

ALSO BY KEN EDWARDS

VERSE

Good Science, 1992

eight + six, 2003

No Public Language: Selected Poems 1975-95, 2006

Bird Migration in the 21st Century, 2006

Songbook, 2009

PROSE

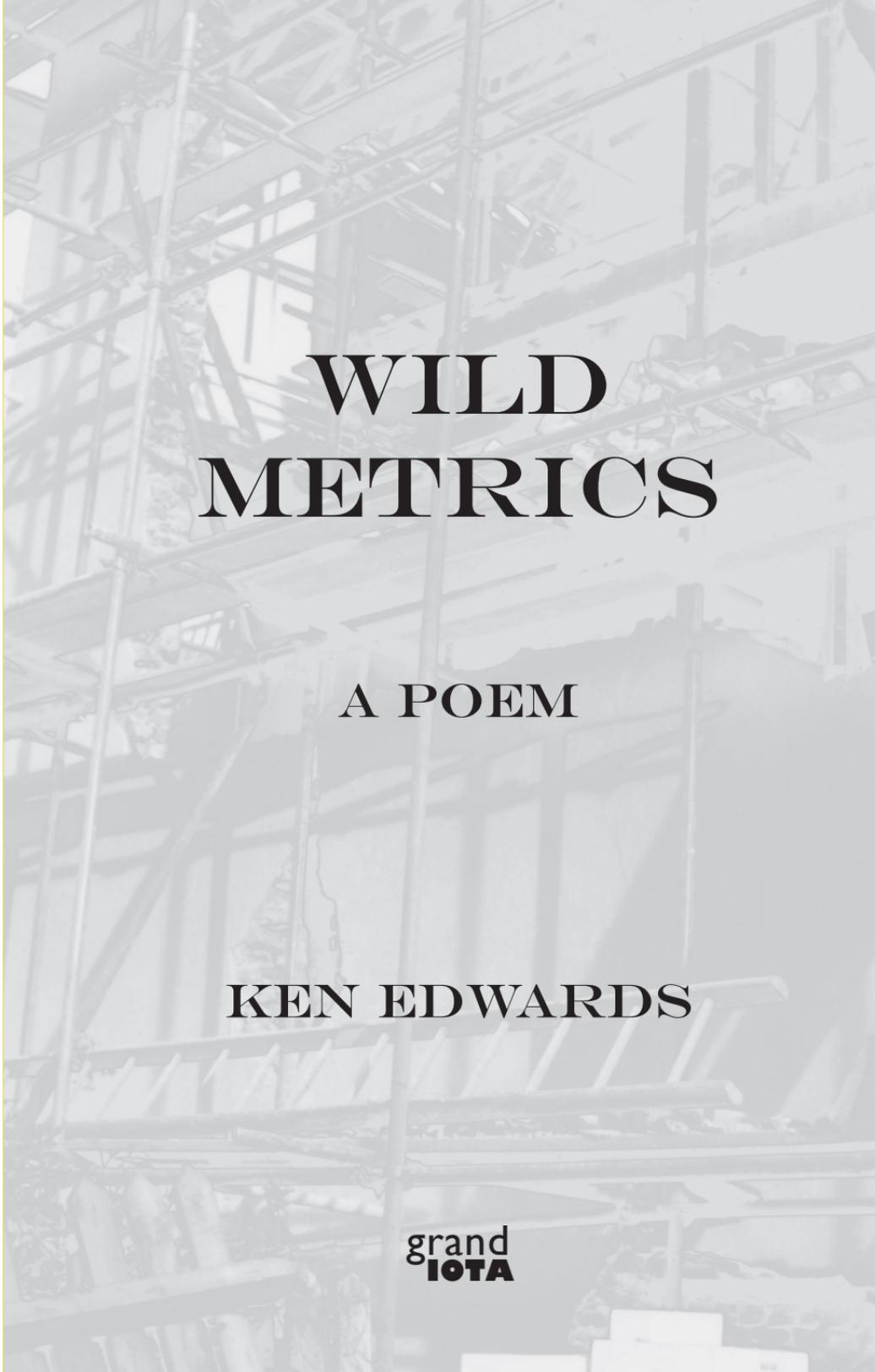
Futures, 1998

Bardo, 2011

Down With Beauty, 2013

Country Life, 2015

a book with no name, 2016



WILD METRICS

A POEM

KEN EDWARDS

grand
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Published by
grandIOTA

