Something is Amiss

“In order to avoid killing Reg, Doug bought three orange cushions...” Continue.

The aged Professor of English scratched his day-old stubble with his dirty fingernails and looked around the room at the blank faces of his class, so many seated statues, alabaster figurines, eyeless and unmoving.

“When you are stuck,” said the Professor, “seek a starting point. Pick a random sentence like this and explore it. See where it leads.”

“Engage your reader from the outset,” he said. “Set questions in his mind that you will help him answer. Arouse his curiosity. But make him work for it: show don’t tell. Consider the sentence I have given you. Why cushions? Why are they orange? What is the significance of three of them? Who is Doug? Is Reg human or animal? What has three orange cushions got to do with life and death? A dozen words and you have posed a dozen questions.” Oh God, he said to himself as he observed the vacant response. What have I done to deserve these morons?

Sami yawned and looked out of the window. He wished he had the wit of his father or at least had received some of that talent through their common genes. Alas not. Dear old Queenie. Stuff this, Sami thought. I can do this. Stuff the New Puritans and stuff linear narrative. I’m going to write a book that starts at the end and ends at the beginning. In the meantime, what can I do with the cushions?
He focused on the old bloke taking the class. What does he want? What rocks him off? Gruesome? Yes, I’m sure he does gruesome. Gruesome is what he’ll get.

In order to avoid killing Reg, Doug bought three orange cushions. Now you must understand, Sami wrote, that orange means different things to different people. For some it is Agent Orange, the biggest American killer in Viet Nam. For others it is the colour of the fatigues worn by the sequestered souls in that camp in Cuba. For Doug and Reg it was the colour of the Union, the colour of the sash worn by the Billy-boys when they celebrated the Boyne. It was the colour of the enemy.

Together through the Troubles Doug and Reg had killed three people. Two Billy boys and that Captain from the Grenadier Guards who pretended he was SAS. After all these years Reg is going soft and likely to blab. That can’t happen. Back then they didn’t knee-cap the two pipers because they were civilians, despite their uniforms. Knee-capping was reserved for controlling their own. Reg and Doug had watched the puff and glory of the march in silence, waiting for their chance. After the parade they had cornered a pair of pipers in the front parlour of a house off the Falls Road. They shoved the children out through the back door. Doug called for cushions to contain the mess from the close-range deliverance. The pipers wept and squealed and pleaded for mercy until a bullet through a cushion into the back of each head, the traditional method of execution, meant that they piped no more. It was different with the Captain.

Robert Nairac was born in Mauritius. His father was an eye surgeon. He went to Ampleforth, then to Lincoln College, Oxford,
where he gained a Blue for boxing. The Guards sponsored him through RMA Sandhurst. Later he wanted to be SAS, but he lacked the discipline they demanded. Nevertheless they used his enthusiasm and contacts to infiltrate the IRA.

There was a *craic* at the Three Steps Public House in South Armagh. Doors locked with a *ceilidh* band playing late into the night. Nairac pretended he was one of them. He knew the words of all the patriot songs, from the ballad of Roddy McCorley, hanged at Toome Bridge, to Brendan Behan’s off-stage folk song from *The Quare Fellow* about the hangings at Mountjoy prison

> And the old triangle  
> Went jingle jangle  
> Along the banks of the Royal Canal  
> Nairac led the singing but he couldn’t fool them all.

> “Your man is an Englishman,” the publican said to Reg and Doug.

They bundled him outside and he fought like a feral animal. They took him across the border into the Republic at Louth. They tortured him for two hours and he told them nothing. He only screamed when they gouged his eyes out, first the right, and then, quarter of an hour later, the left. The delay meant that he screamed louder for the left, because he knew what to expect.  

> “Bring a cushion,” said Doug, as he prepared for the final requisite. Nairac’s last words were “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” “That’s pay-back for the Miami Showband,” said Doug. Two Catholics killed another Catholic, but it wasn’t about religion.
Legend has it that Nairac’s body was fed into a meat grinder at a local processing factory. To this day there are jokes around Dundalk about a Nairac burger, but nobody knows. He was awarded the George Cross posthumously, but it didn’t bring him back.

Now, after all these years, Reg is losing it. As you get closer to your Maker, you start to think about what you will say to Him. Doug will have none of it. He gives Reg three orange cushions. “Cry all you want to the priest in the confessional,” says Doug to Reg. “That’s sacrosanct. But remember, remember what the cushions are for.”

