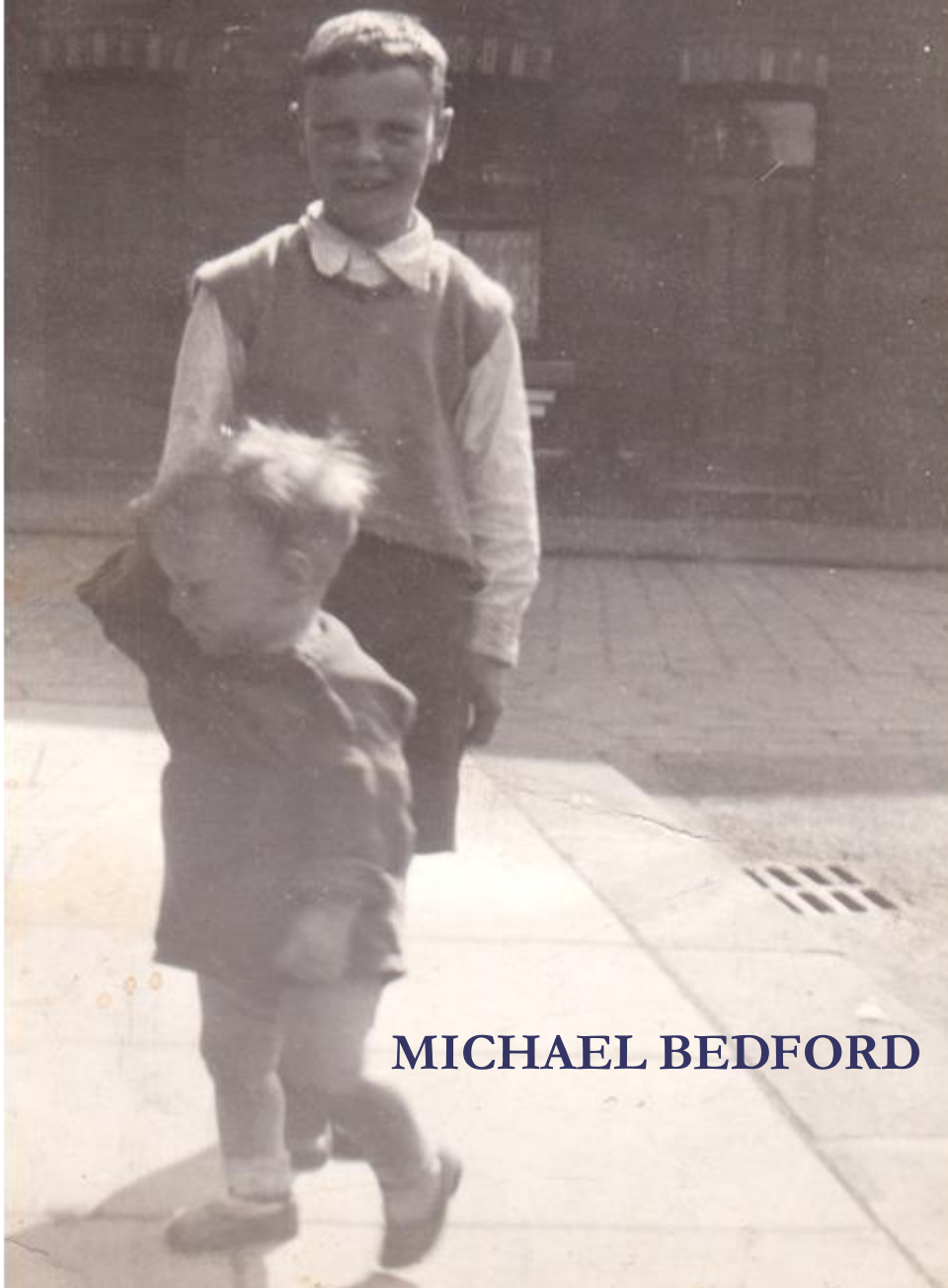


COMBUSTION



MICHAEL BEDFORD

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Combustion

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In memory of Peter Bedford

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Pretend Grandmother

A weathered kind of knowing.
Osmosis. The accumulation of learning
by pouring time through her body.
Facts caught in that fine sponge of mind
(totally untrained, left education at eleven)
until soaked through; become drenched, sodden.

Kept chickens in a wood outbuilding
though seldom heard. Silent clucks, muffled laying.
A horsehair sofa. Or was it feather?
Or was that the pillow? Who can remember?

