

FINCHLEY BOY

MICHAEL BEDFORD

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*The Spectator.*

This collection was assembled while living in Finchley. Many of the poems were written from observation in and around the local coffee bars and cafes.

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## Daydream

Point to point the mind is wandering.

In such idling

gears are not engaged,

handbrake so arranged

to stop the wheels from turning.

What use is thought that is not working,

rolling up its sleeves to earn its keep?

Half-asleep

drifting aimlessly,

connecting dots that have no currency.

Who can spend the profits from a nebulous plan

or eat something vaguely Freudian?

Driver back to take control

pumps the throttle.

This scenery too dull.

Too many roads ahead to dwell in neutral.

## 

## Amiable Rodent on the New York City Underground

Christmas spectacular!

New York in winter clothes

and us, wrapped against brutal weather

that never came.

All stops east

our designated plan

clutching maps folded with military precision

crumpled

in jacket pockets and haversacks

on a dank platform

in a subway

with no signs.

Bristling

with indignation

at gulf between

our own beloved London underground

and this run-down

shack of a station,

private purse locked shut

for all to see.

Suddenly

a bold usurper.

Four standing,

two adults

two children (both taller),

now a fifth!

Huge rat,

as us, staring at track

passing a day.

I mentioned nothing

for fear of mass hysteria

but watched

as only a worried family man might do.

Stock-still

seemed to enjoy our company

then wandered

into darkness

to catch another tube.

I

no wiser

of its motives

or desires.

Not Heaney’s rat

slobbering with a knobbled skull.

A simple rat of simple taste.

Not two syllables when one will do.

An urban rat,

city bred. None the lesser for that fact.

## Dice

Sometimes a life hangs on a single moment of stupidity,

twitch in a trigger finger, car driven too fast into a corner

rolling over into a crowd or coming to rest injury free,

blow to a temple causing bruising or cerebral injury and coma.

The measure between prison, guilt, or interesting story.

Intent, random chance, and consequence regularly meet.

Die is cast almost always in our favour, but occasionally

the blind roll of fate intervenes. In that unexpected defeat

everything can be lost: years of liberty, family, income.

All changed in an instant. Who could say truthfully

if from one of our own acts the worst outcome

had come to pass, we’d be reading this so comfortably?

## 

## Recommendation

and that was how it happened. But on to other things

such as where did you get that from? Which reminds me

of the trouble we had with the Thomson twins.

Light fingered bastards. Not normally known for charity,

wouldn’t give a fart away. When they came hawking

that box of assorted jewellery at discount prices.

I remember you coming over to me whispering,

*Here we go again. Not our first day at the races.*

Being stubborn and psychotic, would not take

no for answer. Anyway, that place we buried them

behind the pub, where the road forks to the lake,

is now a site of natural beauty. It has become

quite the picnic spot. I mention this in passing.

Christmas, does a spot-on lunch with all the dressing.

## Study on the Dynamics of Conflict

There is a woman, no taller than her first guess

or heavier than her own estimation,

shouting at a man, large, well-built, dressed

in two-tone shoes and consternation

that this slip of a mad person, armed solely

with an unseemly amount of boldness

would, even in her own anger and downright folly,

take him on. Who set this match? It is madness.

Yet, it is the mongoose, and whatever the mongoose

gets up to, all over. The proud but vertically

challenged wolverine. The honey badger who does not lose,

but goes on to win, in no small part, due to its ferocity

and failure to take a backward step. There is the bell.

Man, bowed by the unexpected: woman,

fresh to go again. Sometimes sheer force of will

can overcome. Not often. Nature tells us it can happen.

## Young Man With a Bad Leg Refusing a Seat on a Bus

When limbs broken or misplaced

a stick often the answer.

Any issues beneath the surface

of little matter

practically.

Such as when a bus is loading

and suddenly a man,

no older than another man, but sitting,

graciously offers his seat.

