

ALICE MAJOR

For Mary, turning sixty

In *The dictionary
of curious and interesting
numbers*, sixty
gets a whole page.

*"Sixty is the eighth 'highly composite' number -- the first
number with 12 divisors."*

Highly composite, certainly.
All those divisors snipping up her time.
Children. The fractious freelance clients.
The publishing of other people's books.
The churches. The students. The friends, and
her books – their pages adding up
slower than she'd like. Dividing her experience
among characters, and multiplying
herself by her imagination.

"Sixty is the base of a sexadecimal system of counting."

Mary will be glad
to know it still includes
sex.

*"In astronomy, the very ancient division of the zodiac
into twelve parts fits a sexadecimal system very well,
and a decimal system not at all."*

Mary always did fit better with her stars
than with decimated dimes and dollars.
Gemini – the star twins near the boat moon,
clair de lune. In antiquity,
their rising was a favoured talisman
for sailors. This morning's horoscope advises her:
'Ignore those who tell you to stand pat. Emphasize
universal appeal, welcome chance
to travel.' As if we needed
to tell her.

*"We still divide an hour of time or an angle of one degree
into sixty minutes, and each minute into sixty seconds. These
are the only common measurements that have not been metricated."*

No, it would be difficult to metricate
Mary. You need uncommon
measurements – a system for numbering
laughter, for counting friends,
an arithmetic of love.

The minutes tick away. She's
only too aware how they divide
the whole page of our days
into a pile of confetti, something
to run your fingers through, amazed
how it can hold so much
in so small a space.

But confetti also has its role in jubilation.
We conclude that Mary is indeed
both curious and interesting
and is about to turn sixty
upside-down.