School holiday trusted to her solid care.
Nest so perfectly kept. Lace squares,
tablecloth, anatomically arranged.
Dull thud as cushions plumped for display.
Light filtering through nets, silent contemplation,
a gentlemen's club without the gentlemen.

Tale of an errant spouse, long forgotten,
between taming a crossword
or scanning the news. She savouring
every morsel. I enthralled by her understanding,
precision of thought.

And the observer
uninvited in the corner, who decades later
would see her decline completely,
self blurred by illness
unable to recall her own name.
But that story still to be written.

Instead, humming of a Bakelite radio.
Or was it the television? Or the gramophone?

Mother back from work to take me home.
Or was it father? Or did I return alone?

The comfort of that time only within that time.
A product of the moment - not before or after.
Now, not even the memory safe harbour.

Fishing Described

How in an instant the rod became taut,
bent under sheer weight of struggle.
Every strained fibre of muscle brought
into that battle to escape, to wriggle

free and swim unfettered. The telling
framed in solemn tones. Pulled one way
then another, line tensed to breaking.
Eventually, hauled onto land, the fray

concluded. Death swiftly dealt. Yet in
his story parts unspoken, as if secrets
concealed. Though details of the twitching
skin, how guts were stripped and cuts

made, openly told. Finally, consumption.
Impossible for others to understand
how much better its taste, the satisfaction,
when tied to the strike of your own hand.

Combustion

A method to it that I never knew.
How the roughly hewn lumps of coal were stacked
with newspaper and firelighters under
so that when lit, the base would spit and crack.

Eventually, as the crust ignited
a blaze matured in the draw of the flue.
As the fire raged, I would sit transfixed
until its anger died and heat subdued.

We used a flattened shovel made of tin
which as it slid would snag against the hearth.
Ashes tossed over our barren garden
then dug as loam into the bare, parched earth.

One aimless morning scooped up the clinker,
my soot-stained fingers sifting charred remains.
Shocked that the scraps were so insubstantial.
No return at all for the weight of flames.

The Seamstress

I watched her eyes alight upon a thread,
her fingers quickly tack another line.
How much of what we know is never said,
those nimble movements crafted over time.

Her gaze would never falter on a run
except when strands would break or end too soon.
A tip of cotton placed upon her tongue
then twisted through the eye, she would resume.

A table by the fire a cramped workshop
with buttons, pins, and tape scattered about.
When working on new clothes would often stop
to spread cloth on the floor and mark it out.

Her hands stiffened with age and lost their grip,
warm water in a bowl the remedy.
But if she saw the smallest hole or rip
would grasp a needle, wield it perfectly.

Age Observed

Her hands
crackled as an antique glaze.
Tan leather fists that worked looms,
spanned a war. If you pulled the skin
it would stand for a moment
cast adrift from moorings, the under-skin,
the bed of fat, before sinking to rest.
Surface pocked with moles,
brown buttons sewn on pale pink cloth.
And blotches. As if a brush
had dabbed blood and smudged it
deep into gossamer-thin canvas.
Caught her wrist on a nail,
lifted a whole flap.
A red sheet
attached by a thread of flesh.
Carefully replaced. Not stitched.
Strips of tape bridging torn edge
until the transparent mat knitted.
It took many weeks
before I could look without shuddering
or not dwell in a passing glance.

Walk

Bolt blue eyes and clothes undone
from Thornes Park to shops in a day.
Steps painfully crafted. Stride hung
mid-air to be released by the sway

of an indolent leg gathering speed
until again stood motionless, erect.
Then tottering forward until freed
from inertia's grip, his frame, stripped

of all fine movement, doll-like, frozen,
would fall as timber towards its course.
Rump of decaying muscle driven
to resume that slow uncoiling force,

pushing locked limbs on to victory.
Unsung by the crowd who, jostling, late,
brushed past unaware. Did not see
the battle raging in his stuttering gait.

Husband

Dead. Buried in a silver gilt frame
resting on a walnut sideboard.
His face carved in sepia tones
looking for all the world a young man.

Dapper. Suit bought from the penny overspill
of a slender wage. She there, delicate,
slimmer than the fifty thick winters
she had gathered alone.

Stranded. What price good men?
A generation mislaid. And her,
hands that would rock a cradle
lifetimes left unused.

Bonfire

After the flames had died down, adults gone,
we'd rake its base to watch the cinders flare.
Cold November. Even with a coat on
you felt it bite, face numb in the night air.