2 Shoreline, St Margaret's Rd, St Leonards TN37 6FB
&
37 Downsway, North Woodingdean, Brighton BN2 6BD

www.grandiota.co.uk

First edition 2019
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Typesetting & book design by Reality Street

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-874400-74-5

This is essentially a work of imagination.
Names, characters and places have a complex relation to real people
and locations, and incidents narrated may not necessarily have
occurred in the way or in the sequence described, or at all.
Apologies for any confusion created.

*This book is for all those people in my life, living and dead,
whose fictional avatars figure in this narrative, and for
many more who do not appear.*

*Also for Brian Marley, whose help and advice with
writing I appreciate.*

*And especially with love for Elaine, who has been an
essential presence for the past two decades and more.*

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The project / The process

It was not a farm at all, despite the name. It was a five-bedroom, two-storey house set in a huge, rambling and overgrown garden off an unmade lane off a semi-busy thoroughfare in an outer London commuter suburb. Pratt's Bottom was just down the road; how they all, K's friends, tittered at that. In the other direction were conventional bungalows and semi-detached dwellings laid out in neatly circumscribed estates, housing neatly circumscribed lives. Across the main road and beyond an undistinguished patch of green where people walked their dogs was a block of Thirties-Elizabethan buildings enfolding a laundrette, a newsagent, an ironmonger's, an Indian restaurant.

But this house had been condemned. And it had been offered to them (that is, to K and his friends, or if not his friends, any person or persons he might persuade to reside with him) for an unspecified period.

The only photograph I have of it, four decades later, is the

one that is on the cover of one of my books. A book I barely remember. It is out of print now. There was poetry in it. The monochrome photo is of the frontage, and has been magnified to the extent that the black and white dots of the printer's screen are fully visible. You have to stand a distance from the book, opened out so that back and front covers can be seen as a spread, to discern the image as a whole. The frontage is very wide, surmounted by a great wedge of pantiled roof. Two bedroom windows are visible in the shade of the eaves, and two ground-floor windows on the right. Left would be the front door, but it is completely shrouded in dark grey: represented as a cluster of tiny white dots separated by larger black spaces, or alternatively large black dots surrounded by tiny white spaces, signifying impenetrable shadow. You can just make out, though, the paler form of one of the Italianate columns that hold up the portico in front of the door. From the appearance of the surrounding (monochrome) shrubbery, the photo would seem to have been taken in spring or summer.

Lower Green Farm had been condemned because it was right in the path of the proposed route of the M25, London's new orbital road, which was due to be built in the following few years, once all the compulsory purchases, permissions and demolitions had been completed. This K and his friends needed to understand, should they agree to take on the property. In return for a thirty pounds weekly fee, there would be issued to them (by the local council, via the Patchwork Housing Association) an open-ended licence to occupy, which could be revoked at any time.

They were not told who had lived there previously nor when it had been vacated by its former owners, nor whether it had ever actually been a farm. They didn't ask.

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Memories are fractal: the more you focus in and magnify them, the more self-similar structures appear in their interstices, that is, in the gaps between them; and then magnifying those further reveals the even more remotely embedded memories in between them that were hitherto inaccessible. And as these in turn emerge, you wonder whether this process is infinite, or would be infinite were it not for physical constraints that are as yet unknown to us. But in the meantime those memories continue to arise in a kind of stream of particles, of shapes anyway, moving in unpredictable ways, carrying with them their meanings or imagined meanings, their echoes of desires or imagined desires. There are rhythms associated with this process and it may be the case that the interlocking rhythms are all that it signifies and all that will remain of it. Who knows? Who knows anything? There are hints in the narrative that follows, which might be termed a thought experiment, that may provide partial answers. But you do not want to be left in a stupor with negative outlines, you have to make something. You make something of it, and it has to not matter for the time being at least whether that something has what might be termed authenticity, because, also, nobody can determine what *that* is.



