Masud, N. (2022). Edward Lear: Sudden and Surprising. *Modern Philology*, *119*(3), 421-441. https://doi.org/10.1086/717457

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Edward Lear: Sudden and Surprising

NOREEN MASUD
University of Bristol

> At night if he suddenly screams and wakes,
> Do they bring him only a few small cakes or a LOT,
> For the Akond of Swat?[1]

Though Edward Lear's poem "The Akond of Swat" (1873) builds itself around speculation, it never asks the most glaring questions: For instance, why does the poor Akond suddenly scream himself awake at night? In turn, his servants (or carers) ask no questions. They just bring cake, with experienced unsurprise. The Akond is known, in other words, to scream in the night. His long-suffering attendants treat his sudden screaming as an expected phenomenon.

Suddenness runs, here, against surprise. Though the surprising and the sudden are often treated as interchangeable,[2] they carry different valences. Sudden and surprising both describe events one wasn't prepared for. But "surprising" is preachy: it tells you how you should feel (astounded, startled, confused). Something sudden, meanwhile, omits emotional cues: it also happens quickly, but does not dictate how you should respond. Describing something as sudden only tells you that it happened faster or sooner than you might have expected. Something may be unsurprising, but still sudden. The surprising may not be sudden at all.

Nonsense works in the interplay between the expected and the unexpected. It is a complex product of expectations met and left unmet, of the familiar and the surprising. The contention of this essay, however, is that

1. Edward Lear, "The Akond of Swat," in *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, ed. Vivien Noakes (London: Penguin, 2001), 400. All further references to this collection are indicated parenthetically by *CN*.

2. See, e.g., Christopher R. Miller, *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 9; and the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of "surprise" as "To 'take hold of' or affect suddenly or unexpectedly" (s.v. "surprise, *v.*," https://www.oed.com).

Modern Philology, volume 119, number 3, February 2022.
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Lear's originality—the engine of his verse, to an extent that distinguishes him from nonsense-writing contemporaries like Lewis Carroll—derives not from the surprising, but from the sudden. Owls and Pussycats going to sea, Old Men with beards full of birds, Pobbles with no toes: Edward Lear's landmark nonsense writing overflows with things that may be surprising to his readers. But nonsense maintains a double vision: something may be objectively surprising, yet the writer presents it as unsurprising. Within nonsense worlds, life goes on as usual, through the strangest events. Surprise, in Lear, is a privilege restricted to those who expect the world to behave reasonably. Carroll's texts keep a surprised perspective aloft, through Alice's incredulous eyes. But for Lear's nonsense protagonists, things are sudden more often than they are surprising.

A paradigm that admits varying possibilities is precisely the domain of surprise, whose pleasures Ralph Waldo Emerson described in his essay "Circles" (1841): "Life is a series of surprises. We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of tomorrow, when we are building up our being . . . the masterpieces of God, the total growths and universal movements of the soul, he hideth; they are incalculable."[3] For something to be sudden but not surprising evacuates any chance of contingency and of agency. This is a radical claim to make for nonsense; the genre seems to hold a space open where anything might happen. Twisting suddenly from event to event, without reference to causality, Lear's texts do not acknowledge that things might have happened otherwise.

Set against theories of humor, this distinction allows us to see what is at stake in Lear's general excision of surprise from his work. Definitions of humor have certainly long depended on suddenness as a necessary ingredient. In *Human Nature* (1650), Thomas Hobbes defined laughter as "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others."[4] Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) locates laughter in "a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing."[5] Hobbes, however, also makes surprise central to his formulation: he writes that things are funny if they are "new and unexpected."[6] Surprise and suddenness come together in these definitions of humor. What, then, happens when surprise vanishes from the equation? What happens to humor in this situation—what does it combine with, or what is it modified or complicated by?

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2009), 131.

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature, or The Fundamental Elements of Policy* (London, 1651), 103.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

6. Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 101.

Both Kant and Hobbes integrate thought and feeling into their definitions: the cognition necessary to have a "conception" or an "expectation." But drawing a distinction between the surprising and the sudden allows us to see how Lear's work operates through an attempted displacement of thought and feeling. Peter Robinson argues that nonsense must maintain the disjunction between expectation and reality.[7] Replacing the surprising with the sudden, however, squeezes out the space for that vital discrepancy to be acknowledged. Suddenness describes that very displacement: a dislodgment of feeling, a momentary hiccup, a leap out of time, causality, and emotion. Counterintuitively, suddenness describes a falling behind: something has streaked ahead of the emotional, temporal, and logical structures that should contain it. Crucially, that dislodgment is only momentary. Feelings may follow later. But that instant where they are displaced forms the core of Lear's work: it protects the space where surprise is, for a moment, impossible. Where something happens so fast that, for a moment, no other outcome could be envisaged. If we read Lear's verse as something incidentally surprising to onlookers and driven internally by an economics of the sudden, we move closer to noticing how his nonsense writing is braced—and its humor modified—by a resignation to a world in which things happen too rapidly to allow one to imagine, or expect, less jolting alternatives.