Next morning with any luck, deep inside,
you could still find its charcoal heart intact.
Searching for wood desperately as you tried
to feed the core. Tease a molten pulse back.

Potatoes were the dish. Buried under
smouldering embers, kiln of ash and muck.
A blackened shell cracked open to plunder
its white flesh. Searing hot yet hard, uncooked.

A shabby feast had from that raw filling.
The thought of it better than the eating.

Dangerous Talk

Loose words his rapier.
A sentence slipped
from military lips
the foil to thrust and parry,
explore defence with feint and jab,
sport of it his quarry.
A clash of metal, sweep of blade,
an end to peace: a match well made.

In his dotage scarred, unbending,
battles legend through the years.
Candour childlike
still defending
his right to arms.
The virtue in his playful strike.

Bull Dog and Owner in Motion

Does not rest on earth.
Rather, four paws placed precisely down
as if a ballet.
Claws, *en pointe*, pin the ground

ready to pounce.
Bluster and short-stock barrel.
Fur-lined enforcer
fully armed, snarling animal

mirror of the man
shaven head, jabbing finger,
shouting his skewed point of view.
And in anger

they bob together
in an age-old dance
of aggressive posturing
and barely curbed violence.

The Meat Trade

Evening

would bring groceries in,

pick up a paper,

talk briefly during supper

and slump into a chair. Forever tired.

When light faded

would draw the curtains,

watch television. Fall asleep during programmes.

As if part of him,

the substantial part of him,

left elsewhere. Father

was a butcher.

I visited him once in the market hall.

Walk-in fridges behind his stall

filled with hung half-carcasses, slabs of beef, sliced meat.

Opposite, a fishmonger with sheets

of sunken eyes swimming in a sea of ice.

Prices

on squares of white plastic daubed with black numbers

driven deep into flesh on silver skewers.

Amazed

as he served

all the customers by their first name.
String paper packages accompanied by the same

story
he must have doled out to them regularly.

Banter
with other stall holders

incessant. Lasted all day.
Finally, boards washed, stock put away,

I left the store
knowing less of him than I did before.

Tinderbox

Glass topped walls didn't bother us.
You could spread a coat across,
divide your weight or use shoes.
Mostly we used our shoes.
Half decent jump and you were in.

A tall Pandora's box
of early English, brick construction.
Open to sky. Huge
wood gate. Monument, icon,
landmark since the world was young.

Impossibly full of hay and straw.
For what purpose, I can't think.
Not a stable, anyway. Not on
our estate in-between wasteland
and grassless, rutted streets.

No more than nine or ten
none of us had much idea.
Great for den or place to hide.
We didn't major on architecture
or the possibilities of ground rent.

Guy Fawkes night
as we danced around our too-close pyre
(whose centre strut was a telegraph
pole stolen from the Queen)
whoosh - up it went. Loose sparks. Some show.

The brigade did not agree.
Both doused in a single river.
By morning, dissolved to cinder.
Completely gone - I swear it.
The fragility of permanence revealed.

Polluted Water

For all talk of magnificent rivers
the Calder,
wrung from granite,
tyre necklace
and frame strewn shore,
never made the grade.
Topped with surface scum
a rainbow held in petroleum
the only lip service
to nature's beauty.
Then a fresh curiosity.
Froth blowing
tumbleweed-style past the Chantry.
Cotton wool
skimming a pockmarked skin.
They would scour the tidal bowl
for the whorls of industry.
Not us, the cry
pointing to quirks of nature
which could bleach a shirt,
make detergent float by.
And Chantry - fingertips
clinging to bridge.
Class outing set to explore
four blank walls and sod-all more
suddenly
the prized vantage point to see
clouds of white foam
drifting illegally, downstream.

Negotiation

We needed wheels but this not the answer.
A near write-off which hadn't been serviced
since the flood. Said we'd look the thing over
as we were there. Got the slips. Astonished

that it had a test - could be driven on
a road. One owner - Julius Caesar.
Both front tyres were shot and the back box gone.
Didn't know where to start, so we ran her

by the canal where if she fell apart
or blew we could dump her and walk away
no-one the wiser. Checked all the main parts,
gears, brakes, engine. Not too bad. As I say,

still a wreck. Told him up front it was shit
but perhaps, for the right price, we'd take it.

Derelict Church

There is a certainty to stone. Not light or manufactured
as clad on houses too slight for that tenor
but primal stone dug from bowel earth.
Cold, seasoned by the elements and human touch.

I have seen painters catch that quality.
That mix of rain and dead weight
fused in half-light. Seen it reflected
in faces of hunched bodies bowed by wind and storm.

