

For a change, I got our 2018 letter out a couple of weeks before the end of the year. This was a mistake. It meant that the letter had to compete with all the other dross that arrives in your inbox around Christmas. It also meant omitting all the wonderful things that happened during that season of good cheer. So this year's letter starts with December 2018 and will get sent out in January 2020.

In it, there's poetry and polemics, polyglotism and pushchairs. You will learn why you should never move the soap, how to start a cricket club in a country that thinks the cricket is a game that you play while riding a horse, how to kiss a camel, what the opposite of "good" is, and how to turn a disaster into a win-win situation.

December 2018

HEREFORD, ENGLAND – Having my eyes made up by Izzy, my 14-year-old niece, was a first for both of us. She normally does her 14-year-old female friends, and hitherto I haven't really been into makeup. Izzy eschewed the light blues, pinks and glitter I had been hoping for, opting rather for darker tones that made my eyes sink even deeper into my skull than they already have. More Ozzy Osborne than Ziggy Stardust.

SAUNDERSFOOT, PEMBROKESHIRE, WALES – "It would be nice to see the sea," said my mother. So we arranged a Boxing Day trip to west Wales. Sheila (89) is a lot more mobile since her hip operation, and we sauntered along the beach in glorious sunshine. We have a tradition in our family: at the seaside, you must always touch the sea. She couldn't stoop to touch the water herself, so I scooped up a handful for her to dabble her fingers in. Wish granted.

MOITZFELD, BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Our car didn't like being left alone in an airport carpark over Christmas. At the first set of traffic lights on the way home, there was a loud clunk, and we stood still. The queue behind gradually realized that we weren't going anywhere, and filed past. We backed the car onto the verge and waited for the rescue service.

"Broken driveshaft," said the garage. "Doesn't happen if you get a new car every three years." Ours is now over 10 years old and its driveshafts have seen enough kilometres to circle the globe four times. Evelyn says that if we have to buy a new car I can forget about building that conservatory I want. She finds an excuse every year.

January 2019

MÜLLENBERG, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY, 3 JANUARY – Emily celebrated her first birthday by taking her first steps: four, five, six... uncertain and unstable, but steps they were. She needs to learn how to slow down. Maybe she can teach us to slow down too.

"Your house has lots of things to explore", says Oliver. Their flat in Rome is not nearly as interesting for a one-year-old. I translate: "You have far too much junk lying around."

Over Christmas I had got my mother to teach me to knit. My first creation started off with 12 stitches in a row and rose rapidly to 23. Evelyn said it looked like I was knitting a map of Africa. My second creation was a scarf for Emily: it too started on 12 stitches, made its way up to 14, then settled down to 13.



Emily didn't think much of my handiwork: she glared and tore the scarf off.

My New Year's Resolution? Learn how to knit Fair Isle. That uses two strands of different-coloured yarns in a single row. By varying the stitches and colours, you can form intricate patterns: stars, hearts, OXO patterns, and so forth. I think I'll start off with a Fair Isle map of Africa.

February

MÜLLENBERG – "Why do you always move the soap?" demanded Evelyn. I didn't know that I was guilty of this, and especially not on a habitual basis. Reconstructing the crime, I realized that I inadvertently moved it while wiping down the sink: it disappeared behind the dishcloth, invisible to the uninitiated.

I have corrected this error by moving the soap back again immediately after I feel moved to clean the sink. The happiness level in our household has since gone up a notch. I wonder what other little unintended misdemeanours I am committing. I must ask Evelyn to make me a list.

March

MÜLLENBERG – The Bundestag is altogether far less theatrical than the British parliament. I think it comes down to seating arrangements: if you are seated in a circle and have to walk to a podium to speak, it's much more boring than if you are sat glaring at your opposition a mere mace's length away. Parliament is still more entertaining because speakers still have to refer to an opponent as "the honourable member for Lesser Snodsbury" rather than "you gormless fool".

But in another way, it's heartening: where other folk would be out on the streets, building barricades and looting shops, the Brits, divided as they are, are still engaged in the thrust and parry of parliamentary debate.

