



John Greening

In My Bottom Drawer

WOULDn'T IT BE NICE IF I really had a bottom drawer instead of all those teetering piles? In fact, I don't know any writers who keep their work in a drawer, but it's the agreed euphemism for work that's best forgotten. Or maybe work that's ripe for rediscovery.

Still, as one who overproduces and therefore discards a great deal, I rely heavily on my editorial instinct. Unfortunately, it's coupled with the instinct of a hoarder. So, although, for example, I cut out 500 lines from my recent long Sibelius poem, *The Silence*, I also printed off the deleted sections and stuffed them under my desk with all the other notebooks. That is what my 'virtual' bottom drawer contains for the most part: notebooks. Stapled, spiralled or perfect-bound. Feint, narrow, blank or square-ruled. Occasionally in biro, mostly in pencil. Many of them going back to the mid-nineteen-seventies.

But there are other so-called 'drawers': the suitcase under the bed; the storage box in the wardrobe; the cobwebby coffin-shaped thing in the shed. None of these are indexed. There's no Search option. And just as I've reached an age where I buy a book or a recording that I already possess – that's to say, I forget what I already have – so I'm quite certain there are entire plays in storage that I don't remember at all. Because for many years I considered myself as much a playwright as a poet, and there are at least a couple of dozen verse dramas stashed somewhere in our little cottage. Most of these were written in the pre-digital age, so there may be carbon copies, even relics from those primeval gods of duplication, Gestetner and Bander.



I'm not bothered by the plays any more, nor am I concerned to find the exact whereabouts of my single novel. My short stories are in a 'middle-drawer' area, accessible if I ever need them. I don't think I'm going to re-read any of these and cry out, as Brahms did, 'What a genius I had then!'

But since coming to realise I'm a poet and pretty much only a poet, occasionally I have burrowed into my poetry manuscripts, and found there are things that might be given an airing. After all, poets are said to do their best work in their early years (Thom Gunn wrote *Fighting Terms* when he was a student, and how old was Helen Mort when she began?) Young poets aren't always the best judge of what's good, though. Editorial skills come later.

Among my favourite Elgar works are his *Wand of Youth* suites, a reworking of pieces he composed as a child. Benjamin Britten did much the same with his *Simple Symphony*. I like this idea, and I sometimes think that one could make a tolerable suite of verses from early drafts. When I eventually get round to finding that legendary bottom drawer, I'm going to pull out all the lost masterpieces and edit them into a best-selling volume called... well, *Scraping the Barrel* doesn't sound quite the right title. How about... *Bottom Drawer*?