The tarnished rock stood
wood tipped spire crown on a mason's art.
Somehow right that stern form embraced that aim,
prayer gun firing heavenward to God.

Sure in slow and stolid resurrection.
All-seeing condensed eye
piety of a different age
set to hoard eternity within a rigid frame.

Yet brutally re-cast.
Functionless, empty, the moral inverted.
A beacon of transience – irrelevance,
only magnified by its density and obdurate nature.

Illumination

Something about
light or lack of it.
A landing

hung in gloom. But it would
not stop there.
There would be words

on how when one door closes
another slams,
stained carpets, worn livery,

the obstinate character
of money.
A head would nod,

finger wag,
again to fix on
a filament,

unforgiving steps,
darkness,
a flex beyond reach,

the inevitable fall.

A Miner and His Tribal Markings

Forearms

peppered with black flecks.

An unsettling sight.

Marker of a status, manhood.

Rations assured for life.

Might starve to death

or tallyman

remove all sticks of furniture

but he would be warm.

The cart's path

ended at his door.

Free heat, all for want

of cheap match and split kindling.

And if that failed

might squeeze a lung

for blackened spit. Sift out the dust.

Small fragments

first to rush to flame

ascending a chimney

skywards

where birds

would count each spark,

weigh,

then ascribe a cost.

Trainspotting

Looked from hill eyrie
onto shoelace track below
poured as dull lead channels
through green fields and beyond.
We could see the steam god
rolling in,
hear its clatter and spent sigh.
Driver sweeping a tired brow
with oil-stained sleeve,
passengers on their way.
Not close enough to touch
but still to taste the soot
and hear a Tannoy call.
Logging plates
idly on a summer's day
counting the last of them in.
All ghosts already.
Numbers on a sheet
the sheet abandoned.

Gambling

Piss pot poor he sat
between finger and thumb the acorn.
Pools. That was the answer!
Grow your own money tree
a checkerboard certainty.
The fragility of knowledge
laid against the no-man's land
of fate.
Horrors doled out every Saturday.
Grenades of goals bursting
battle plans asunder.
A loosing habit. And horses too.
Dumb equine bullets
with blinkered eyes and nailed feet.
Careering off course.
Galloping, last in a heartbeat,
his cash strapped to their back.
Form the watchword. Or inside track.
A slight adjustment would see
fortunes transformed instantly.
Dogs? Whippets?
Insane bags of razor bones
best left well alone.
Unpredictable, unknowable,
their motivation a mystery.
*Never trust anything that races
without a jockey.*
Crap odds too. Odds were king.
A horse three legs
or team nine men
but Right Odds would lift a stake
stealthily from his wallet
sweet as any pickpocket.

I had a go once.
A neighing assassin
called Good Money After Bad.
Ringer. Bound to win.
Unsung champion
complete with stable lad's nod
and tipster's backing.
Hit the turf a funeral. Limping,
wheezing, flogged to destruction
race barely begun.
Despite all reason
sure another punt
would redeem the situation.

That Time of Year

July has rung the changes. Sound of lawnmowers humming and saws cutting innocent trees. A workaday sun given way to blistering heat. Stage set for summer heatwave bringing tales of previous years, and how on a half-remembered day

temperatures rose so high, in its pomp, you could hardly breath. As heat builds, thoughts wiped clear of winters drab months. Plants interred in the hope that coming weeks will leave meaner days behind. Eager hands clearing residual clumps

of dead branches. Last year's debris swept aside. Race in motion to prepare the soil to extract the very last measure of growing. Despite our perceived complexity, astonishing how a new season can lighten a mood. A single beam of sunlight alter everything.

Saturday Night by the Market

Do nothing. Stand and watch.
Ignore the shouts, sounds. Sure, you can't
miss them but hold that space,
the feeling intact.

Stalls may be emptying.
Left as bare clothes horses
when the glitterati have departed.
A squall of newspapers, hot dogs

furnishing the pavement.
Step over, pay no heed. Think.
Yes, you may be jostled, bumped.
Bodies ricochet

in early evening panic.
A wheeze of fat buses over
damp tarmac. Cars, the noise of cars.
Keep calm. Quiet. Gaze elsewhere.

Anywhere will do. Vans, racks
being loaded, palettes, a window in a pub.
Then she arrives. And you
hardly noticing. Is that the time?

Strange Recollection

The tortoise shell.
A dull tin bath
pinned to a wall.