Write what you know, he was advised. But he had already concluded he didn't really know anything. And he certainly didn't know what he was doing. How could he? Therefore he could only write out of ignorance. He wrote pages and pages of stuff generated out of this ignorance, this unknowingness. When he read these pages back, decades later, they seemed vaguely familiar.

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Fine weather was breaking up into fine rain, thunder and lightning not far off now. As evening came on, the streets were deserted except for one or two shiny parked cars, observed through a screen of rain-needles shot through with a peculiar and very exciting amber light. The pub was shut. Pale blue and pink patches appeared in the sky to the west, but it was dark overhead. This contrasted with the white glare of the desk lamp. As he wrote, pounding the keys of the Olivetti, he heard children's voices coming and going outside.

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Henning the Dane who worked in the Patchwork Housing Association office in Ladbroke Grove had told K there was this "beautiful" house outside London available now for five years. Or up to five years. It could be as little as six months, though. You never could tell when it came to local authorities and lawyers and planners. Technically, the purview of the London Borough of Bromley, but yes, unusually, outside London. Patchwork was offering it *pro tem* to anyone who wanted to set up a community there.

Henning was placid, long-haired, ginger-eyelashed, doubly denimed. K, who had cycled into the office to do a day or two's typing to eke out his benefit, had said he was interested. It was chance that brought this about: Richard who he used to share a house with had phoned him to tip him off. It was nice hearing Richard's voice again: Hell-llo Kkkkk ... how are yoooo? Uh, I thought yoooo'd uh like to knnnnOW Pppppp-atchwork nnneeed ssssomoneto doooosome adadadmin coz ssssomone's off ssssick.

Of course, K no longer lived in a Patchwork shared house, but he was having problems in the flat off Westbourne Grove he had moved to. The gas supply had been cut off because the landlady, Mrs J, had not paid the bill, and consequently (although she had provided him with an electric kettle and a calor gas stove for the time being) K was withholding his rent. It was a stalemate.

K said he would think about it. He was confused. On the one hand, he'd had a vision of an artistic community, where people would be free to pursue their imagination and its fruits. On the other hand, he had left the Share house in Sunderland Terrace after two years – following his two-month sojourn in the States, on tour with the Rock Star – because he couldn't stand communal living any longer (he didn't tell Henning this, obviously). And that was why he was currently on his own in the flat off Westbourne Grove. On the third hand, he was now possibly going to be evicted from that flat. On the fourth hand – outside London? no way.

K told Henning he was going through a “mixed” time with the girl he had met last year (on the rebound from Marie), whose name was Lynne, and had had a “bad, weird” weekend. He had just received a hand-made postcard from her featuring one of her delicate water-colour washes, urging him not to be “alone with his grief”. What the hell was that supposed to mean? In a previous letter she had quoted Krishnamurti saying the followers of Zen were “doomed”. She was at her parents' farm in Hampshire now, shortly to go to Spain for a month with her best friend. He was listening to Albert Ayler in his flat, and also the spine-chilling voice of the Chilean singer Violeta Parra, a favourite of Lynne's. He had been reading Beckett (*Texts for Nothing*), Gerard de Nerval (*Journey to the Orient*), Julio Cortázar (*All Fires the Fire*), Gertrude Stein (*Three Lives*), Freud (*Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) and Harry Mathews (*The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*).

As he listened, Henning nodded sympathetically in his

gentle Danish-hippie way. They had gone on to talk of other things. They had discussed the strange experience they discovered both had shared of remembering a previous dream within a dream, and concluded that such “memories” were probably fake.