Lear's lifelong epilepsy meant he had to live braced for suddenness, for seizures that might grip him at any time. Yet the sudden-but-not-surprising has its consolations. If suddenness sometimes enforces resignation, it also makes room for instinct and impetuousness. At its best, the dynamic accommodates a kind of necessary, joyful, animal difference. It becomes the grounds for both the tension elicited by others (since they will always sooner or later, we know, jolt us somehow) and delight at the idiosyncrasy of those others. It allows one to be vulnerable to them, and also (therefore) enchanted by them. In turn, suddenness enables the active, not-uncomplicated, worked-at love that emerges when this tension and this delight work together. To see this ethos as fundamental to Lear remodels one critical image of the poet as an easy, comfortable refuge for eccentrics and outsiders, offering, as Vivien Noakes would have it, "an escape from a world of anxiety into one of safety and imagination" (*CN*, xxvi), or becoming, as Auden thought, "a land" for children and the disenfranchised.[8] Lear's world holds itself together by bracing for suddenness: this may be jarring, but it is part of living with nonhuman, eccentric, and simply different Others. Governed by a

7. Peter Robinson, *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 61.

8. W. H. Auden, "Edward Lear," in *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 127.

Levinasian ethic, Lear's work makes loving-if-turbulent space not only for nonsense beings, but—more profoundly—for those Othered racially by the Victorian colonial context in which he lived, such as the Old Man of Jamaica in his limericks. He accommodates differences of culture, appearance, and temporal rhythm, while staying alive to those sometimes jerky and stressful differences, without allowing them to melt into consistent sentimental harmony. In this world, to be surprised by Others would be a category error: it would entail a failure in deep awareness of the intrinsic strangeness of other beings. All you can do with the necessary suddenness of others and things, in their rapid caprices, is to live alongside them. For Lear, that is both the hardest and the most alluring prospect.

Drawing at every stage on unpublished manuscripts, this essay begins by positioning suddenness as a phenomenon not of expectation, but of time. It contrasts Lear's writing with that of his more temporally orderly contemporary, Lewis Carroll, to argue that, for Lear, suddenness captures a sensation that something might be at once expected and unprepared for. It goes on to explore how suddenness sends both bodies and feelings out of sync, arguing that suddenness brings home, in Lear's work, the importance of living tolerantly alongside an unknowable Other. Finally, it traces how his writing (mis)allocates surprise, making it a response to a soothing everyday. The surprising does exist in Lear's writing. In his hands, however, it comes to mean something different from the use made of surprise by his contemporaries: the delight of the uneventful. If suddenness involves a threatening jolt, a closing off of agency, Learish surprise—in its brief appearances—holds the hope that things might still, always, turn out otherwise, that they might pan out with a normal and unremarkable happiness.

I. THE EXPECTED SUDDEN

Death is seldom described as surprising. Everybody dies. But it is almost always experienced as sudden. When Lear recounts in his letters the deaths of his relatives, he draws on this established formulation of suddenness:

> [July 31, 1870] I must tell you that I have been, at one time, extremely ill this summer. It is as well that you should know that I am told I have the same complaint of the heart as my father died of quite suddenly.
>
> [July 28, 1859] My sister's death was so sudden at the last, that her nearer Scotch friends did not get to see her alive, poor thing.[9]

9. Edward Lear, *Letters of Edward Lear to Chichester Fortescue, Lord Carlingford, and Frances Countess Waldegrave*, ed. Lady Strachey (London: Unwin, 1909), xxxii, 145.

No matter how expected a death, how scrupulously prepared for, one is still seldom ready. Illness and death seem to happen suddenly, though they are inevitable, as for Lear's Old Person of Prague:

> There was an Old Person of Prague,
> Who was suddenly seized with the plague;
> But they gave him some butter, which caused him to mutter,
> And cured that Old Person of Prague.
>
> (*CN*, 86)

Lear experiences his life as unusually full of such sudden but inevitable experiences. In his diaries, unwanted guests barge in; fleas pop up and make his life a misery ("I would that my fleas were not so many," he laments).[10] Seizures from his epilepsy erupt without warning:

> Began to work 7.15—& worked till 9. After breakfast—wrote to J. Cross, & Mrs. Robinson. Worked—at 160 Tyrants—but suddenly
> X1
> Very unexpected.—
>
> Rose at 5½. Greek till 8. Worked irregularly—& suddenly came to awful grief
> X1 X2 X3[11]

What does it mean for Lear to describe his seizures, in the first entry, as "unexpected"? Lear knows he is prone to seizures. They happen frequently enough for him to employ a code for them: an X marks a seizure in his diaries. What Lear means is that he did not expect a seizure at that moment. Seizures are an intrinsic part of his life. They do not surprise: he is braced always for their unreasonable, capricious, inevitable interventions. But they are sudden.

The sudden and the surprising offer two models of relationship to possibility and expectation. A surprising world, as Emerson suggests, is one where possibilities are utterly boundless, in the hands of a wholly "incalculable" God; nothing can be expected, only excitedly waited for. In a world that is sudden but not surprising, the only unknown is why things are happening now and not at another time.

Suddenness disrupts the temporal order. Things are brought forward; they happen too soon—as in the case of the Old Man of Jamaica:

> Who suddenly married a Quaker!
> But she cried out—"O lack! I have married a black!"
> Which distressed that Old Man of Jamaica.
>
> (*CN*, 98)

10. Edward Lear, diaries, MS Eng 797.3, June 17, 1871, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
11. Ibid., March 8, 1865, and January 5, 1858.

Lear imagines a marriage that can somehow happen fast enough to outstrip the Quaker's racism, that could leap over all practicalities of courtship, ceremony, and paperwork, to take place before the Quaker could register, let alone reject, the man she is marrying. Lear's use of "suddenly" here takes to an absurd extreme his wider sense of how time tends to operate for him. In a letter to Hubert Congreve, he uses it to mean something like "immediately": "If you want to buy the Corsican Series for £1100—let me know suddenly."[12] He draws on the same implication in his diary:

> Dined alone: & suddenly began Musters's Interlaken, at wh. I worked on till 11 no one coming.
>
> I drew in & ruled all the Acqueducts & the Tower in Sir W. James's Campagna—after which I suddenly commenced 6 of the 3rd size next year Watercolored drawings
> —& actually outlined all 6.[13]

In these instances, strikingly, Lear casts mere everyday promptness as suddenness. To be timely, or for one occurrence simply to follow another, is already to be sudden. Lear hints at an extreme sensitivity to time: a situation where even the most benign events can make themselves overly and joltingly present. His description of a difficult evening, in a diary entry from 1873, reads like one of his nonsense worlds. Household objects and creatures interrupt with rapid calamities: "Home to dine—but everything—from unknown causes,—was later than usual. . . . Also Foss the cat suddenly ate up the new creamcheese. Also later the Lamp abruptly extincted himself. I meant to have written to [Lear's beloved friend] Frank,—from whom I have not heard for an age—but it is getting 'too late, too late.' "[14] The Lamp comes inexplicably to life and puts "himself" out; the cat "suddenly" eats up a cream cheese, before Lear can stop him, with a dispatch quite unexpected for a meal so large and rich. It is reminiscent of the sudden fate of the tiny Old Man of Leghorn, in another Lear limerick: "quickly snapped up he, was once by a puppy" (*CN*, 73). In all these cases, duration shrinks: it collapses in on itself. Things are never experienced as in process. They have not happened, and then, abruptly—no matter how long it should take to marry, or to eat up a whole cream cheese—they are already over.