Bring it in: clean it up.
Scour that rough dish
in front of a blazing fire.

Fill to brim
with steaming fare
of soap and boiling water.

In the privacy
of your own front room
swim the English Channel.

Electricity

Taking a vacuum cleaner apart
doddle for a screwdriver
with a curious child attached
targeting removable parts

plunging into the task
wholeheartedly.
Electrolux on the box.
Outer layer removed quite easily.

No thought of a map
or getting back
to where I started.
Soon, casing parted

from body.
Internal fittings
and workings
revealed

with all manner
of wiring slotted underneath.
Later, stubby fingers
replaced by teeth

in a frenzy
of exploration.
Bent plastic cover
the last partition

and further
into the belly within.
At that point noticed, quite incidentally,
the plug in

and wall switch on.
Live all along!
Genuinely. Life in danger.
No circuit breaker

we took the mains as it came.
Stopped in my tracks
unplugged the thing,
collected scraps

and hid its debris in a cupboard.
Whether divinity, deity,
blind luck, tree spirits,
astrology, or guardians of electricity,

I owe somebody
or something a big one.
Saved from stupidity.
When its shell undone

a loaded gun.
Lucky, abashed, sometime later,
went off to explore
dad's electric shaver.

No wiser,
but ambition
scaled down
and a whole lot safer.

Steam Fair

We had only heard
of their coarse iron traction
through stories of old men
who spun unlikely tales of Eden
as old men do.
No Eden here that we found.
Spew of smoke, certainly,
metal lung and coal breath
spinning brass and pulley.
Wheels, certainly,
huge land-locked paddles
sonorous vigour testament
to dour construct and design.
Vent spleen of steam, certainly,
shrill voice invading
a calm autumn day.
Giants of leverage and pivot,
young about their beaten steel skirts.

Yet
sensed the bittersweet air
as children do.
Looking behind – except
holding, grasping, polishing
cherishing – never letting go.

As if
today was less than yesterday
but we knew that to be untrue.

Pre-War Man

He could not see the beauty in a word,
those calloused hands not built for poetry.
A constrained age, a less indulgent world,
was sprung from school to earn a salary.

As children came, no choice but to accept
the rough labour which kept his family fed.
Outpaced the stain of welfare, shame of debt,
yet never more than last week's wage ahead.

In time would come to praise that harsh regime,
a grandchild sole exception to that view.
Would judge the present by the life he'd seen,
the discipline and sacrifice he knew.

Disturbance at a Service

That boy could paint. Add colour and shade
to a dreary landscape.
I went to watch an artist at work. To learn a trade.

The Methodist chapel. Not a chapel really
but a stern flat roofed building. Fit for purpose,
no more. At night, the faithful would rally.

Bring cushions to mellow hard oak benches,
hymnal shaped for righteous knees. His talent,
to fill a blank canvas. Add subtle hues, deft touches.

The reading began and so did he. Prayer book fell, clatter,
sneeze. Stage whispers right and left. Coughs.
Tolerated the English way. Embarrassment. Disgruntled chatter.

Eventually, escorted to door, he
strolled out smiling. Art complete. Whilst I, the Philistine,
denied him thrice. *Who? No! He's not with me!*

Found later this a variation,
sketch part of a greater whole. Not dynamic or fresh at all.
They had seen his work before. Similar performances, installations.

Unsure of this dark image, kept the exhibit
safe from public view. Fearful,
tried to brush myself from the scene in case God saw it.

Totem

Top of the hill
back from the ridge
those iron gates
defined the limit.
Poker molten rods
we could not touch.
Barley twist bars
wrought and bound
as schoolyard guards
to keep them out or us in?

Saw the world
through those slats.
Lived a life in tall rectangles
that reached the sky.
Strips of houses,
long path home,
parents on their way.
All safely wrapped
in scuffed lead paint
and a welded metal frame.

Double barrelled
they formed a goal
between two towers
made of stone
from which their
huge load hung.
Sport assured
by a locked bolt
dropped into rock.
Never saw them open: not once.

History Repeating

An ancient print from a box camera,
square solid case with silver face
and round, black-rimmed shutter.

View: a seaside town.

One of those blustery days
beach resorts keep up their sleeve
for tourists who come *out of season*.

In front of the shore
two figures stood by iron rails,
type that always lined the coast
drainpipe girth fixed by upright posts.
The Victorians knew how to build.
They built a dream and roped it in
with poles each yard to guard the strand.

