the boys marched up and down; team blue, team green, marking time, “to attention”, faking guns with their hands. Girls did girl things, which boys didn't understand, they didn't mix which seemed just fine.

Look, beyond the stains, by the last of the sheds is the line

where you had to wait when break was over or got to school late. They used to poke and push and stand in single file and girls would giggle all the while so teacher would “shoosh”.

They didn't know then that they were free, they scraped their shins and tore their shorts and got muddy knees from simple things. Knights fought dragons and always won, just there, by the slides and the turrets of the castle-come-climbing-frame. Do you see?

They kicked balls across the playground and played tig and run-around and kiss-chase in the sunshine, just there by that stack of marker stones. They played conkers on the corner (moved away from

all the windows) and rubbed dock on the stings from the nettles. They were innocent. Do you see?

## Words are art

**W**ords are art and better yet  
they draw their pictures in your head.  
They drip their paints across your mind  
and splish their splashes, you will find,  
with "dreaming spires" and "daffodils"  
like Wordsworth's green and pleasant thrills  
and though young Vincent cleft his ear  
Kiping's "If" is no less dear.

**End..**

Thank you for reading

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