Which might end there

except standing man, crutch in hand,

pointedly looks elsewhere

so declines.

Sitting man mistaking

this as a grand misplaced gesture,

starts offering

again and again

and will not cease

until standing man

is forced to take his seat.

He self-consciously

lowers himself down.

Landed,

begins to look around

for a place outside to park his gaze.

A few stops later

stands,

brushes himself purposefully to saunter

off the bus

as steadily and as upright as he can

not looking back

or offering any gratitude or thanks.

Strange vignette

played out over a seat.

Man

who seemingly feels embarrassment and sees defeat

simply in a question;

second man, so strangely intent to make good his offer,

despite the other’s obvious discomfort

or honest answer.

## Spectator Sport

*She has never had to earn anything in her life.* Gauntlet

delivered, duly picked up by the woman opposite

who, leaning forward, ploughs straight into the subject.

I observe people. Glean what I can from snippets

that fall my way. Watch. Arms folded lightly until she

launches a tale when her arms start crazy wandering,

Left limb, in particular, works tirelessly to sell the story.

I take a break. Drink tea. Woman behind me talking

about a dress her sister wears which shows her boobs but

adds that could be a good thing. Friend concurs. Moves on

to more *racy stuff*, whispering. Endlessly interesting. What

people do - how they do it. I am surprised television

survives. Stand on any street corner. Plug your ears in.

An education. Mobile phones a particular treasure.

Plot, sub-plot. If you can’t hear the whole thing

can fill gaps with more salacious fare, later, at your leisure.

## Rambling

Days divided thus,

into those with just the two of us,

those work collected,

family time, holidays, rail commutes I always hated,

or in sleeping

which when locked and running

takes us all to lord knows where.

Incidentally, I am not one of those people who swear

they recall every strange detail of a dream.

That cock-eyed scheme

the sub-conscious uses to find loose threads

unravelling from our threadbare heads

to stitch together sanity.

I hope that’s clear. Back to my point. Time slips by too easily.

Frameworks, categories, left behind.

Days more simply assigned

into those I remember and those I do not.

But the current flows and will not stop.

Concerned where it may finally subside.

Here? Or near to here? Or with all structure swept aside?

## Lucky to Be Confined to the Present

A man in the cafe looks just like my son.

Not the current version: years added, reconfigured.

Final blossom – end-product as if wrung

from clay, mechanically made then animated

to be a copy of him. And as he works

unease growing inside me, as if this facsimile

had deeply resonated. The image subverts;

man unaware he is an object of study.

A distortion: son older than oneself, age set in.

Inverts due order with no good explanation.

As if a whole life ripped away from him.

All hopes, plans, forfeit to this drab conclusion.

## Masterclass

A hammer

thumps paving slabs into sand.

Shaft end-on piston-like

in practiced hands.

Now side-on

persuades the stone to edge in

to set location.

Confirms the level and the laying.

Sculpture

brought to perfection.

A chevron fence

frames the installation.

## The Dutiful Daughter

An older, aging mother

with a younger, middle-aged daughter.

Two planets circling in distorted symmetry.

One, the stronger gravity

so when the daughter expresses an opinion

mother diminishes and derides, so the focus of attention

is held on her.

Over years, the daughter quieter,

more shabby.

Throughout, her mother is that great personality,

person to charm an audience, lead conversations,

yet sucks oxygen

from air

so her child cannot breathe or grow there.

Bond in transition.

Deformed between offspring, carer, servant, paid companion.

Ties

laid in childhood become vines

thickening each year, twisting

around unused limbs, becoming more complex, enveloping

entire sections of her being, so you know instinctively

she will never break free.

## Short Breaks at a Well-Known Hotel Chain

Motels called our name

with the promise of cheap prices.

Single-room saver. However, children with capacity

to expand into all available spaces

wrecked any hope

of a peaceful holiday.

