



Dear Gillian,

Each morning at ten to six I pass you as you put out sultanas for the blackbirds. I'm eating my apple and my crunching noises drown out my 'morning' and your 'morning'.

I eat the whole apple and I'm on to the stalk as I pass Mr Moody's house; he taught me at Low Valley juniors,¹ stood us all in a field and told us to listen to the grass growing.

Gillian, I pass my brother's house then and his curtains are shut and his lights are off; but the other day I heard someone shout 'John' at 6.03 and that's his name, and I looked around and there was nobody there and the empty X19² rolled by and a man on a bike nodded at me.

Do they like sultanas, Gillian, or have you trained them to like sultanas?³

All the best,
your neighbour,

Ian McMillan⁴

Notes:

¹ Five miles out of Barnsley, by the banks of the River Dove, Low Valley Juniors is now known as Darfield Valley Primary and was recently rated as both satisfactory and improving by government inspectors. Standards to which we can all surely aspire.

² The X19 bus, operated by Stagecoach on behalf of Travel South Yorkshire, makes the return journey from Barnsley to the Robin Hood Airport, via Darfield and Doncaster, twenty seven times each day. According to the most recent timetable, at 6.03 the service would have been running either slightly early or extremely late, both of which scenarios would explain the bus being empty.

³ Sultanas and raisins are indeed 'particularly enjoyed' by blackbirds, robins, and song thrushes, according to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which also suggests cold Brussels sprouts for starlings but draws the line at offering strong blue cheese to a wren under a hedge. See rspb.org.uk/wildlife/features/christmas.aspx for further details.

4. Ian McMillan was born in Darfield, South Yorkshire, where he still lives today. He has published over twenty-five volumes of poetry, including *I Found This Shirt* (Carcanet, 1998), *Perfect Catch* (Carcanet, 2000) and *Talking Myself Home: My Life in Verses* (John Murray, 2008). He has also worked as a journalist, playwright and broadcaster; he hosts *The Verb* on BBC Radio 3 and writes a weekly column for his local newspaper, *The Barnsley Chronicle*.

You can follow Ian on Twitter @IMcMillan, and we heartily recommend that you do, since he's made sense of the medium in a way very few writers have. His tweets are tiny postcards from his travels around the country, and they consistently brighten our days.

5. The map used as a background image here is taken from www.openstreetmap.org, and is © OpenStreetMap contributors. Éireann Lørsung put a bird on it. (Although, full disclosure: the editor is responsible for the wavering cut-out job, which he likes to think conveys a certain shambolic charm but actually reveals his lack of a steady hand when either under- or over-supplied with coffee.)

BARNsLEY
December 2013

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