This particular mode of temporality is specific to Lear. Things do happen suddenly in Lewis Carroll's books, but the main engine of plot development in *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) is the idea of the individual "moment." It

12. Edward Lear, letters, MS Eng 797, May 2, 1883, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
13. Lear, diaries, MS Eng 797.3, February 23, 1860, and August 28, 1864.
14. Ibid., January 20, 1873.

recurs: "at this moment a heavy crash shook the forest," "a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment."[15] One moment follows another, kept in more or less orderly temporal sequence. The changes may be rapid, but we do not have the same sense of time warping, collapsing, getting behind itself, as we experience in Lear. Events remain portioned out; time remains an even and predictable size.

Suddenness, in Lear's verse, is necessary to overcome the inertia of what naturally is. In "The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs" (1871), it jolts the impossible into the obvious:

> "Let us all of a sudden hop down from the table,
> And hustle downstairs, and each jump on a horse!
> Shall we try? Shall we go? Do you think we are able?"
> The Sugar-tongs answered distinctly, "Of course!"
> (*CN*, 272)

"All of a sudden," as a phrase, accommodates the anapaests of Lear's meter; its sudden little jumps, after a two-beat prevarication, offer a leaping into possibility and jubilance. The Nutcrackers propose suddenness to bypass the paralysis of surprise. Christopher Miller notes how surprise is immobilizing: surprised characters in eighteenth-century novels represent "temporarily halted characters—bodies immobilized and rendered mute."[16] The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs cannot afford, therefore, to be surprised at their own actions. If they give into surprise, they will be unable to move—lying motionless like the inert instruments they "should" be. And that would be a pity; there are horses to ride.

Distinguishing between suddenness and surprise allows us to see what is left when suddenness is liberated from surprise's dominion. To describe something as sudden but not acknowledge it as surprising is to imply that things are happening as they should. They are happening joltingly fast, but their feasibility is not in question. The Sugar-tongs's reply of "Of course!" admits no doubt about whether they will be able to hustle downstairs and jump on horses. What Lear's suddenness suggests is that what is happening is physically jolting, and yet that one might not have expected anything else. The sudden, in other words, is inevitable: over almost before it has started, the cream cheese devoured, the Quaker married in the blink of an eye.

There is a resignation in that speedy inevitability. It underlies Lear's wry description of his cat's uncontrollable, anarchic appetite, and especially his mournful recording of his seizures in his diary. They are known

15. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford University Press, 1998), 197, 46. Further references are to this edition, indicated parenthetically in the text as *A*.

16. Miller, *Surprise*, 8.

to happen, and they are not therefore surprising. The orderly routines that he describes in his diaries, his sober and abstemious daily round, are recorded as a bastion against suddenness; they work, however, only to frame and showcase it. The sudden-but-not-surprising accommodates sensations of powerlessness and helplessness in the face of a willful force.

Such a force, bouncing one along heartlessly, manifests in nonsense's form. Key to almost all nonsense poetry is what James Williams calls "the resistance of meter to feeling."[17] What occurs is impossible in our everyday world—surprising to us—but the meter hurries us along nevertheless, tinkling regularly. That doubleness reflects the double vision of nonsense writing, where something is surprising and at the same time has that surprise controlled or flattened, and it bears out also in the use Lear's nonsense makes of rhyme. "The Akond of Swat" binds itself gratefully around a display of the (limited) range of words that rhyme with "swat."[18] Does the Akond *squat*? Does he make *blots* on his letters? Does he like his shawl marked with a *dot*? Rhyme's unpredictable associations take the poem to strange places: in the same gesture, however, it offers a predictable shell to absorb and manage these odd associations. That framework contains Lear's whimsical wonderings, his little surprises for the reader, providing a grain for events to run against, and moderating their capacity to feel surprising. Lewis Carroll emphasizes such a formal failure of surprise when, on a number of occasions, he leaves off the final rhyme of his poems, such as in "I passed by his garden" in *Alice in Wonderland*:

> When the pie was all finished, the Owl, as a boon,
> Was kindly permitted to pocket the spoon:
> While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl,
> And concluded the banquet by—
>
> (*A*, 94)

The Mock Turtle can interrupt Alice's recitation because the outcome is obvious. It is unsurprising: preordained by poetic form. The same deadening of surprise operates in Lear's repetition, in his limericks, of the key rhyme word at the beginning and end, consistently replacing rhyme with repetition. His nonsense poems describe surprising events, yet their form explicitly neutralizes the experience of surprise: we know that, inevitably, the Person's home will be reiterated or returned to in the final line. Though the Old Person of Prague suddenly catches the plague, we can be comforted by the sure knowledge that his hometown Prague will materialize to encase him, reassuringly, at the end of the limerick as it did at the beginning.

17. James Williams, "The Jokes in the Machine: Comic Verse," in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford University Press, 2013), 823.