Extra bed pulled out from under another

a limit on mobility

which saw us swap ground for bed

as we bounced gazelle-like from A to B.

An aerial challenge,

shaving successfully

then falling to earth

as Icarus, but without the stubble.

But I digress.

Enclosed spaces likely to cause trouble

such as at a zoo when cages are too crowded

animals maul a keeper

or worse still, each other.

Or life raft cast adrift in stormy weather.

Four set out

but only one found by the rescue party

who, burping, recalls

the hungry two days lost at sea.

Survival of fittest

is what I mean.

When walls close in

self-preservation becomes the only priority, solitary theme,

and slights and imperfections and disappointments

kept down, damped, left unspoken

as wadding

applied to barrel of a cannon

to keep the shot in place. Safe. Unexploded.

Until later,

when least expected, in some stupid innocuous conversation,

out comes the loaded mortar.

## Hoodie in Costa

Sat there

bold as brass. Phone, tablet, electronic chicanery.

Friend talking

sipping tea

leant together

planning murder or worse criminal caper.

Who wears a hood

sheltered from the weather?

No driving rain

to dilute his coffee, drench his jailbird hair, freeze his evil nose or ears.

Best of my knowledge, it has not snowed inside

for many years.

Suddenly, as a waitress, harassed as usual,

comes to clear debris

they are

the pinnacle of civility

and helpfulness.

Nothing is too much trouble!

Clear their own,

then start an adjoining table.

Luckily

I never rate books by their covers

or label in haste.

A fault I see in many others.

## Gossip

Her story

could not be confined in a two-line structure. History

too long and complicated to be fitted in.

Hence, I have shaved off a sliver to begin

and will return to the rest at some future date.

I hesitate

to go any further

as I realise, I may have set in motion all manner

of conjecture and speculation.

This cannot be avoided. There is no direction

I can go, other than the route I have taken.

I have spoken

to her solicitor

who is of a similar opinion. Her butcher

baker, candlestick maker, are of a single voice.

I have no choice

in this matter. *After a dry spell, she is going steady.*

There. I have said too much already.

## At the Junction of Redbourne Avenue and Ballards Lane

Early. The nights chill

has not cleared. People

shaken in a bag and overspill

dumped out, ripple

through deserted roads.

Woman drags a case behind.

Two youngsters abroad

well before normal teen waking hours. Workmen lined

in casual order

pray for transport.

Frozen, sneak closer

to a sheltered door without thought

of Barclay’s staff arriving in corporate blue batches.

Breakfast underway.

Finchley stretches

preparing for another day.

## Raw Beauty

She is *the* one.

Red dress painted on.

Gravity, sun,

point eyes rest upon

thoughts silently defile.

As she drinks coffee

unleashes a smile

built so gloriously

friend opposite

rocked back in her chair.

Ankle bracelet,

delicate stare,

leans across

at ease, enjoying it.

I dwell on the cost

of being so perfect.

## Electrical Therapy

The customs of the medical folk are simple:

place an electrode on each temple.

Current once applied

will clear any confusion inside

and when the storm has passed

a new beginning.

Electrical ballast

so prescribed, will fortify and solidify

mental foundations,

secure against flights of fancy

mania and other related conditions

might allow, or magnify,

or pull someone bodily

from standstill of depression.

A miraculous cure

over weeks or single session.

And I have seen that tidal wave

wipe clean and shift

delirious thought, save

people otherwise adrift.

Myself, as chance observer,

leant against a forgotten wall

saw poles placed in gel,

airway secured, heard a call

when the machine was ready.

Not what I expected.

Body twitched, but barely.

When inspected,

wheeled back out to safety.

No convulsive dance,

or Frankenstein aloft in a maelstrom cursing

or lightning strike chasing

an earth through flesh.

Anti-climax. No drama or threat.

Peaceful, professional,

and yet

while I know the ins and outs,

balances and checks,

accumulated debts

to memory or cognition, weighed against each benefit,

I wish I had not seen it.