Having said that, the Brits have lost cartloads of goodwill around the world. Germans' respect for the UK has ebbed like the tide across a North Sea mudflat. People here cannot understand why the Brits would want to leave the EU – especially after all their opt-outs, rebates and exceptions. But Britain has always been the awkward member of the EU, and many feel the club would be a lot easier without them.

MÜLLENBERG – A couple of years ago, my mother gave Evelyn's sister, Sibylle, a book of English poems. Sibylle has

since been trying to memorize one particular ditty, called the *Flower Alphabet*. It consists of 26 stanzas, each featuring a particular flower: A is for Amaryllis, B is for Buttercup... you get the idea. She likes to recite verses to us over the phone.

She has got down to Z, so I have written some new verses for her, featuring poisonous, thorny or unpleasant plants. I call it the *Weed Alphabet*.

*B is for Buttercup
Yellow and bright
Eat it and throw up
All through the night.*

April

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn edits the monthly newsletter of a professional shepherds' association. I contribute a couple of cartoons to each issue, typically featuring a pair of sheep discussing a topic covered in the text. I also occasionally draw cartoons of Evelyn and me (though not for publication). She complains that she comes across as the bad guy while I always make myself appear blameless.

So it is with a slight sense of panic that I report that Evelyn has joined an art group for refugees and volunteers. Every Thursday the group gets together to draw still lifes and portraits of each other. I dread the day when she starts drawing cartoons of me. When she does, I'm in trouble.

*B is (also) the Bramble
It grows in thick patches
Go in short trousers
You'll get lots of scratches.*

May

ROME, ITALY – Emily now has four words: “azie”, which is short for “grazie” (“thank you” in Italian), “mama” (which means “mama” in the language of your choice), “zu” (“shut” in German) and “no no no no no” (which is both English and Italian). She is learning four languages simultaneously: English from Oliver and me, German from Julia and Evelyn, Italian from her kindergarten, and Franconian, a dialect of German, from Ingrid and Günther, her other grandparents. Mostly, though, she speaks Emilynese – which only she can understand.



What's Lego in Emilynese?

KITULUNI HILLS, KENYA – A group of young men was waiting on the side of the road as our coach stopped. One poured water on the tarmac, and we gawped as it flowed uphill. This remarkable phenomenon has generated a minor tourist industry in the area, with young men demonstrating the demise of gravity by collecting water from a nearby stream and pouring it on the road. One of the lads explained that a woman living nearby had been married to two brothers, one who lived uphill and one further down. She preferred the uphill one, which is why the water still flows that way.



Which way is uphill?

Our group consisted of soil scientists who suggested other theories: iron impurities in the water attracted to magnetic rocks nearby, local gravitational anomalies, and so on. No one mentioned the idea of an optical illusion. Nor did the young man who pocketed the tips he had collected from our coachload.

I had been working with the soil scientists to produce a book on fertilizer in Africa. Much of the world (including Europe) uses far too much fertilizer – polluting rivers and groundwater. Most of Africa uses too little, resulting in low yields and hunger. See *Feeding Africa's soils* at tinyurl.com/qtafyhc for more.

LÜNEBURG, GERMANY – Ella was the star attraction at our family meeting in this north German town. Injured when she was a puppy, she was adopted by Evelyn's cousin Andrea, who built a wheelchair for her that allows her to scoot around the house and go for walks. Andrea, a small-animal vet, has a sideline in dog wheelchairs. You can get hindleg wheelchairs (like Ella's), foreleg wheelchairs, four-wheelers, and wheelchairs with removable wheels for big dogs. You can even rent a wheelchair if your dog is undergoing rehab after an accident. See tierarzt-runge.de/en/ for details.

June

HÜCKESWAGEN, GERMANY – Our neighbour Ulli has a low opinion of my technical flair. He needed help to install a roof window in a flat he was renovating. He had already scoured the whole building for assistance, but everyone was either away or too old to lift a heavy window. His other friends and relatives were at a birthday party, had just had an arm operation, had a bad back, or were in Majorca. I really was his last choice.