18. Lear's rhyme scheme presents the word as homophonous with "swot."

Rhyme, as in "The Akond of Swat," can foreclose surprise, in the same moment as the absurdity of what the rhyme resorts to narratively (squats and dots and blots) invites a little thrill. In general, W. K. Wimsatt suggests, rhyme depends on surprise: "The greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked and the more appropriate will be the binding effect. Rhyme theorists have spoken of the "surprise" which is the pleasure of rhyme. . . . Even after the discovery, when the rhyme is known by heart, the pleasurable surprise remains. It must depend on some incongruity or unlikelihood inherent in the coupling."[19] To replace rhyme by repetition, or to eliminate the rhyme altogether as Carroll does—as something so self-evident that it can be left implicit—involves moving away from an aesthetic of surprise. What Wimsatt does not acknowledge here is how rhyme folds surprise and unsurprise together. With its long history of use as a mnemonic, supplying predictable shape, rhyme deflates surprise even as it seeks it out, as Carroll shows us. His Panther eats the Owl, not just because it is in its nature to do so (they wouldn't share a pie if this was the only relevant consideration), but more importantly because it is necessary for the rhyme.[20] Though the events in his poems may be unexpected, the use of rhymes in Lear's poetry—and, crucially, the replacement of rhyme by repetition in his limericks—turn the unexpected into something to which we must submit, even as we laugh.

II. NONSENSE TIMES AND FEELINGS

In Lear's "Mr and Mrs Discobbolos" (1877), a harmonious pleasure trip to the top of a wall is broken up by a sudden exclamation:

> They took up a roll and some Camomile tea,
> And both were as happy as happy could be—
> Till Mrs Discobbolos said—
> "Oh! W! X! Y! Z!
> It has just come into my head—
> Suppose we should happen to fall!!!!!
> Darling Mr Discobbolos!
> (*CN*, 321)

The same exclamation crops up, suddenly, in Lear's diary, when a visitor offers to purchase a painting: "And they suddenly said—(o W X Y Z! -) they wished to buy the Vintimiglia!"[21] In his diary's moment of good news,

19. W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1954), 164.

20. On the imperious power of rhyme in nonsense, see W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 265–75.

21. Lear, diaries, MS Eng 797.3, January 4, 1872.

hearing that one of his paintings will be sold, Lear takes recourse to the rhythms of his nonsense to express himself. For him, "suddenly said" invites "(o W X Y Z!)" with the inevitability of rhyme. The turn of events is positive, but—in its suddenness—his response becomes scrambled. Lear's diary entry illuminates what is at stake in the Discobbolos exclamation: Mr Discobbolos's cry reveals itself as ambiguous, wordless, halfway between terror and rapture, exemplifying simultaneously an orderly alphabetization, a euphemistic oath substitute, and a meaningless shout. In this internally contradictory space, feeling is delayed or deferred, scrambled out of sight.

Suddenness describes a moment when things go out of sync. In Lear, time constantly loses its step: events collapse their duration or happen impossibly soon. These temporal hiccups affect the bodies and minds that experience them. Lear traces how suddenness offers a space beyond feeling; knocked almost out of their own bodies, his characters negotiate the experience of becoming, in several ways, beside themselves.

If surprise is a cerebral response (comparing what one expected to what actually transpired), then suddenness is a physical experience, a mute bodily jolt. One experiences suddenness corporeally; the body loses sync with itself. This is borne out in *Alice in Wonderland*; though Lewis Carroll's writing acknowledges suddenness much less often than surprisingness or oddness, when it does occur, he renders it clearly in terms of its impact on Alice's body: "[The Duchess] said the last word with such sudden violence that Alice quite jumped"; "I wish [says Alice to the Cheshire Cat] you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!" (*A*, 53, 59). Suddenness makes Alice dizzy, or launches her into the air: it dislodges her to a point beside herself. We see the same dislodgment in Lear. One of Lear's most common portrayals of human figures involves them standing or riding or jumping with their arms stretched behind their backs: as though their trunks are moving so abruptly that they leave their arms behind. A manuscript at the Houghton Library shows a huge—human-sized, human-faced—moth emerging from a chest (fig. 1). Surprising? Not, apparently, to the woman who stands in front, a key falling to the ground from hands flung behind her. Her posture suggests astonishment, but—like the moth—she is smiling. She seems to find the appearance of the impossible, half-human moth sudden (she has dropped her key, unheeding) but not surprising. Her backflung hands may instead imply that she is about to embrace the insect (perhaps they are long lost friends?) The people of Basing, chasing their resident Old Person of Basing, run with a similar gesture (fig. 2). They look focused but unsurprised; perhaps they would not have expected anything better from this Old Person. In all these cases, the posture signifies a body not quite in rhythm with itself: one part moving so fast that others cannot keep up.

Hands keep control. They organize; they manage. So when the body moves faster than the hands—when the hands do not come first to prepare

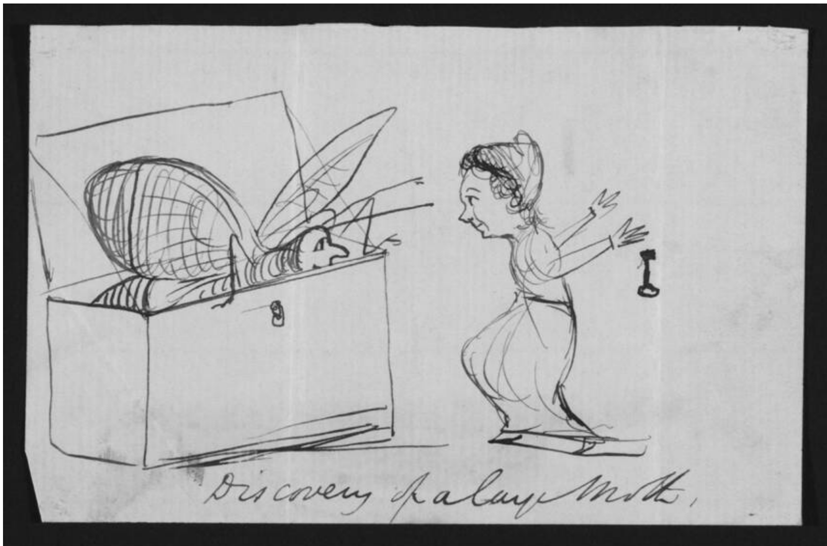

Figure 1. *Discovery of a Large Moth*, in Edward Lear miscellaneous drawings, 1849–66, MS Typ 55.14 (10), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

the way, to forestall a painful landing—it means that things are happening too fast for preparation and forethought. In other words, suddenly. Suddenness makes you vulnerable: in Lear's postures, the soft front of the body is bent forward, exposed to what might erupt.