Not logical or subject to discussion.

Once seen, I became lesser for it.

I can offer no explanation.

## 

## Snapshot

I only saw the worst of her. Arthritis already burned in.

Bed bound under tyranny of joints which when moved

by examination, pressure placed on levers flexing or extending,

bones would grind audibly until the turning force removed

and elbow or knee returned to their linen sanctuary.

For pain, a cocktail of morphine plus sundry analgesics.

Worst case he’d ever seen. That was it. Her history.

Borne with an almost casual hint of steel. When asked about its

severity would say, *Can’t complain* and, *My wrist is better*.

Her whole frame, entire skeleton affected, though immobility

to be final straw: spectre of the pressure sore and leg ulcer.

Side tables stacked with dressing packs and sterile water ready

for that unequal battle. And what of the redundant fifth wheel?

Shadowing a local doctor on his rounds, I had not expected

to encounter such intensity or see this depth of suffering revealed.

Why? What was the sum of it? What great truth represented?

That tableau considered for forty years and still no clearer.

My intent, to capture an image, overall tenor of the memory.

In this, think of me not as writer but acting as photographer.

For you to add any text or headline you feel is necessary.

## Totally Unexpected

She smiled at her. In that moment

all motion stopped. It became the reason

everything was created. In comparison, a firmament

of stars faded, nature did not grow a season,

and every other crass, poetic hyperbole. All due to a megawatt explosion

of emotion. That event, so unconditionally meant,

so powerful, cut through shabby life. And as life has since moved on,

it is recalled here and now: I am a witness; I was present.

There, dressed in usual garb, my drab intent

to pick apart, draft discomfort, find scraps to feed upon.

Imagine – that cynic vaporised in an instant.

Shamed, knowing I can never capture that purity of expression.

## Waitress Staring Out of a Window

Pauses. A passing look.

In that unguarded state, deeper

thought revealed. Book

opened, but the reader -

who will that be?

Plots queue.

What ending do you see?

Or are you working through

drafts, opening lines,

imagining final scenes?

Against this, time

corrupts, negates all our schemes.

Choices to be made.

A perfect ending or sensible trade?

## Reading

A sweet smell of piety and saccharine

pervades the air. A cloying scent.

I am not a killjoy - averse to happy ending,

but the easy line stains style and content.

Preacher and converted merged together,

audience bellows at what it thinks it knows.

Performer in role of paper tiger,

crowd delighted as its own thoughts echo.

Who wants to be the outsider looking in?

Yet the group experience is not for me.

Evenings, I part butterflies from wings,

rip two creeds apart before I have tea.

## Prisoner of Language

Migrating west across a panoply of countries,

twists and turns that words engender

falling as heavy weather, rain, flood. The local is

at ease with regional extremes, sentences meshed together

with barely space to breathe, meaning hidden in pronunciation

or affectation. The untutored tongue is rendered silent

by its lack of understanding, diction,

so in the present, and every ongoing moment,

excluded. I knew her. Her husband would say

*Why bow to other’s expectations? Why educate when I can translate?*

It courts disaster. A conversation which might sway

or embolden her to consider decisions only he should make.

## Debate at a Nearby Table

Five people cluster.

They are discussing

moral questions. At their centre

is a man who controls the meeting.

He employs two words repeatedly: *We*, and *Clearly*.

Each unloads a tale in turn

after which he delivers a verdict. They listen intently,

nodding profusely, eager to learn

from this religious or moral leader.

While I am not suggesting killing

Buddha is in order,

at the very least, give him a good kicking.

## Motorway Service Station

We have arrived

despite a myriad of wrong turns

and slip roads mistaken

for the shortest way.

When parking

again, I go astray

to be put in my place.

This is the longest day in history

and slop

in metal tins

labelled *home cooking*

does nothing to alleviate

my sense of foreboding.

Prices here a heart attack

in waiting.