To find out why Ulli thinks the way he does, see December.

LEIPZIG, GERMANY – I eventually persuaded Evelyn to let us hire a canoe to go paddling on the Elster – but by the time we got to the canoe-hire place, they had run out of boats. No matter, I then persuaded her to let us hire a couple of bicycles instead. Download the app, scan the QR code to unlock the bike, and you can cycle to the destination of your choice. Which in our case meant along the riverbank, looking with longing at the canoes we had been denied access to previously. This is the first time I have seen Evelyn on a bike for many a year: she claims it's because I haven't repaired her bike, but then says she wouldn't ride it anyway because she's afraid of the traffic. A lose-lose situation, as far as I can see.



According to the man who sold me an e-bike (see OCTOBER), this is a “bio-bike”

*G is the Giant Hogweed
It burns if you touch it
Don't grab it, don't eat it
And definitely don't clutch it.*

July

MÜLLENBERG – Ulli is not the only person whose exacting standards we fail to live up to. Leni, a volunteer who works with refugees in Kürten, wanted to bring Maarif for help with a job application. I told her how to get to our house.

Twenty minutes later, she called. “We’re outside your house but no one lives there.” I opened the front door to find her car. Too many weeds growing around our porch, it seems.

Maarif was impressed, though. “Like a museum”, he said, looking at the decorations from around the world that hang over the stairs – and started taking selfies. Maybe we could charge an entrance fee and use the proceeds to pay a gardener?

LEOMINSTER, ENGLAND – “You want to take Emily to a brewery?” Oliver was incredulous. It is difficult to find things that interest all generations from a 1½-year-old to the nearly-90. Especially in Leominster, a no-longer-thriving Marcher wool town. The younger generations opted for a nap while the hophead majority visited the Swan Brewery. I can recommend both their “Swan Small Step” and “Swan Giant Leap” brews.

MUMBLES, WALES – When I was young, my parents used to take us on mystery tours: day trips that always seemed to end up in Clacton, a no-longer-thriving resort on the Essex coast. Evelyn and I continue this tradition by taking my mother out to a mystery destination, known as “Clacton” until we actually get there.

Clacton 2019 turned out to be Mumbles, a seaside town in south Wales. But at first we couldn’t find the house we had booked. We drove up the road and ended up in a graveyard. “A bit early” said Sheila.



If you don't understand Emilynese, try Welsh

It is difficult to find things to please both young and old. Emily rejoiced when she saw the indoor playground. Too loud for my mother, though: we took her to a seaside café instead. On the beach, Emily did not want to get her feet wet. We played football on the sand: Oliver carrying Emily, Sheila hitting the ball with her stick. Both displayed far more talent than I will ever have. Maybe I should try cricket?

BIRMINGHAM AIRPORT, ENGLAND – Waiting at the gate for the plane: a man and woman walked briskly past. He was holding her closely; she looked under duress. We went to investigate, but the couple had disappeared. We found security and reported our suspicions.

Posters on modern slavery are plastered around the airport, but people – especially women – are still smuggled across borders and through airports, despite all the checks and security. Keep an eye open when you are next waiting for your plane.

KÜRTEEN – Say “cricket” to a German, and you either get a blank look or a tentative description of croquet, baseball or – bizarrely – polo. So it is tricky trying to find somewhere where a group of Afghan refugees can play the gentleman’s game.

The few playgrounds are too small and are distressingly close to BMW-filled carparks with windscreens waiting to be smashed by the next six. The district is hilly and wooded, and converting one of the few patches of flat land into a cricket field would mean battling a thicket of German land-use regulations.

The artificial turf on the Montania-Kürten football club pitch is too spongy for cricket and would be damaged by the hard ball. So the Afghans are practising on the running track that surrounds the pitch: hard enough for a good bounce, but damages the ball. They’ve gone through a boxful already.

August

POTTERNE, DEVIZES, ENGLAND – The problem with ruby wedding celebrations is that you meet friends you haven’t seen for 40 years and spend the whole evening chatting with them rather than socializing with any other guests. Sorry, Clare and Pete: we didn’t mean to be so unsociable.