In the realm of the sudden, one is in thrall to the vagaries of one's unpredictable body, which might collapse in a seizure, or to the choices of temporally chaotic others. Lear's pet cat Foss is one of these sudden entities. Apart from the cream cheese, he is a creature of small disasters and sudden movements. A large blot on one of Lear's flyleaves is blamed on Foss (fig. 3). Erratic dashes frame Foss's jumps and runs in Lear's diaries, as they do his accounts of his seizures: "At 12.30—PM. as I was giving some food to Foss—the quadruped suddenly went off—at seeing someone on the Terrace."[22]

Lear is indulgent to Foss. Elsewhere, though, he shows his knowledge of how alarming suddenness can be—how it invites acts of verbal and physical control:

> There was an Old Man of Ibreem,
> Who suddenly threaten'd to scream;
> But they said, "If you do, we will thump you quite blue,
> You disgusting Old Man of Ibreem!"
>
> (*CN*, 375)

22. Ibid., March 27, 1881.

Figure 2. *There Was an Old Person of Basing*, in Edward Lear's drawings for *A book of nonsense* (1861), MS Typ 55 (20), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

If one is sudden, one cannot be sedate. Suddenness is the cousin of hastiness, that condition of violence wound up with prematurity. Suddenness prevents those around you from making proper preparations to deal with what is going to happen.[23] It has its own brutality and invites a kind of brutality: in panic, "they" threaten to "thump" the old man.

We see this in "Mr and Mrs Discobbolos: Second Part" (1888). Mr Discobbolos responds to his wife's sudden anxiety that they will not, from their home atop the wall, be able to marry off their children. His first reaction seems tenderly indulgent:

> But Mr Discobbolos said,
> "O—W! X! Y! Z!
> What has come into your fiddledum head!
> What a runcible goose you are!
> Octopod Mrs Discobbolos!"
> (*CN*, 430–31)

"Goose" is a very mild tease, even modified by the ambiguous "runcible." Yet immediately, Mr Discobbolos changes tack:

> Suddenly Mr Discobbolos
> Slid from the top of the wall;

23. I follow James Williams in having a certain amount of sympathy for this "they." See James Williams, *Edward Lear* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2018), 4.

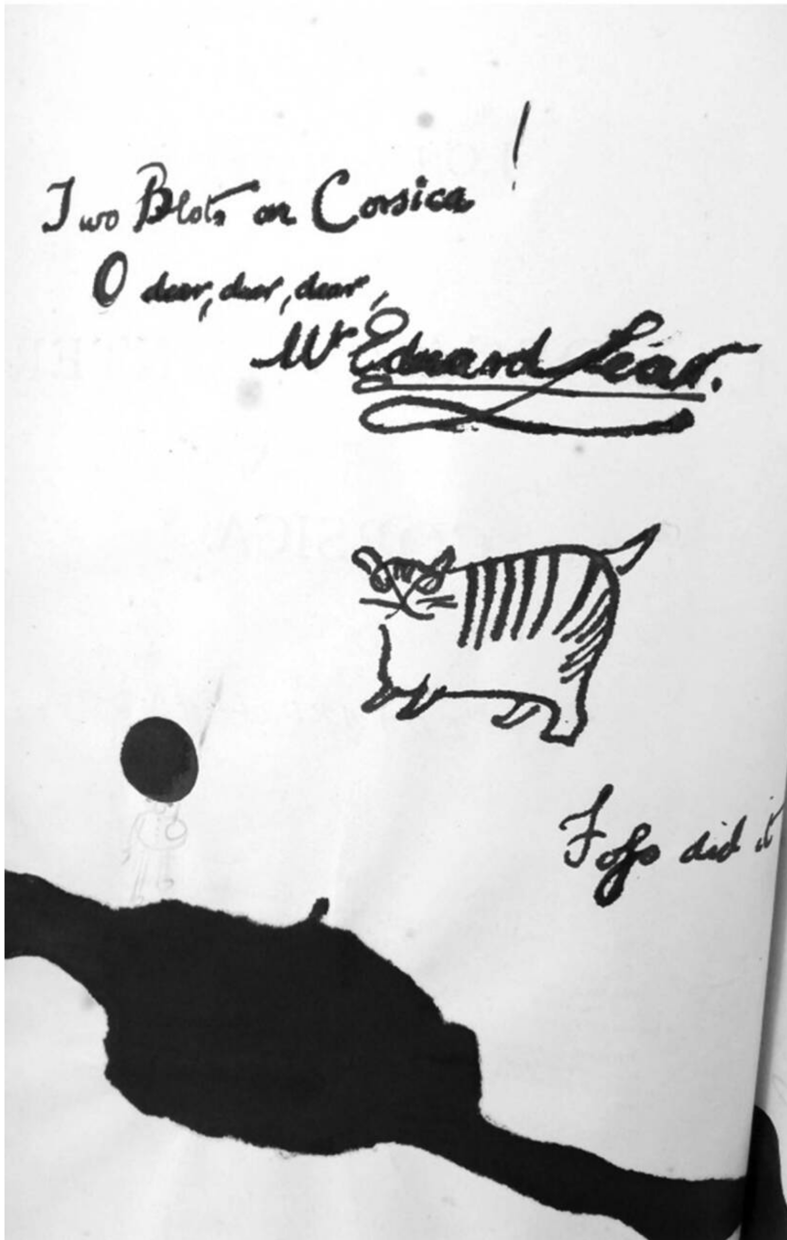

Figure 3. Edward Lear's drawing of Foss in his copy of his *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* (1870), Typ 805L 70 (B), Houghton Library, Harvard University. The caption reads, "Two Blots on Corsica! O dear, dear, dear, Mr. Edward Lear. Foss did it."