First figure, moon-faced boy
in a duffel coat with buttons and toggles.
Second figure, taller adult.
Short jacket, cropped hair catching spray.
Father and son on a foam drenched front
dressed in time-expired clothes.
I can't recall that lost day,
teeth of that particular salt gale.
His plan to book when tariffs fell
so acres of frozen shoreline
would be ours alone. A resounding success!
Very bracing, landladies would say.

And now here I am.
Self-same scrag-end of year jaunt
I swore to never do.
Everything different, yet nothing new,
an ancient print in a fresh surround.
We board a pier stretching into the swell

Billboard

A climbing frame on a grand scale. Barrier between the road and derelict common land behind. Wood superstructure built from rough planks with iron braces which held the load on riveted metal plates. Each week its facade would feature

the latest must-have thing. Poster advertising. Hoarding in prime position on a main route. Defenceless when no cars passing. Screened from view, could easily scale its splinted bones. Climb to uppermost rung and sit snug, hidden behind siding

with no thought of the disastrous drop a careless step back. Beams solid, sure. Timber tightrope of more than enough breadth for our young feet. Two posts formed props behind end stacks set at forty-five degrees. Keyed into bolted joints with the strength

to stay any movement or threat of collapse. A dare, to mount one and slide down the incline. Nobody that dumb. Bet rejected. When adults shouted at us – no sweat. You could run either side, change mid-descent. Too fast to be apprehended.

They nailed coils of razor wire around its base. Lethal to get over. A balance - to have adventure but still be safe and secure. We were miles the wrong side of that equation. Did us a favour though we cursed them. Someone would have slipped off for sure.

Tall Story

As if he was there to feed us,
raise a sapling flame
from green wood.
Raw ears the kindling.

Tales in-between playground bluster
and classroom best; huddled in the toilet
for *man talk*.
In confidence

told of his uncle who died wanking.
It's true! Found lifeless
with green sticky sperm sprayed around.
Me, I believed him. What did I know?

Junkyard

Rained solidly. Drenched slate and asphalt.
Washed away a hopscotch pavement,
chalk numbers from a pavement's face.
All living things inside except the dog.
Fletcher's mutt of the sawn-off snout,
thick legs, harsh outlook, tethered in the rain.
Too close would snap, fly the leash.
They would come to belt its rump
and it would think to lunge, defend itself,
but know better. Curled in the tide
a coil - a muscle coil eager to unload
soaked to soul in that awful downpour.
They kept it mean, sharpened, as they
kept themselves and their children too.

Julie's Strop

There you were in your whirligig blues.
People are stupid! The crap I put up with!
So everyone you ever knew
were drenched in that stream of invective,

immersed in *Why me?* and *Why now?*
The torrent of words unrelenting.
Paul (bless) trying to reason how
things were really much better, rambling

in that finger-in-the-dyke way he did.
You fixing him eyes cold and staring
realising that there, trussed and delivered,
was the sump for your rage. Then ripping

into him as if he was to blame.
And us, pissing ourselves with laughter
at the prey, who when the hunter takes aim
steps forward, instead of running for cover.

Urban Boy

They say countryside is king. I have never been of that opinion.
Born to cobbled streets, feet when placed on those rounded rocks
at home. Nested among the terraces and their cramped dominion.
Who needs greenery when you have open fires and chimney stacks

pumping the rich roast of a coal-soaked smoke? Road's end
derelict buildings began. Playground of the rich and famous.
If you were careful, survived the rotted stairs, could spend
a childhood in a deserted, industrial haven. Dangerous,

sure, could fall straight through but steps where beams crossed
underneath, planted with goat-like precision, would ensure safety.
Work of human hand, endeavour, always the priority. Nature lost
on me. Sculptures carved in red brick, clutter of heavy machinery,

sprawling railway yards. Monument to the sweat and intelligence
of ordinary men and women. Their sooty fingerprints still survive
bound to mill and mine and factory. Pitted landscape and dense
town backdrop to their life-limiting labour yet irrepressible drive.

As a Young Child Held Hostage by an Older Child with a Knife

An afternoon at knifepoint
not as bad as you might
expect it to be.

Threat of a cutting edge
clarifies thought
and action wonderfully.

Marched through town
on the point of a blade
by some lout

who had bought a knife
and wanted
to try it out.

And I, surprised
at how cool
I could be under fire.

Logically measuring the possible success
of staying or running,
of what would transpire

after - would I get away
or would a sudden movement
cause an involuntary

reflex to tip
this already dangerous situation
into tragedy?