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Women had been attracted to K but then gone off him, which he found puzzling. Naturally disposed to melancholy, he had dark curly hair and during this time was starting to experiment with a vestigial moustache. A sort of white Jimi Hendrix effect was the idea. His speech was fairly RP with traces of what later became known as Estuary, but there was something not quite right about him. Once or twice, when his ethnic origin had been revealed the comment had been “Ah, so *that* explains it” (or something to that effect). Lynne had probably wanted him to be more Hispanic; that was why *she* went off him eventually and took up with a real Spaniard. Or perhaps she had at first liked the idea of a poet, as a romantic ideal – that often happened – then went off him because her idea of a poet and his did not in the final analysis match. They had agreed about Lorca, but she didn’t like Ginsberg and had never heard of Olson, much less Tom Raworth, Lee Harwood or Roy Fisher, and didn’t seem interested in finding out.

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Eighteen months prior to this, K was to be found with his bicycle, trying to gain entrance to the Rock Star’s discreetly salubrious home in an exclusive London neighbourhood. He

could see a carmine baby Rolls Royce parked in the driveway beyond the railings. He'd rung the bell at the front gate several times but there had been no response. Fortunately, a man appeared on his bike, who turned out to be the gardener, and let him in. And the housekeeper, who had a strong London accent, greeted him at the door, confirmed that he did have an appointment for 11.30, said he could leave the bike in the front hall.

Tea was served in the dining room, in proper china cups and saucers. They sat round an enormous polished wooden table. On one wall was an original Magritte, on another a framed gold disc. Maybe even platinum. In one corner an abstract chromed-metal sculpture, possibly by Paolozzi, in another corner a harmonium, in a third a huge classic American jukebox carrying a stock of old rock'n'roll and contemporary reggae 45s.

The Rock Star and his wife entered the room. As is often the case with famous people, he looked smaller in real life. They all sat round the table. The Rock Star fired a question at K: What's seven times five? K said: Thirty-five, last time I checked. Right, said the Rock Star with a knowing grin. It was his idea of a joke to break the ice, evidently.

The meeting was about the Rock Star's thirteen-year-old step-child, Buttercup, who wasn't present (she would have been at school that morning). The girl was falling behind in her lessons, principally because she was repeatedly being pulled out of school to go on tour with her parents, and the head teacher had put her foot down and said if this happened again she would have to exclude her permanently. So her parents would have to hire a tutor for the forthcoming American tour. That would satisfy the head teacher. The head teacher was a friend of the self-styled "educational therapist" John W, to whom as it happened Buttercup was being sent weekly for "treatment" – basically, cramming. John W divided his time between work with disadvantaged kids, often *pro bono*, and

tending to the children of the rich, for which he charged mightily substantial fees. Now Buttercup's head teacher had appealed to him in her hunt for a tutor. It was a bit of a problem. The role required a qualified teacher, but anyone who fitted the bill would likely be in the midst of the school term and unlikely to want to give up their job for an engagement of no more than two or three months. And so one morning he had turned to K, who happened to be in the office doing that day's admin. You've got a PGCE, haven't you? he said. K had indeed acquired a teaching qualification three years previously, but had decided pretty soon that teaching was the last thing he wanted to do. It would be a doddle, John W had said, nodding seriously. Buttercup just needed a little remedial work in English and maths. But, but, K protested, although his lead subject for his postgraduate teaching diploma had been English, he had not done any maths since O level. *Remedial* maths, said John W. It seems Buttercup, despite having entered her teens, was academically at the level of a seven-year-old. It would be a doddle, he repeated reassuringly. I can give you the text books, he said.

That was why K was here.

He sat across the table from the Rock Star and his wife, while the housekeeper moved in and out of the room carrying teacups and milk jugs. She returned with a plate of bacon and egg, which she set before the Rock Star, who took up his knife and fork and munched in between pleasantries.