And beneath it he dug a dreadful trench,—
And filled it with Dynamite gunpowder gench
(*CN*, 431)

Mr Discobbolos blows up the wall, himself, and his entire family. Is this a response to Mrs Discobbolos's absurd anxieties—no longer tolerable to him—or an acknowledgment that she may in fact be right, and their only option is death? His motivation is left unclear. All we have to go on is the suddenness of response: a jerk into action that comes out of some sort of attempt to manage unbearable feeling.

So suddenness warps not only our sense of time, but our sense of feeling. Sudden events, like the Old Man of Jamaica's marriage, happen before either the sudden person or the audience has time to record or even experience emotions about what has occurred. Events, and the feelings that might or ought to attend them, go out of sync, in line with the bodies that fall out of tempo. Suddenness is dangerous, then, because it might jolt necessary feeling out of the picture; it might involve an attenuation of generous affective responses. This happens in "The Adventures of Mr Lear & the Polly [& the] Pusseybite on their way to the Ritertitle Mountains" (written 1866): "Mr L. & the P. & the P.B. incidentally fall over an unexpected Cataract, & are all dashed [to] atoms" (*CN*, 217). The key word here is "incidentally." "Incident," etymologically, suggests to fall into, implying the abruptness of their fall.[24] It stages what has happened as an "incident." And yet, in the same gesture, it relegates it away from the status of important climactic event, toward something casual: something only mentioned incidentally, casually, in passing. Here, the "unexpected" cataract has the same doubleness as Lear's "unexpected" seizure: at once shatteringly eruptive and entirely quotidian. If the trio's calamitous tumble is only narrated "incidentally," then the reader is redirected away from being able to feel sympathy, being able to care.

Such an attenuation of feeling is at the heart of my distinction between suddenness and surprise. Surprise circuits itself around feelings and thoughts. Alice, in Carroll's books, is constantly thinking and feeling, keeping paramount in the text the perspective of one who expects a reasonable world:

> Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: "But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?"
>
> "You can draw water out of a water-well," said the Hatter; "so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?"
>
> "But they were *in* the well," Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

24. On falls in Lear, see Matthew Bevis, "Falling for Edward Lear," in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford University Press, 2016), 134–61.

> "Of course they were," said the Dormouse: "well in."
> This answer so confused poor Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it. (*A*, 66)

Alice's continual surprise involves confusion, haughtiness, anger, caution, and courtesy, as she struggles to measure events in Wonderland against her sense of logic and of physical possibility. Surprise gives space to wondering, as Alice does, at the gap between what was expected and what happened. Suddenness, in contrast, can be brutal; it precisely eliminates any space to process and pass judgment.

Despite its potential for brutality, however, the sudden's elimination of judgment means that it is a space for instinct and impetuousness. It is an animal tendency, and one that Lear loved, despite his own sternly disciplined life. The quick reflexes of animals and their brisk recourse to instinct mean that all their actions tend to seem sudden. We can view the sudden in Lear as the way in which things just act out their inevitable, idiosyncratic, ultimately lovable natures. When he describes Foss the cat going off "suddenly" because he sees a visitor, this capacity in Foss is something that Lear lovingly and attentively records: it is part, for Lear, of capturing the charm of his cat.

The impetuous suddenness of the Old Man of Jamaica, the Old Man of Ibreem, becomes an aspect of doing what they are called on to do—what they cannot not do. We do not know what underlies the Old Man of Jamaica's marriage, what drives the Old Man of Ibreem to his sudden desire to scream. But the unknowability of these motivations is part of what makes them lovable; it makes them Other in Emmanuel Levinas's sense: "The absolutely other is the Other. . . . Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal.[25] The Others of Lear's nonsense, hailing from their often-exotic multisyllabic homelands, have reasons that are necessarily foreign to him, priorities that do not match his, speeds and hairpin moments of decision that do not match his personal timetable. Their suddenness cannot be changed or controlled, only (variously, simultaneously) braced against, tolerated, admired, and adored. The constant negotiation in Lear's poetry between resignation to, fear of, and joy in the suddenness of Otherness excludes comfortable communal safety, precisely in favor of love's restless livingness.

III. EXTREME SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

Nonsense protagonists (and perhaps nonsense writers) learn to accept things in all their absurdity. It seems quite natural to Lear's Sugar-tongs

25. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 39.

that they should be able to take up horseback riding. Only viewers external to his nonsense logic are surprised, in the sense that we tend to understand that word; surprise as a response to a misbehaving world plays almost no part in the chaotic mechanics of Lear's nonsense. Replacing surprise with suddenness as a narrative engine allows Lear to rethink surprise. He recasts the word to accommodate a novel and unexpected set of affects. This section suggests that when surprise, in Lear, is not focalized through the disapproving unspecified "they" who recur in the limericks (attacking misbehaving Old Men or Young Girls), or a too-busy set of Four Little Children, it takes on a different and, in fact, surprising resonance: that of simple delight and ordinary, everyday pleasure.

All rebellion needs a conservative audience. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice plays the role of the surprised outsider: reminding herself of her home rules, reciting (or attempting to recite) school lessons, criticizing those she meets for their behavior. The denizens of the nonsense world are unconcerned, and often withering about her surprise.