A loop through town
and back
to home ground

concluded.
Released, ran home
found

mother
and unloaded the story.
Who, incensed, departed

to find the culprit.
Make sure he was
reprimanded.

Incredibly,
in retrospect,
the police not called in.

I don't know for sure
if anyone else told.
Today, left wondering

if this a single event
which would have ruined an otherwise
blameless life irreparably,

shipped out to borstal or wherever,
or prelude to a life
of much worse thuggery?

Who knows?
The dice fell his way that day.
Details

are indistinct.
His face, size, or name.
I recall the trail

through town,
ribs

and the pressing

of a concealed weapon behind.

Walking past shoppers
unaware of story playing

in front of them.

I can't recollect
if there was even an apology

or whether
he got off
completely free.

The most absurd aspect
is
I have carried this around

a lifetime
but have
never found

any urgency or reason
to dig out
the incident again

until today.
As if
the child back then

finding this
not treated as a serious
or criminal offence

consigned
the whole episode
to being of little importance.

Two Men

They would talk at length on what life would bring which in the grand scheme of things did not mean anything. Impact on the world - a nod or knowing glance. No bold new insights. Nothing to be seen.

They would sort wheat from chaff. The inconsequential become grander in the telling. What had already gone, pondered then forgotten. They would be sentimental and unsentimental, age slowly moving the script on

from youthful indiscretion to thoughts on mortality. Decline in themselves and others. Loss and weather considered in equal part. They would disagree vehemently at times, and later find common ground together.

All considered, this discourse did not define them. In sharing, may have added weight and substance to each experience. There would be no headline when they died on how or why this made all the difference.

Warrior

When I first knew him there wasn't any
mock bravado or stupid tough guy stuff.
A great lad to be with. Smart and funny.
But all the fighting talk - I'd had enough.

He started to run with the gangs that hang
around the subway. People don't go there.
Use the tunnel at the wrong time and BANG,
you wake up on the floor wondering where

your teeth went. Told me they chased a few lads.
Caught two. Gave them a good kicking because
they'd done or said something to make them mad.
I don't know. Trouble always finds a cause.

When I'm with him now, can't think what to say
anymore. I wish he'd just go away.

Vignette

The instructions lasted for a moment.
In no time, trying to force the joint in
by repeated thumping. What sort of present
requires construction skills on Christmas morning?

Begging for another go. Bootless pleas rejected
as dad waded in. Brief nod to precision
after which, reduced to bad-natured
bodging, surfing a tidal wave of frustration.

It's going to fit, heard before a cracking sound.
Should it do that? Some toys don't last
long enough for playing. Common ground
between dad and me - our tempers fast

to flight. From nought to sixty in only
a few seconds. Next came the tricky bit.
Straight from the blocks to blame shoddy
workmanship. Mum having none of it.

Cremation at Kettlethorpe

Bodies wrapped against the freezing weather.
At this time on another day, we would be at home
cup of tea never more than a step away, dinner
on our minds from half-past three. But the stone

on which we stand bears no relation to our own flooring.
Windows, doors, gone. This is not domestic architecture
it is the work of nature. The place we are waiting
open to elements, a walkway the only structure.

A light drizzle. When it falls on lips, you can taste
the flavour of the world itself. It is that sort
of occasion. A time to re-interpret everything. Waste
of a man dying too young who despite his short

span collected this congregation, drew people
from their own destinations to be here today.
In the lull between the service in the chapel
and when cars will arrive to take mourners away.

It is still nothing like a house. A place between places
to feel cold and rain. Submit to the rule of winter.
Our lives insulated. No longer close to the phases
of seasons, cycles, things passing. Today, we remember.

Skinny Dipping

Heat unbearable.
People became unemployable
that summer.
Restless, sweltering in stores
where assistants would stand
nose to blade with whirring fans
as dripping customers
queued, goods in hand.
Policemen sleeves rolled,
jackets draped across an arm.
Whole world becalmed.
Wardens hid in doorways.
Would dart from shadow
to tag their prey, then fall back,
exhausted, into their lair.
River lower than records knew
as firemen, slaves to the combustible,
became heroes of the tale.
Exploits fighting flames
served at our breakfast table.
Reservoirs died. Inferno's side-by-side
with pictures of staff
pacing a desiccated ground
where bodies of water were once found.
I remember the tang of lemonade,
home-made, quenching an insatiable
thirst. Haze rising over paving.
Wondering if it would ever cool.
Mother strangely inconsolable.
Sat on our doorstep crying
for two unknown boys
who, mad with sun, threw off
their clothes and plunged laughing,
headlong into forbidden depths.