Marvellous, Sami thinks to himself, bloody marvellous. Move over, Salman, I’m coming. Whilst he waits for the professor’s judgement of this original composition, he doodles on the blotter

I went over the

and down

the steps

one by one to

find my way to

and

h u m  d g e

b r

c k

a b

p i

and down

the steps

one by one to

find my way to

t

h e

r

i
“Three cushions. Not bad,” said the Professor, as he extracted the grime from under his fingernails and examined it. He started with the index finger of his right hand and used its nail as a scraper, starting with the contents under the nail of the little finger on his left hand, and worked his way from this furthest digit back to the thumb, accumulating the detritus. “Not bad at all. Now you have tried an external influence to get you started. What else could you try, what about another medium?”

“Are you suggesting a séance?” asked Sami.

“No, no,” said the Professor. “I mean, you’ve tried prose, what about a pome?”

“A pome?” asked Sami.

“Yes, Sami, a pome.”

“But I’m not a pote,” said Sami.

“Have a go, anyway. Think in a different way. Lose your identity in your composition. Let the language say it all.”

Poetry, thinks Sami to himself. What’s that? You start every line with a capital letter and each word at the end of the line sounds the same? Lose myself? Take the author out of the narrative? I suppose he means Bart Wossisname. I’m certainly not going to do what the Lollipop Men did. Leaving out letters and
swapping words? I don’t think so. I’ll give it a try. I wonder what the old boy will think of this:

The Words

I picked up all the Words
    and threw them to the ground
not in a mighty temper
    but simply in despair.
I shuffled through them with my feet;
    rustling underfoot like autumn leaves
not crushed, but scattered everywhere.
I picked them up quite randomly
    and this is what they wrote:
“Don’t despair; we’re here to help
    we really like you, don’t you know?
You treat us kindly, with respect,
    that’s all we ever want.
We have our feelings, sensitivities;
    most people just don’t think.
They grab at us and toss us down:
    we tumble on the page
unordered, slighted, quite unloved.
With you we know it’s different.
 - Just pick us up
    and put us down.
Don’t try too hard
    or think too much.
We’ll do what we can.”
“You’re quite right, Sami,” said the Professor, “you are not a pote.”

“Don’t blame me,” said Sami. “I didn’t write it. Remember what old Bart said? I’m dead.”

“I take your point,” said the professor. “You’ll have to try some internal stimulus for your creativity.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” said Sami.

“I think you know exactly what I mean,” said the Professor. “Literature is littered with the consequences of unusual substances imbibed or consumed by writers since the origin of the written word. Some thought that this method was the seat of inspiration and creativity. Have a go. See what it can evoke from you.”

“If you’re certain,” said Sami. “Here goes.” And this is what he wrote:

**pins and needles**

*lucy in the sky with diamonds and lucy you pass me that spliff on a pin and I'm so roached out and you think you know but you don't how could you you weren't there but I was and I did and I am*

*are you going to san francisco no I am there already it is faraway man faraway that city by the sea with flowers in my hair that flower power and that bell round my neck*

*I'm a rocket man rocket fuel rocket propelled I am as high as a kite by night*

*I can touch the moon the moons a balloon in june to that tune and dune did you read than book dune that spice man that spice is nice like that brown sugar and I don’t mean demerara*
this is my summer of love and I love it I love the flashes that flash flash in my mind
the kaleidoscope colours that saffron im wild about saffron and saffrons wild about me they call me mellow yellow the saffron robes and the maharishi and the monk who burned himself self immolation is a great word except for what it means hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare hare rama hare rama rama rama hare hare
ha ha hee, ha ha hee, little red book just you and me and then there was zen ravi shankar and his sitar ravi sanker ravi sanker ravi shitter ravi shitter et ne nos inducas in tentationem no no yes temptation lead me to it bring it right on forget ginsberg and remember keats emptied some dull opiate to the drains one minute past and lethe-wards had sunk cocaine cocaine all around my brain am I insane
I am a day tripper
paint it black and watch juliet of the spirits and award yourself the purple heart no not the one for bravery and I puff the magic dragon and get rolling stoned sputnik beatnik apparatchik a clockwork orange and did you know it is here the ludovico centre is here in brunel black is black kerouac I want my baby back lm in pieces bit and pieces and peace is it
Sami awoke the next morning with a headache from hell. He felt quite unwell and decided to spend the whole day in bed.