What crap.

You need a mortgage to buy

a fun size bar of chocolate.

A man has just fainted.

He was browsing and found a bargain.

It was that unexpected.

## Unexpected Storm

Rain hosing the world down.

A sloping road becomes a river

flowing down to where cars turn around.

Level rising ever higher

so when drivers get out to run

legs are converted to marker

of how deep the flood has become.

Our cul-de-sac a sump for bad weather.

Remainder of street soaked

to storm drain gills fares little better.

People dressed for sun are drenched

under makeshift umbrellas

of bags and holdalls held to deflect the spray.

Deluge pauses, resumes even harder.

Expectations, plans, completely washed away

by the vagaries of falling water.

## Lazy Day

A cup

before the *hoi polloi* turn up.

Sunday morning coffee

a rare treat for me.

Beans, flown halfway round the world

swirl

in water,

off the boil – no warmer

to ensure

a perfect balance. Neither sweet nor bitter. *Once more*

*into the breech*

*dear friends.* Cappuccino reaches

parts tea,

delightful as it may be,

can only dream.

Hiss of steam,

a measure

of grounds and milk together,

the synthesis

of bliss.

## Inevitable Decline of Something Hardly Begun

First stirrings, enclosed within each other, syrup sweet.

She perched delicately leaning forward so that

at any time, might tumble off her seat

into his arms. He, emboldened, to look deeply in what

seems to be an infinity of eyes.

Around them, commerce stumbles quietly.

Cups are emptied. Cake devoured. Strangers pass by.

Love is mentioned. Almost imperceptibly

he pauses for a second. Not so much

that an observer might notice, still engaged, inclined towards

her, yet long enough for one not used to such

heat to feel a first fault line creak, inwards,

so from that pause on, fissure planted,

deeply, beyond logic. Now limited. Somehow ended.

## Testimony

Imagine the treat!

Bearded English master

waving another

poetry book disaster

to be landing soon

in our vicinity.

Buckle up lads!

Words only seen in a dictionary

coming our way.

Pass the books around.

What’s this?

*The Mersey Sound*.

Shock

of recognition

complete.

Suddenly a lesson

alive

with scraps of thought, poems, scribbling.

Imagine - verses that use the language

we are speaking!

Sod classics,

sod Latin,

we have Henri, McGough,

and Brian Patten.

Events

not always constructed logically.

Elements may come together

accidentally

as if by chance.

A teacher

way off curriculum,

a bored class and three Scousers

meet.

Later,

no matter

how much my life alters,

places change, perspective shifts,

incredibly

that encounter decades ago

still inspires me.

## Map of the London Underground

Victoria Line

a particular friend of mine.

Pedal

to metal

no-nonsense sort of fellow.

Circle shaded yellow,

along with District, Jubilee

Metropolitan, City, Piccadilly,

slip off a tongue

quicker than they sometimes run.

Jokes aside,

apart from being crowded, decent rides.

Bakerloo to Paddington

whose seats are sprung,

hasn’t been updated

since electricity invented.

Northern

out of Morden

goes through to Finchley

so more than handy.

However, Central

from Notting Hill to Bethnal

could it get any warmer?

In summer, it could double as a sauna.

## Mug

Remember when we were given that scrap metal by the guy

at the factory and had to drag it back to our garage space?

And that bloke passing from the caravan site offered to buy

it off us, and how he would need to take it back to his place

but would come back to us shortly with the money?

How many hours did we wait for him to return?

I can hardly remember that long ago. What age were we?

Nine- or ten-years young. Plenty old enough to learn

people are not always what they seem or claim to be.

Well, he hit the jackpot with us. Farm fresh and gullible.

Our costs not too extreme. Few pounds with loss of dignity.

You pay for an education. Collect wounds. Nothing physical

though we certainly didn’t advertise what chumps we’d been.

Decades later, cut to a different scene, sat with mortgage lender.