Snagged by a current and drowned.
An age of new experience.
Lemonade. Heat. Endless summer.
First time I heard that awful sound
of one parent's loss echoed in another.

Hard Time

Blessed by robbery
we returned, world split open.
Shifts of furniture so subtle
only our forensic eye could decode.
Shocked, exhilarated, police would arrive
and talk seriously.
Measure the why, wherefore,
dimension of our crime.
A neighbour
would rant for ages
on how you suddenly realised.
How awful truth
took time to settle.
She, about trinkets.
Family jewels lost forever.
Search parties. Suspects.
Everyone suspect. People
would lodge
in our identikit mind, *just in case*.
Us, residents of Carey Street,
who would have thought?
Then mystery solved: a window cleaner.
The cheerful guy who always smiled
was our *bête noire*, acrobat robber.
Raffles with a shammy!

Television criminals
snub-nosed, easy to spot.
Him, you couldn't have known.
Grin sometimes. Breezy hello.
Jailed two years.
Released, would nod
as you passed
yet different. Face gaunt

they had painted him grey.
Somehow thinner, harder, less fat.
Reminded me of a whippet
trained to race
that no longer remembers
the gentle, carefree canter
or can ever return to it.

Terrace

Squat houses
shuffled, cut, dealt into hands.
Space between houses
filled with house. On back of a house
another house, so all space
became a house. Road clogged
with house, bumper to bumper.
A house traffic jam.
Pierced by ginnels.
A way to the other side
where you might need to go
to get to a house. Perhaps your house.
Tunnel with an arched roof,
bedroom built over. So every
few houses a bed in the air.
Death defying,
strange.
And a sprinkling of folk
placed in a house
to make a home. To fettle,
keep it spick and span.
Stump of garden tendered
so those near
might form a view
on the house inside. Soil windows
cross referenced to doorsteps
meticulously scrubbed.
An outbreak of humanity
captured in a slate topped box.

Unreasonably reasoned
if we all drew breath together
the walls would bow.
Or if everyone stamped

the great brick snake would slither
imperceptibly, but measurably,
a modest coil towards the town.

Drab Homecoming

Of course, it rained.

Not a fine poetic mist or light drizzle
but sling buckshot fall. Soaked
a summer nylon shirt through. That odyssey
began and ended in rain: spring-tide bullets
ricocheted off head and body.

I had come to visit forgotten gods
and they had blessed me.
Baptised, admonished, blessed, I began.
As Gulliver, sailed through that arcane
drenched realm. Not plain Gulliver,
St Gulliver the Prodigal Son Returned
but the deluge washed that false deity
from a shivering skin. Wrenched
its safe umbrella from my grasp.

Sheltered by the corner shop.
Now, not shop at all but home!
Where were those two ancient sisters?
Me, gone but thirty years and they had moved.
Where to? Along the street?
Heard usurpers in their nest. Shouts of laughter
between penny sweets and burnt toffee treats,
jar upon jar set on bulging shelves.
How could they fit in there?

Once schools were chiselled
from rock. But not today.
Some diesel maelstrom had swept
that black-walled pile away.
Driftwood memory with whalebone timber
ceiling and double oak-dressed doors.
Straight box walls held the line, railed against

a bleak sky now. Safe straight box walls
which did not leak, or echo, and held heat.
No smell of age from their block fingerprint feet.
Not heaven - clad spires I had known.

Adrift, alone,
in that reduced nation,

sat on an iron studded wall.

A solid stone prop with raised metal veins
neatly aligned on a rectangular crown: spurs
cast as candles above the flat facade.
A birthday cake from God!

Forever wondered how that bedrock began.
Quarried at a special site - ore intact
and ready? Or cut by Michelangelo?
Carved as David – each rod enshrined.
Then a stranger stopped.
How astonishing on such a day!
Rain pounding, sodden summer shirt.
The war, he said.
Cut the railings off for scrap.
There it was! These were railing
heels; butt ends of redundant paling.
Imagine, how could I look yet see so little?
Bulwark diminished, a pall of truth hung
an albatross - a flood complete.
Retreated as a latter-day Noah,
St Noah Of the Tactical Retreat.

Of course it rained.
What else could it do?

*Her hands stiffened with age and lost their grip,
warm water in a bowl the remedy.*

*But if she saw the smallest hole or rip
would grasp a needle, wield it perfectly.*

from 'The Seamstress'