To keep me busy while waiting for the party crowds to arrive, Clare asked me to drape kilometres of bunting up and down the driveway. The following morning, after the multitude had departed, I made myself useful by taking it all down again. This was a mistake: further throngs were on their way to consume the leftovers from the previous evening’s festivities. Which all goes to prove that the opposite of “good” is “well-intended”.

RYDE, ISLE OF WIGHT, ENGLAND – I have become an unlikely cricket tourist: I go to see pitches rather than games. My friend Alan took me to see the pitch up the road from his house. This is a strip of rubber-backed matting laid into the ground between two football fields. Alas, not a solution for Kürten, which has just one football field. I don’t think the Montania trustees would look kindly on us digging up their AstroTurf to insert a cricket track into their centre circle.

The alternative is to create a cricket playing area, 22 yards long, from a set of plywood boards covered with coconut matting. Lay the boards on top of the AstroTurf, and you have a cricket venue on par with anything in Afghanistan. This what we will do in Kürten next year.

*H is for Holly
Prickly and green
Put it under a pillow
And wait for the scream*

September

MÜLLENBERG – It was a good spring. In June, we harvested 75 kg of dark, viscous honey: the bees had been collecting honeydew excreted by lice in the spruce forest next door. (“Forest honey” is louseshit that has been regurgitated by bees.) But the summer has been very hot and dry, and the spruces have been turning brown, succumbing to drought and a plague of bark beetles. The woods have been humming with chainsaws as the foresters try to prevent yet more beetle damage. We’ll probably have less honey next year.

Especially if the wasps have their way. Hot, dry weather is good for them too, and a steady stream of wasps has been robbing our hives. We try to keep them out by reducing the entrance (where the bees fly in and out) to a minimum, making the hive easier for the guard bees to defend. But the wasps also mean we cannot open the hives to treat the bees against varroa, a parasitic mite. Too many varroa mean no bees at all.

SADRI, RAJASTHAN, INDIA – Here’s the wrong and right way to kiss Evelyn. She says I still have a lot to learn.



Left: wrong. Right: better

MÜLLENBERG – Several months ago, Evelyn said she wanted a way to measure the rain in our garden. Mental note to self: a birthday present I could get her that she actually wanted. I ordered a digital weather station online: it monitors rainfall, wind direction and strength, gusts, humidity and air pressure. It feeds this information via Bluetooth onto a multicoloured display in our living room to save us the trouble of looking out of the window to check whether it is chucking down or merely drizzling. It uploads the data to the internet so we can use our mobile phones to check whether our veggies are getting enough rain while we are away.

Evelyn wasn't as pleased as she should have been. She refuses to use the internet functions ("I don't want Google to know where I am"), and relative humidity fails to grab her interest. A bucket on the terrace would have been a cheaper way of keeping track of precipitation, she says. What was the opposite of "good" again?

MÜLLENBERG – Five heavysset Azerbaijanis, clad head to toe in black, piled out of the small car in our driveway. A visit by the local mafia clan? No: Maarif wanted to buy honey, and I had assured him that we did not adulterate ours with sugar (as seems to be standard practice in Azerbaijan). His friends wanted some too: we sold five kilos in all. An offer we couldn't refuse.

ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND – Julia and Linda, her sister, invited their families to a photoshoot in Zürich to celebrate their birthdays. Condition: we all had to wear blue and white – which happen to be the colours of Bavaria (where their family comes from). A professional photographer met us in the city centre and snapped photos of us all in various combinations and poses.

That evening we went out in search of a meal. Günther (Julia's father) and Thomas (Linda's partner) went ahead to recce. We found them in a restaurant playing loud Bavarian oompah music. Home from home.