Full of our best interests, explaining how a repayment scheme

was throwing cash out a window, how much better

an endowment would be. Not only pay off the loan,

expect extra! Certainty! Then near maturity, after chickens,

scrawny bastards, had come to roost, shortfall grown

to huge proportions, asked if we’d like to put extra cash in.

Sure. Great idea.

## Conference Scanning

Though words are strung together

they are not connected.

A conversation of no matter

between two people distracted

by other things. Who else is arriving?

Substance, as it is, consists

of shadow boxing, wondering

what better opportunity missed.

At our most flimsy, superficial.

Both know it. Pretence maintained

to stay sparring in the ring until

sure no margin to be gained.

## Adventures in Backpacking

World broken into pieces

picked as lottery.

Here or there, random

play of chance, the possibilities

endless. Hill, mountain

setting their own games.

Which peak is larger?

Who knows their names?

Rivers and lakes

duly scatter.

Whether swum, sailed or rowed

it doesn’t matter

planet spinning

under your feet.

Jump, hang in air long enough,

the lap will complete.

## Cutting

She seemed happy

but zebra stripes

roughly hewn

with penknives

or razor blades

shaped a different story.

Arm a marker

of a time

or place

which had

in some way

overwhelmed her.

I asked, as you do.

Her answer short,

confused.

Pain

a treat

she looked forward to.

It somehow

served to

reassure.

What I most

remember

now

was her smile,

openness,

her laughing.

She was

as lovely

as she was fragile.

## Regular

Green dress. Table configured carefully.

Mobile placed centrally so an observer

is assured of purpose. How she is busy.

Keys and notepad together

complete a pose, an image for consumption.

Clouds swirl, traffic passes,

customers come to go. All the time one

of us, alone. To trace a line in verses

slowly with a finger. Book an armour

as days move on irreparably in spite of her.

Summer, autumn weather. Drama

of people loving. And she, never the lover.

## Proposal

It is the time

when orchestras

fade in,

crowd

cheers,

celebrations

begin.

She has said, *Yes*.

All the rest

superfluous,

mere filling

for main event.

Remember

this.

The moment.

## Listening to a Transistor Radio

Music runs through life

as a thread.

Pull it.

See the first shred

of teenage angst

or rebellion

etched in some

long forgotten

vinyl single,

through to today’s slicker

video fests

who flatter

to deceive.

*Sound and fury.*

Pull harder.

Step between the memory

of a garage band

bound to fail,

speakers and drums jammed inside a Leyland mini

to tales

of school bands

with instruments blagged from the Salvation Army.

Amazing how a tune or song

can instantly

remove years

to a time or place.

Can remind you

of a face

or particular event

and is woven

around

the very same emotion

you felt then.

## Conversation with a Middle-Aged Man

He wondered where she went,

what happened after. Would say

those words were not meant.

Never wished to push her away.

Sin in perpetuity: remembering

scenes which as years progress

become threadbare in the viewing.

Unguarded moments would confess

he had never managed to move on,

forever taking that catastrophe in.

*Thirty years with the wrong woman.*

I heard him say it. Imagine.

## Theological Pamphlet

Words linked purposefully together

explain the unavailability of bliss.

A treatise on the highs and lows

of emotion, how we can miss

any subtle signs, reject

what might be our sole chance

of paradise here on Earth.

Further, how we preserve distance

between a hard or easy life

subconsciously, to spur ourselves on.

These are central arguments

the work was based upon.

I do not believe any of this.

Hairshirt not a garment

I would have chosen; less, still

to wear with muddled intent.

## Station Road on Thursday the 5th September

How strange! Man on a phone

in middle of a road.

Not a main route, I grant you.

Turning, tributary. Cars slowed

nonetheless to walking pace.

Quite unperturbed, does not see

beyond his wireless world.

Skims a van’s wing quite nonchalantly.

Lost in himself,

consumed by a point he is making.

