

MICHAEL BEDFORD

The London Plane



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For Robyn

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The Fox

I heard the screaming long before I saw.
At first, a mild annoyance then it grew.
The fox, a magpie clamped within its jaws,
emerged from nowhere. Trotted into view.

It crossed the tarmac path onto the grass.
It serves as lawn. A meagre stump of land.
Head raised, and with its feathered prey held fast,
then slowed for no good reason. Chose to stand.

Four birds had trailed the fox. The strangest sight.
Two magpies barked their harsh, staccato calls.
One nameless bird screeched overhead in flight.
A crow perched in a tree, loudest of all.

The magpies on the ground seemed unafraid.
Despite their size, intent to block its way.
That boldness took them closer every raid.
So close, you knew they could not get away.

Throughout the spat, the fox gave no response.
Made no attempt to venture from that spot.
The noise incessant. Ever more intense.
You thought it must react but it did not.

When suddenly, the argument was done.
It bowed its head and let the body drop.
Now unconstrained, continued on its run.
The moment that it did the protest stopped.

The carcass never stirred. A lifeless thing.
A few clipped calls before the crow moved on.
The others held their place as if waiting
though seconds later all the birds had gone.

Why would the fox return what it had claimed?
Reviewed the scene. Could find no reason why.
At one point, I would swear it looked ashamed
but that was to my biased, human eye.

Memorial

His trail a path that only he walked on.
We cannot trace the slope of that journey.
And when, at last, this traveller had gone
what maps there were, consigned to history.

The more you search for clues, the more you know.
This is not so. Ignore the things you hear.
An echo does not sharpen as it goes,
and each retelling smudges with the years.

And do not say you thought that he was brave.
Who knows what fears he had or hid inside?
Or that he holds his secrets in the grave.
We guess at what he did, the lusts denied.

So when you speak of him make sure to say
we could not grade the dust that was his stuff
but once, he was like us and walked our way.
He lived and died and that is good enough.

Fisherman at Prayer

How did that sullen countenance begin?
Blasted from rock and dragged across the hills
then shaped into a face, cracks mortared in
with clay and moss, to keep the muscles still?

His uniform a frayed, rope-knotted weave.
A statement made though not a word was said.
Unpacks his kit, this shepherd of the sea,
descends stone steps his father used to tread.

Instinctively looks up to test the sky.
A storm mislaid: the rain did not appear
He kneels to touch the swell, the friends who died,
an age which disappeared but holds him here.

Measuring in Garden Time

I didn't think the ferns would grow this year.
A thankless task to make the border good.
The mulch and membrane laid to keep ground clear,
unwanted roots pulled bodily from mud.

An age to lug wet clay out of that bed.
I like to take my pleasures instantly.
To labour planning months, seasons ahead,
a different sort of scale and currency.

Drab Thursday

An overcast morning. Nothing to say.
The cold seeps through an open windowpane.
It promises a bleak and windy day.
Although no clouds, the sky is grey with rain.

A couple with a pram absurdly dressed.
As parents do, have packed to fight a war.
A thickened plastic sheet unfurled which rests
across the child. So large, it skims the floor.

Another woman walks along the road
and wearily adjusts her clothes and hair.
Then scans the heavens trying to decode
the need and aptness of the coat she wears.

And later, as the world awakes from sleep
and people start to scatter from their homes
a muddy palette washes through the street.
No dabs of colour only muted tones.

Ballards Lane 6 am on a Cold Morning

The first full blast of winter overnight.
A flat roof sports a festive overlay.
Now covered by a sheet of sparkling white.
Cars too, their iced tops crowd the parking bay.

The grocer stands outside already late.
He checks whether the shelves securely laid.
Black metal welded to withstand the weight
of boxes piled with goods to be displayed.

And as I'm walking by, can't help but note
the men who haul the crates all look the same.
Well-built with beards and wearing thick black coats.
To shift that mass of pulp a young man's game.

Had finished by the time I circled back
and though not changed from how it's always been
could only see that now, well hidden, rack.
The slog which underpinned that common scene.

Priorities

Some mornings when I've nothing else to do
I stay in bed and scrutinise the noise.
First hear the squalls at dawn but have no clue
of who said what to who, who owns what voice.

In childhood, don't remember them at all.
Perhaps the coal and brick dust could be why.
The wheezy, sooty birds no breath to call
and trees in which to nest in short supply.

No, dogs and cats and ferrets more the style.
I tell a lie – saw budgies in a cage.
That trill-based life not seen in quite a while.
The miners friend. But that another age.

I can't recall their names, much less their songs,
no hook with which to hang a memory.
Perhaps we set our values when we're young
and birdsong never meant that much to me.

Tree Outside My Window

You heard the clatter well before you knew
the work was underway or team were near.
Red cones around the trunks supplied the clue
with lengths of tape to keep the drop zone clear.

Not all the street to be treated the same
which made no sense until you grasped the fact
their grudge solely against the *London plane*.
All other species spared and left intact.

They stripped the crown and cut its limbs to stumps
and swept the verge picking the pavement clean.
Two men with saws, another three to dump
loose twigs and brushwood into a machine.

The boughs reduced to shards against the sky.
An airless lung without its canopy.
A harsh unveiling for my untrained eye
which could not see beyond mere thuggery.

But by that summer, leaves had grown again
and shoots aspired to climb much as before.
Along the road a line of splintered frames
all dressed in green. They too, in part, restored.

And yet, felt more unease as growth set in.
We pare down to the nub too many times.
Then count on nature to absolve our sins.
How do you judge the edge - not cross that line?