Blue and white: Bavarians in Zürich

CHIAREGGIO, ITALY – At the end of the summer season, two spectacular migrations take place in the Alps. The first is when cattle are driven down from the high pastures into the valleys before the onset of the winter snows. This is a major tourist attraction that directly causes the second migration: a traffic jam that flows downhill after the last cow has been safely penned in its winter quarters. We missed the first migration but were privileged witnesses to the second. Inching up the hairpins, we were held up by a seemingly endless avalanche of steel, plastic and rubber heading towards us. Only a few locals overwinter in Chiareggio, at the head of this narrow glacial valley, served by snowmobiles that work their way up the road from the town below.



A tourist location is wonderful if there are no tourists. We were the only guests in the restaurants, the only customers in the shop, the only walkers on the mountain paths, and the only guests in our AirBnB. This turned out to be a problem: the next-to-last occupants turned off the water when they left, leaving us showerless and coffeess until the janitor arrived from town to turn it back on again.

October

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Evelyn suggested we go for a walk for my birthday, but first she had to buy some flowers for the grave of her mother, who would have been 99 on the same day. She drove into Gladbach, but missed the turning to the garden centre and instead parked outside a bike shop. The talk of flowers had been a ruse: she told me to go inside and choose an e-bike.

This is the second-best birthday present I have ever received (ask Evelyn about the first-best one). Bergisch Gladbach is half an hour from Müllenberg by e-bike – only slightly less than by car, and there's no hassle or cost of parking. Battery power melts the hills of the Bergisches Land into docility. A basket on the back means that I can do most of our shopping without having to get the car out. Now all Evelyn needs is her own e-bike, and we can go off on romantic road trips together. Maybe towing a canoe. Next year's birthday present, maybe?

*S is the Stinging Nettle
It burns and it itches
Push it down his neck
And see how he twitches*

November

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Go into your local supermarket and try to find something that is not wrapped in plastic. All that packaging ends up as waste. Recycling is only a partial solution: much of Europe's "recycled" rubbish is exported to Asia, where it ends up in rivers, collects on shorelines, and floats in the sea. Manufacturers like to push the blame onto consumers for littering, whereas the real problem is producing too much plastic in the first place. We must cut down. (For more, see the *Plastic Atlas* that I have been translating: boell.de/en/plasticatlas.)

Our friend Stefanie has opened an "unpacked" shop here. This is where you can buy stuff without any unnecessary packaging. Bring your own containers and weigh it before paying. You can get dry goods – muesli, beans, coffee, pasta, rice, chocolate – as well as cooking oil and washing liquid (bring a bottle). Load them on your e-bike and you can feel extra smug about doing your tiny bit for the planet. See bueggel-unverpackt.de for more.

BECHEN, GERMANY – Our Jobs4Refugees volunteer group interviews refugees in Kürten, prepares CVs for them, and helps them find a job. Without reasonable German, all they can hope for is low-paid, often temporary work: building, cleaning, waste handling, kitchen work. But as their language has improved, an increasing number are ready to apply for apprenticeships that

open up better-paid jobs: retail, carpentry, motor mechanics, nursing. We help them choose a career and apply for apprenticeships, and then coach them through the three years of combined work and schooling required. As a result, Kürten is a leader among the nearby districts in helping refugees find work and integrate into German society.

Our attempt to start a centre for refugees in Bilstein have come to naught: too far away for anyone without a car (and refugees aren't into e-bikes yet). But our friends Christa and Rolf have rented a room behind a café in Bechen, a village on a bus route and easier to get to. Every Tuesday evening, I arrange appointments there to help refugees redo their CVs and apply for jobs. On Sundays a group of women get together to cook and chat. Next year a teacher will be offering computer courses for women. Various other volunteers help refugees deal with various aspects of German bureaucracy: getting their children into school, arranging doctors' appointments, dealing with asylum questions, and so on.

December

MÜLLENBERG – (Health alert: this is my political rant. To avoid it, skip ahead to “COLOGNE ZOO”.) First it was the Brexit referendum, then the election of Trump. Right-wing populism is a threat all over the world: in some countries xenophobic nationalists have already taken over governments and are doing what they can to undermine institutions. Respect for facts is being dumped in favour of self-serving tweets, slogans and soundbites. Complex issues are reduced to simplistic solutions – or in the case of climate change – outright denial. Foreigners and immigrants are blamed for policy failures; refugees are herded into camps (or in Britain and elsewhere, denied entry altogether) rather than being welcomed with sympathy. Institutions that have been built up over years – the courts, parliament, the independent media, international treaties, the EU – are being attacked or subverted. I fear we are heading back to the 1930s. And they did not end well.