Master of all traffic flow,

local deity of braking and swerving.

Completely diverted

as are many vehicles around him.

We all let things pass by unnoticed

though seldom with an engine.

## Victorian Haberdashery

Dust here

speaks of arcane, forgotten times.

Of trade - cuffs, starch - where

slovenly service a crime

and culprit severely admonished.

Poverty the lever and whip hand.

No dissent unpunished.

To understand

one’s rank in a prison of dress,

that constricting

hierarchy – to be less

than another – the cost of working.

A ready elegance

in carved mahogany furniture.

Distracted by romance

we forget the whole picture.

## Reflections at a Coffee Shop

I

Poster children for the punctured generation

on call today. Girl with eye and ear piercings in conversation

with a friend, heavily inked on fingers and hands, who ignores all before her

until a manager, clearly irritated, steps in to take an order.

Tattoos on every strip of skin; everyone has a nose ring.

A creative, colourful setting

for the drab customers who frequent the café. Show

prelude to main event. This is, by common consent, the finest cappuccino.

II

Tattoos have always been a source of fascination for me.

The artistic, vibrant expression of a talented hand

in a coordinated design. Others - smudged, gathered haphazardly,

less so. Perhaps my nature values the well planned

above the whim or drunken camaraderie these often represent.

I have baggage attached. A book on the forensic study

of inking. Those applied in prison that are a statement

of an allegiance or position. Dots, spider webs, and sundry

other coded marks. Or those on limbs which could prevent

a recruit from joining the military. However, fashion moves on.

From minority sport to now, seemingly, always present.

For myself, permanence a problem. I change my mind too often.

III

They have swapped home-grown artwork on the wall

for more functional shelving. Sales probably too slow.

Large ornaments placed in top compartments with smaller

bags of beans and milling equipment below.

A few interesting objects to consider. Books, glass, bric-a-brac.

It retains a touch of the amateur. Selection almost casual.

Why I like the shop. Better to be savaged by an enthusiastic

puppy than professional wolf, say, the internet kings, cynical

in how they track people to exploit them, as well as sell

their details on. Claim it is to improve *the experience*.

I avoid large companies when able. Find an independent. Tell

my friends. Buy things when I can. Try to make a difference.

IV

An internet jockey

you know who I mean,

laptop open

empty plastic cup

riding other people’s airwaves for free,

has a team of physicists visiting

from a local university.

Apparently,

has managed to stretch

a lone coffee bean to infinity

and as if that’s not enough

by using a previously unknown filtration

process has refilled his cup

purely from condensation

and a whiff of perspiration

in the air.

A mug of coffee all day.

The staff would like to clear his testicles away.

V

A woman sat at the next table leaning over, speaking quietly,

is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.

Her clothes a jumble of army boots, combat fatigues, and hoodie.

As if dressing down to avoid attention, but to such an extreme

extent the opposite occurs, so she can’t help but be noticed.

She sits with four friends who don’t look at her clothing,

but all of whom are immaculately and expensively dressed.

For some reason it brings to mind a renaissance painting

where a range of symbols or signs would be added to a scene

to include a hidden message or explanation. Without the key

you could scan the elements yet never know what they mean.

Something awful happened. Or not. You can only guess her history.

VI

Car blocking the road outside.

A woman nodding apologies

rambles on

to the end of her conversation.

Truck driver at the door

arse-end in traffic,

vehicles jammed to eternity

or at least as far as eyes can see,

quietly suggests

under his breath

where he would be pleased

to put her car keys.

She returns

hatchback

duly moved at last

to let his lorry pass

then circled back

to be parked

exactly

where it used to be.

VII

A disturbed, dishevelled woman is talking to two customers

who sit outside the cafe. It seems amicable. In time, they go

and the women, deprived of captive audience, waits as a predator

is prone to do. People inside have noticed and know

the space comes with a price attached so avoid the tables.

