

# FINCHLEY BOY

Michael Bedford



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MICHAEL BEDFORD

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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 knobbed 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 breach*  
*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 it 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.

## 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.