The real issue with Brexit is not deal or no-deal, the Irish border, job losses, trade deals, queues at the Channel, disruption to daily lives, economic growth, lack of control over immigration, German dominance, or subservience to EU law. Rather, the UK is withdrawing from an effort to maintain peace in the world's historically most conflict-ridden continent, by channelling selfish nationalism into compromise and the common good. Notwithstanding all its flaws, the EU has been remarkably successful at doing this for the last 60+ years.

Despite its dominant insular myth, the UK has always been part of Europe, its fate interwoven with that of its neighbours. It has guided the EU's rule-making as much as any other country. To withdraw from such an arrangement is folly indeed.

But such considerations do not concern the average voter. Instead of doing the honest thing and holding a second referendum, the Tories called an election, muddying Brexit with other issues. Weary of interminable Brexit debate and repelled by a suicidal Labour party, voters went for the populists. Fortunate in their choice of an opponent, and their vote magnified by the inequities of the first-past-the-post electoral system, the Tories won a landslide. Decades of EU-bashing in the press and in Parliament have finally paid off. The people have spoken. I'm glad I have a German passport.

COLOGNE ZOO – Toddlers may not be able to talk very much, but they can still make their wishes plain. Emily really, REALLY, REALLY did not want to be strapped into the pushchair. As dutiful grandparents, we wanted to be sure she wouldn't fall out, and at nearly 2, she's getting a little heavy to carry long distances. We attracted sympathetic looks from other

grandparents taking their descendants round the zoo. Emily calmed down only when she spotted the elephants.

“We never strap her into the pushchair”, said Oliver later. “She learned not to get out of it when we rolled over her once.” Goes to show that 2-year-olds know more about their routines than their grandparents do.

ZISCHENDORF, BAVARIA – A convinced feminist, Julia avoids gender stereotyping, and campaigns for women's rights and opportunities. Emily is given gender-neutral toys and books on science and heavy machinery (we gave her one entitled *General relativity for babies* for Christmas). But Ingrid and Günther gave her a play kitchen. She has joyfully been cooking meals for her dolls ever since.

Emily is a big fan of *pasta con salmone*...

“Emily, what do sheep do?” – “Baaa!”

“What do cows do?” – “Mooo!”

“What do bees do?” – “Bzzzzzz!”

“And what does Emily do?” – “Pasta!”

ABERYSTWYTH, WALES – Fancy a *Currywurst*? Forget the Christmas market in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a picturesque mediaeval town in Bavaria, where they are not available (though you can get a *Bratwurst* made by a butcher's called Trumpp). Instead, get your *Currywurst* at the three-stall “German Christmas market” in Aberystwyth, which also does *Bratwurst*, mulled wine and gingerbread. The stallholder doesn't speak a word of German, but he did assure me that his *Wurst* were imported directly from Germany – via Dartford.



Currywurst? Aberystwyth!

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND – No Christmas presents, please: instead, my mother had a list of minor household tasks for me to do. Change a light bulb, fix the toilet flush, change a tap, check the car battery. The light bulb was easy, but the plumbing jobs entailed turning the water supply off and taking the toilet cistern off the wall. As New Year dawned, she had no hot water and the cistern was dripping onto the carpet. Maybe a few impurities in the water and a magnet would help?

Unlike my mother, I regard this as a win-win situation. The plumber will come to put the problems aright, and my mother will never ask me to fix anything in her household again.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. May your plumbing be free of drips, your poetry free of drivel, your Brexit free of drawbacks, and your camel kiss free of drool. May you always understand what your granddaughter is trying to tell you. And don't put stinging nettles down anyone's neck.

Unless you meet Boris Johnson, or Donald Trump, or...

Paul and Evelyn