I think she is harmless. Looking for someone else to talk to.

Alarm bells rung, the chairs have become untouchable.

Seats inside are taken so friends are splitting, going into

half-filled areas sharing. It is the potential - what she might start doing.

Smart money avoids such company. Why put yourself in that position?

Life has an unpleasant aspect. People alone, discarded. In sitting

here today, did not expect to see so eloquent a demonstration.

## Sketches in Finchley Church End Library

I

Two women

legs swinging as a metronome

whose pace

reflects the volume of conversation, its tone,

content, salacious meat.

At interesting snippets

voices lower

as swing increases

until feet can go no faster.

Then, tale complete,

silence, stillness,

until again, feet pick up a beat.

I speculate

what rumour, depravity,

so charges

this human battery.

However, the formula

for any link found

between

pendulum speed and level of sound

and exactly how they

are connected together,

could be easily quantified

by experiment or trial and error.

II

A librarian

whose voice belligerently

rattles the building’s frame,

who seemingly

cannot keep quiet

even momentarily

to breath, and when he is not speaking

drags a contraption piled high with books rattling noisily

lest mean of sound

should drop below a set level

agreed between

himself and the devil,

is speaking now

to some woman so loudly

her hair is blowing in the breeze

from this apocalypse of council employee.

III

There is a whole system in place

of codes, passes,

numbers to be quoted,

photos to be taken, fingerprints, locks, and latches,

nonetheless, a tramp has wondered in.

We sit. Perplexed.

Uncertain what to do.

Tramp, feet up, relaxed

is enjoying bespoke seating,

a holiday in the sun.

We look around.

As buses, where are librarians when you need one?

Tramp sleeps on, comfortable,

contented

by basic comforts, the rest of us

take for granted.

IV

A library mouse who has awoken

is whispering

to a colleague

about books which have been stolen.

Desks can reflect a state of mind.

Their workspace, a monument

to organised thought.

Objects precisely lined

in a row

except for a corner

piled impossibly, dangerously high.

It must fall, surely. Oh no!

Beige jacket, glasses, *de rigueur*.

Socks are odd. Perversely so.

Different colours, textiles, patterns.

Who knows if beneath that calm exterior

a psyche is engaged in a deadly struggle?

If that tightly coiled spring

should snap

I think we all might be in trouble.

V

There is a machine,

nobody knows what is does.

They press a button now and then

but only wearing gloves.

A bright fluorescent light

illuminates a tray.

The coin slot has no obvious role.

The screen has no display.

Some say it photocopies

some say it validates passes

some say it is pure evil

reads fortunes and predicts disasters.

VI

The two women earlier

whose leg swinging so captivated me

are moving their heads too.

A mass of movement. Every joint unglued.

What are they discussing

I cannot guess.

They are laughing now, flopping backwards,

tears running down cheeks. They are in raptures.

VII

He is pacing up and down past my table.

A military demeanour

belies a strange uncertainty.

Perfect posture

eroded

as if lost amongst us.

I draw a line, hatch form,

but any likeness

eludes.

I return renewed.

My focus

blurred, confused.

I cannot capture him

because he has not yet sketched himself in.

Purpose

in transition.

Forces child,

ex-soldier

now in civilian life

without orders or commander?

I defer, leave as thumbnail

for completion.

He is

his own commission.

## Timely Reminder

The small girl opposite is a volcano.

Mum, desperately trying to stem the flow

of white-hot lava, curtail behaviour.

This one is a force of nature.

Told to settle.

Points sound, thought through, sensible,

but everything mum suggests

completely lost in the process

of eating a sandwich upside down

trying to keep its filling off the ground.

Suddenly moves on

in a blur of purpose and pink ribbon.

Whilst exasperated,

her mother to be congratulated.

Refreshing for the jaded, battle-weary among us

to see such little monsters

so crammed with life, joy, anticipation,

it comes bursting out in all directions.