> "Boots and shoes under the sea," the Gryphon went on in a deep voice, "are done with a whiting. Now you know."
> "And what are they made of?" Alice asked in a tone of great curiosity.
> "Soles and eels, of course," the Gryphon replied, rather impatiently: "any shrimp could have told you that." (*A*, 91–92)

Alice's surprise seems reasonable to us. But startled surprise in Lear's nonsense writing is often the domain of the ignorant, the judgmental, and the sadistic. Most notably, the surprised take the form of the disapproving "they" figures of Lear's limericks, shocked at the protagonists' antics (who, in one limerick, "[start] away in surprise" at the size of a Young Lady's eyes [*CN*, 75]), as well as the readers of nonsense. Surprise recurs frequently in "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" (1871), whose composed, ruthless young protagonists explore strange lands:

> When they had landed, they walked about, but found to their great surprise, that the island was quite full of veal-cutlets and chocolate-drops, and nothing else. (*CN*, 221)

> After sailing on calmly for several more days, they came to another country, where they were much pleased and surprised to see a countless multitude of white Mice with red eyes, all sitting in a great circle, slowly eating Custard Pudding with the most satisfactory and polite demeanour. (*CN*, 225)

The Four Little Children enter worlds where the logic familiar to them is suspended. At the same time, of course, their own logic is nonsensical:

churning seawater to make butter, for instance, which the narrative presents as entirely fair and reasonable. The difference lies in the fact that their nonsensical behavior involves gestures toward the sedate, the orderly, the domestic: their bizarre (to the reader) acts are ways of performing versions of socially sanctioned behavior at home, and shoring up those mores heroically in colonial contexts that make British-style ways of life difficult.[26] Indeed, when the children evince surprise at the white mice in a circle, their pleased surprise seems related to the mice's "satisfactory and polite" behavior rather than their numbers or their incongruous consumption of pudding. Their surprise is that of pleased parents—or disciplinary colonial masters. It originates from an outsider looking in.

In his diaries and letters, however, Lear invites us to empathize with surprise. He logs his meals with scrupulous detail; food offers a high point in otherwise dreary days of painting hundreds of identical landscapes or "Tyrants," or a distraction from the depressive "Morbids" that plagued him. In that sense, food looms large in his life and his diaries. And Lear uses the word "surprising," often and cryptically, to describe the meals his servant Giorgio cooks:

> [December 5, 1870] Dinner, Maccaroni, grilled fowl, & surprising turnips.
>
> [December 6, 1870] G's dinner, Maccaroni, & a surprising roast leg of mutton & cabbage.
>
> [December 7, 1870] Dinner, Barley broth, surprising cold mutton & mashed potatoes.[27]

Three days of dinners, surprising each time, even though on the seventh he is eating the same mutton that he ate on the sixth. The mutton keeps recurring, served up hot and then cold; it is familiar. Why does Lear describe it as, of all things, surprising?

A letter to Hubert Congreve offers a clue to what the "surprising" means to Lear when he uses it in this way: "We have got 2 blackbirds as sing surprising, & as Foss went out & sate looking up at the cage for 2 hours every morning, we hoped she would learn to sing too."[28] As does another entry in his diary, when Mr Baring agrees to buy one of Lear's paintings: "This is a great surprise as well as a great pleasure."[29] Surprise, for Lear, I suggest, is identical with delight and pleasure. The feelings associate in

26. On Lear's engagement with Anglo-Indian culture, see Martin Dubois, "Edward Lear's India and the Colonial Production of Nonsense," *Victorian Studies* 61, no. 1 (Autumn 2018): 35–59.

27. Lear, diaries, MS Eng 797.3.

28. Lear, letters, MS Eng 797, May 12, 1882.

29. Lear, diaries, MS Eng 797.3, April 20, 1872.

his "Stratford Place Gazette" (written 1866): "& finally giving way to dishpear, opened the window & leaped 4th into the street — to the extreme surprise & delight of some little children playing on the pavement" (*CN*, 212). And the illustration to "There Was A Young Girl of Majorca" strengthens the link:

> There was a Young Girl of Majorca,
> Whose aunt was a very fast walker;
> She walked seventy miles, and leaped fifteen stiles,
> Which astonished that Girl of Majorca.
>
> (*CN*, 107)

The Girl of Majorca is "astonished," we hear, by her aunt's stile-leaping prowess. In the illustration, however, she looks not surprised, but delighted. If her aunt, slinging herself over the fence, embodies suddenness in the backswing of her arms, here the Girl of Majorca swings her arms upward in cheerleading elation (fig. 4).

Surprise associates with pleasure, again, in Lear's travel journals:

> [August 20, 1847] Our meals were remarkable, inasmuch as Paradiso cookery appeared to delight in singular experiments and materials. At one time a dish was exhibited full of roasted squirrels, adorned by funghi of wonderful shapes and colours; at another, there were relays of most surprising birds: among which my former ornithological studies caused me to recognise a few corvine mandibles, whose appearance was not altogether in strict accordance with the culinary arrangements of polite society.

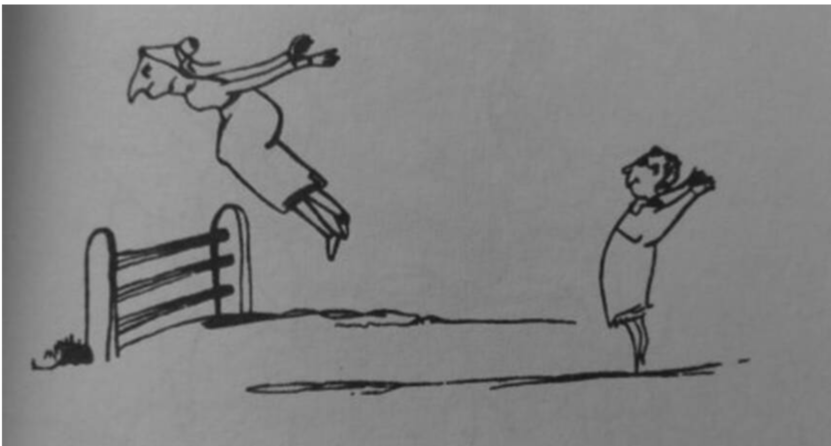

Figure 4. *There Was a Young Girl of Majorca*, in Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, ed. Vivien Noakes (London: Penguin, 2001), 107.