After the times-table volley there were no more searching questions. It was clear neither the Rock Star nor his wife could think of anything more to ask. At no time did they ask him about his previous experience. Had they probed, they would have found that K had never actually taught any children since teaching practice during his postgraduate year. He had been offered and accepted a job in a comprehensive school starting in the September after he was due to graduate, but in July had had a panic attack and phoned the school to with-

draw. The school had threatened to report him for this – the timetabling had already been done, so that was a fuck-up as far as they were concerned – and since then it had been unclear whether his PGCE was in any meaningful sense valid. He was probably on some government black-list of unrelia- bles.

Buttercup and her school prowess or lack of it were not mentioned again that morning. K complimented the Rock Star on his magnificent jukebox and on the choice of reggae records inhabiting it, and the Rock Star beamed proudly while continuing to pick at the bacon and egg. K was careful, though, not to sound like a fan, and steered clear of the Rock Star’s own recording and performing history; and that in retros- pect seemed a good decision. The Rock Star’s wife, who had interjected a comment from time to time, flicking a strand of blonde hair out of her eyes, said K would need to report to the tour management office in Soho to “sort out all the details”. Neither actually offered the job in so many words, but it was heavily implied that the deal was done.

On the way back, K, in a state of great excitement, called in at the Kypriano restaurant in Chalk Farm where Marie was working to tell her all about it. By then, things were not great between him and Marie. They had lived together a year, shar- ing a room in Sunderland Terrace, but she had now moved into another room, and he rarely saw her because she was working all hours at the restaurant. So the conversation was guarded. But she said she was pleased for him. Her arm was bandaged, he noticed. She had fallen downstairs at work, she said. It was nothing to worry about. He noticed, not for the first time, that whenever she talked about the goings-on at the restaurant she unconsciously lapsed into a cod-Greek accent.

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Lynne was at the party, but she was avoiding him, probably dancing with the Spaniard now. Anyway, he hadn't seen her since the start of the evening. He was a bit drunk, a bit stoned. It was all a bit sweaty. He knew scarcely anybody. His sister was in there somewhere too, with the man who was to become her second husband. He cheered up somewhat when the reggae came on the sound system. *Exy-duss*, chanted Bob Marley; it was his latest. *Movement of Jah people*. Killer bass line. The long version, good. The totality of creation was there, evident for all to feel, the beautiful ligatures of conscious music.



But he was on the rebound from Marie, after all. K had met Marie over two and a half years earlier at John W's office, where he had a part-time administrative job at a pound an hour. The outfit was called The Hampstead Centre for Continuing Education, though it was situated nowhere near Hampstead but in this shabbyish terraced house, down the road from the Patchwork shared house in Sunderland Terrace where K then lived. Where the shabbiness quotient was high. Both were short-life houses licensed through Patchwork. It was believed John W had social ties with the Patchwork founders. And an offset litho printing machine was installed in one room of the premises, which was the official Patchwork printer, used to manufacture letterheading and other official literature. K had his eye on this for possible poetry publishing purposes, if he could only learn how to use it – a cut above his Roneo duplicator.

Marie was also doing bits of administration and filing, in her case in return for her "treatment", which in effect meant John W helping her with her O levels. John W was kindly and droll. He always wore a grey three-piece suit, and his trimmed

grey beard and glinting glasses made him look like Freud, especially when he reclined in his professional leather chair. He was lean, almost cadaverous, and suffered from a “bad back”, hence could never stoop to pick up anything hefty, or indeed anything at all, even a book that had fallen to the floor.

K’s first impression of Marie had been that she was rather sweet and also full of energy. Dark-haired, with a pale complexion, full lips, chubby fingers. She was nineteen years old. He knew that she had had a troubled history, because John W had alluded to this in his guarded way.

The office was only a short walk from Sunderland Terrace. So to get to work K didn’t even need his bike, which remained parked in the gloomy entrance hall of the Share house. It was cash in hand, two days a week. That was sixteen pounds. Pretty convenient for allowing him to write, without hassle from the SS. Also helpful as a distraction from the internal politics of the community house, which although officially having adopted a collective approach to decision-making, with weekly house meetings and all, was actually run by K’s friends Des and June. They it was who had made the initial approach to Patchwork with a proposal for a shared house – called Share – in which able-bodied and disabled people could live together equally; for June worked for a national disability charity and had had a vision of the future. And so this five-storey short-life house (if you counted the basement – though Sean lived separately on his own down there with Dennis the Magic Dog) had been procured on licence from Kensington & Chelsea council. Thus far, however, no actual disabled people were in evidence.

Des was jovial, bearded, prematurely avuncular. He called himself Professor Chaos, or something like that. That was a sort of stage name. Referred to himself as a “hippie Jew”. An early adopter of green politics, non-violent, communitarian, a visionary. Always had something to say, mostly in jest. If he was misunderstood, he would come out apologetically with a

saying quoted from one of his uncles from London's East End: "I speak three languages: English, Yiddish and Rubbish." He was a performer – had done some acting, was a friend of the comedian Mel Smith. One of his party tricks was talking nonsense syllables very rapidly in a Russian accent, perhaps imitating another uncle. He had set himself up with a workshop on the ground floor of the partially rehabilitated Sunderland Terrace house, where he recycled furniture, machinery, packaging, timber offcuts and other detritus that he found in skips or scrounged from exhibitions at Earl's Court or Olympia and brought home in his dilapidated Transit van. K's Roneo duplicator, on which he ran off poetry pamphlets, was parked in a corner of Des's workshop.

June was warm and amusing, always reading books and not reluctant to make pronouncements on them – K was impressed by her grand dismissal of Graham Greene as "one of those mediocre English writers" – and a little older than Des. She loved to wear a hat. And she loved Des, and shared his politics. But was more sceptical, maybe. Occasionally she would come out with a killer sardonic comment, in a Birmingham accent, after he had held forth for a bit. She was a psychologist by profession.

Des and June had recruited K to this scheme of theirs, persuading him to abandon his dogsbody job at an independent publisher in Holland Park, the one he'd fallen into when he abandoned the teaching profession, and to live off the SS for a year while writing and helping do up the house. They took him to visit the founding father and guru of Patchwork, Greg Moore, who lived at the top of one of the many short-life houses licensed by Patchwork in the borough of Kensington & Chelsea. He was an old Etonian who had seen the light. He was rumoured to have once been a monk. He knew the playwright Heathcote Williams, who lived in a squat nearby. Previously, Des had called in on Heathcote Williams about some later abandoned theatrical project, and taken K with him

because he had expressed interest in meeting him. Heathcote Williams had perfected the white Jimi Hendrix look to a degree K couldn't have matched. All K remembered afterwards was him standing in his kitchen passing a hand through his wild hair, ranting about something.

So there lay Greg Moore on a huge mattress on the bare floorboards of this top-floor room, while Des, June and K sat on cushions which formed the only other furniture. A joss-stick burned in a holder on the floor. He seemed to have forgotten what he had convened the meeting for, instead talking at length about a canoe tour of America he was planning. Greg Moore had long hair, was dressed in jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt, his feet bare, and talked in a low, mellifluous voice. When he stood up to go across the room for a book or some other thing, it became obvious he was very tall. Other Patchwork people quietly came and went all the while. A short-haired man, dressed bizarrely in a dark suit and tie, popped his head round the bedroom door and greeted Greg Moore with a warm handshake, and the two discussed a legal question for a minute or so. While they were talking, June whispered that she recognised him as a member of the House of Lords.

As Greg Moore returned to the bed to recline again, apologising for the intrusion, K suddenly noticed something: he appeared to have only four toes on each large, bony foot. K lost the thread of the conversation thereafter as he counted and re-counted the toes: big toe, one, two, three, big toe, one two, three.

Two years later, Greg Moore would be killed in a car crash in Wales along with his lady. That would send shock waves through Patchwork.