> [April 16, 1868] The fare, as usual in these untoward-looking hostelries, is far better than could be expected, though woe to the traveller who cannot eat omelettes! Mme Paolantonuccio, however, piques herself on abstruse and scientific cookery—eggs dressed with tomatoes, and other surprises, besides boiled and roast lamb, and the unfailing and excellent broccio, and wine of capital quality.[30]

Remarkable, wonderful, surprising, delight—even "far better than could be expected." Lear's poke at the crows is gentle and humorous: their "appearance was not altogether in strict accordance with the culinary arrangements of polite society." But, often, neither is Lear's. He imagines himself, in letters, eating chops under the sideboard; he gives accounts of gathering watercresses and eating them, to the wild delight of observers; he describes throwing fish around the room in jubilation.[31] Surprise, here, carries in it something of friendly recognition, of a shared absurd sensibility.

Lear is in conspiracy with these corvine mandibles; they know each other of old, from his "former ornithological studies." Old friends, meeting again in surprising and delightful circumstances. It is in fact Lear's ornithological experience that enables him to be surprised by the food served up to him. The studies of birds with which his career began are marked by close attention to the details of animals: their color, their expressions. It is because Lear is paying similarly close attention to what he is served that he can identify the discrepancy between what he expects and what he is offered. A more inattentive or distracted eater might not mark the "corvine mandibles" that catch Lear's eye.

Surprise is then, I suggest, suddenness plus attentiveness.[32] It emerges when one fully and critically witnesses—attends to—the world's charming strangeness. In Lear's Young Lady limerick, the recurring rhyme of "surprise" and "eyes" reinforces the interdependence of these nouns. Surprise involves really using your eyes.

So the capacity to feel surprise depends on the ability to pay attention. Carroll's Alice is an attentive child, but many of the characters she meets

30. Edward Lear, *Edward Lear's Journals: A Selection*, ed. Herbert van Thal (London: Barker, 1952), 104, 165.

31. Lear, letters, MS Eng 797; Jenny Uglow, *Mr Lear: A Life of Art and Nonsense* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 138, 339.

32. On this point, Charles Darwin positioned attentiveness, or attention, as the crucial initial component of surprise: "Attention, if sudden and close, graduates into surprise; and this into astonishment; and this into stupefied amazement" (*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. Joe Cain and Sharon Messenger [London: Penguin, 2009], 208). What Darwin emphasizes is that there is no surprise without attention. The attention has to be "sudden and close"; here, suddenness comes before surprise, a kind of precondition. Suddenness hooks and activates the attention.

clearly lack this quality. The White Rabbit takes Alice for his housemaid, Mary Ann (*A*, 31); the pigeon is alarmed by Alice, thinking she is a serpent, but not surprised. This is because the pigeon does not attend to what is actually in front of it—an impossibly oversized little girl: " 'I've tried the roots of trees, and I've tried banks, and I've tried hedges,' the Pigeon went on, without attending to her; 'but those serpents! There's no pleasing them!' " (*A*, 47). This theme—of nonsense characters not really attending to Alice, and therefore not being able to feel surprise at her, or share in her surprise—recurs:

> "There's no sort of use in knocking," said the Footman, "and that for two reasons. First, because I'm on the same side of the door as you are: secondly, because they're making such a noise inside, no one could possibly hear you. . . ."
> "Please, then," said Alice, "how am I to get in?"
> "There might be some sense in your knocking," the Footman went on, without attending to her, "if we had the door between us." (*A*, 51)

In fact, inattention more widely becomes the machinery through which chaotic nonsense events are able to occur. It is the Duchess's inattention to the cook's unexplained violence that sustains the nonsense events that follow:

> The cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby. . . . The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her; and the baby was howling so much already, that it was quite impossible to say whether the blows hurt it or not.
> "Oh, *please* mind what you're doing!" cried Alice, jumping up and down in an agony of terror. "Oh, there goes his *precious* nose!," as an unusually large saucepan flew close by it, and very nearly carried it off.
> "If everybody minded their own business," the Duchess said, in a hoarse growl, "the world would go round a deal faster than it does." (*A*, 53–54)

Only Alice feels surprise; she is the most attentive character. Like Lear on his travels, she has not yet become inured to the idiosyncratic customs of the new world she is in. Habit has not stripped her of attentiveness. It is that attentiveness, I want to conclude by suggesting, which informs Lear's relationship to surprise. Where surprise unsettles Alice, it associates with delight for Lear. He notices small details: of color, behavior, seating arrangements. He records these, and his meals, meticulously. Suddenness runs through his life: the sudden jolts for which he is permanently tensed, against which he can never fully relax or focus. In contrast, the things for which Lear permits surprise are everyday joys acutely tuned into: a piece of mutton, a singing blackbird, an aunt who turns out sprightlier than her young niece might have hoped to expect.

When Lear describes the blackbirds to Hugh Congreve as singing "surprising," "surprising" here seems to mean "beautifully." Perhaps what is most surprising, in Lear's world, is when things—despite all the obstacles—proceed smoothly and harmoniously, when the world feels, even if only briefly, organized by a benevolent rather than a capricious god. In his diary of May 23, 1871, what is surprising is precisely the absence of event: "A happier day than some have been & it must be owned, the tranquillity of this place surprises as well as delights me—Selbona Convolvulus in bloom & sweet peas almost so!"[33] Surprise emerges here from a lack of the sudden jolts that pervade Lear's world: exciting, stressful, arduous, lovable, negotiating actively with difference of all kinds. The man who brought "surprise and delight" to so many children repositions the very concept in a world where nothing discombobulating at all is happening. Only then, for a moment, can the world stop feeling so exuberantly chaotic—so nonsensical.

33. Lear, diaries, MS 797.3.