I Think I Dreamt of Butterflies Last Night

The whispering of sleep a languid tune
which needs no prompt from me to press its case.
I do not have the time to spare but soon
its waves will take me drifting to that place

in which I will rest hostage to a tide
that washes sense and will and hope away.
And all the fears and thoughts I hold inside
will wear their cheap disguises until day.

Empty Church

The darkness paired with total lack of sound,
it took a while for senses to reset.
A peaceful calm immediately found,
our careless discourse paused out of respect.

Stillness, enough, to hear a sinner's prayer
or sanctify the candles lined in racks.
A cast of angels, incense in the air,
the walls a host of gilded artifacts.

The central nave a trail of worn flagstones,
all witness to the souls who worshiped here.
Departed now, two women kneel alone,
at labour in the gloom to catch God's ear.

Alcoholic

At six o'clock the sudden gift of light.
One moment it is dark - then it is not.
A canvas stretched. As yet, no muse in sight.
I try to fudge a line but I cannot.

A man arrives. He's swigging from a can.
Explores the dregs and throws the tin aside.
A fresh ring pulled, then slips into a van
with froth left draining on the kerb outside.

He drives away. Was that one beer or two?
A bad portent. The morning scarce begun.
A sour reminder of a man I knew.
He too, disciple of the *early one*.

A standing joke (made in no joking way)
his hand came fitted with a glass or cup.
You'd ask him why he drank throughout the day.
Ah sure, he'd nod. To keep the levels up.

Experience the lens through which we see,
connections that we make, roles we assign.
Or is that plate too stained, occasionally?
Perhaps the guy just having a bad time.

A Late Cold Snap Scars the Young Acers

A harsh, unwelcome frost is bedding in,
that early glimpse of warmth sent to deceive.
The hot March sun forgot as night begins
to freeze the fledgling buds and nascent leaves.

How fitful spring can be, how unconcerned
to keep its promise to unlock the land.
Now ice will undermine, its crystals burn,
each tree to bear the cold as best it can.

Well known the final impact will not show
before the season run a few weeks on
when sturdy limbs may wilt or fail to grow,
a leaf corrode and fall, all vigour gone.

No date set as to when that loss may come,
a strange connection forged within the deal.
For as shoots push again, stretch for the sun,
the full scope of the damage is revealed.

Often the greatest wounds not in plain view,
the rot beneath the surface no escape
until the pressure builds and must break through,
the canker left to drain and dissipate.

Original Tin

I soaked the tray but could not lift the stain.
The metal surface breeched, too deeply etched.
Some marks you can't scrub clean, make good again.
Those battle scars when bonded must be kept.

I ran my finger down the tarnished plate
the scuffs of honest labour well-applied.
Why mourn the loss of its unblemished state,
the wounds we must engender be decried?

A Clean Break

I held the shattered glass up to a light,
had found the largest shards but needed more.
Its missing parts lay scattered out of sight
transparent, laid across a kitchen floor.

Always the way, and when you least expect,
before you can react - the moment gone.
No point in cursing fate, to court regret,
sometimes there's nothing else that can be done.

Whatever splits apart can be rebuilt
dependant on the will to right that loss.
A complex choice so intertwined with guilt
the end result is seldom worth the cost.

We scan the wreckage, find our place within
the shrunken world that we are left to face.
All pure nonsense, the brutal truth kicks in,
what cannot be repaired must be replaced.

Brutality of the Workplace

We brook no animosity or feud.
The rule ensures we're all treated the same.
And yet the real world deals in subterfuge,
of subtle ways to bend and flex a frame.

For *weakness* is a rogue and toxic word
no matter what is said, or what is right.
Don't trust the passing mercies of the herd,
it's never good to drown in common sight.

And people who should otherwise object
deny their conscience, serve the company.
As if absolved, forgive their own conduct,
then lecture others on such policies.

Battle

The thought has not yet formed within my head
and yet the verse emerging as I speak.
There are no simple tricks or paths ahead
to batten down or match the words I seek.

So roll the dice and let the poem go
and if you can keep pace, it may just lead
to pastures which you never thought to know
or tools you do not own but surely need.

Perhaps what is the meanest trick of all,
hard work alone is not the help you think.
It is that subtle loss of tight control
which, fitfully, can push you to the brink

of capturing a thought or state of mind,
to be surprised by what you find inside.
The toughest test, to leave dull graft behind
and learn to trust that fleet, capricious tide.

Two Nights at a Friend's House

A different sensibility intrudes.

A face hangs on a wall unclaimed, unknown,
as sugar for a coffee still eludes.

This kitchen serves a plan but not my own.

I woke at dawn: the sun had clipped my sleep.

This house tuned to another's pitch and tone.

Unsettled, had not thought how much I keep
the markers of my life on view at home.

And worse, a slip of plastic broken free.

The card which feeds and clothes me lost, alone.

A call line sends a fresh identity.

The number which defined me is disowned.

That Time in My Life Recalled

Because there are no outward marks to see
whatever you may feel, it holds no weight.
No tissue to be found, pathology,
stigmata to excuse your damaged state.

There is a loosening of the ties inside
as landward marks are lost, and when adrift
upon that deep and self-propelling tide
all simple choices fade, cease to exist.

Another shame to hide, the practiced lie,
the way we carry guilt and never learn
there is no fault, except in other's eyes.
Re-formed, we go to work: fear its return.

Urban Fox

Side-stepped a bush and trotted into sight,
they slip between the bottom fence and wall.
Occasionally, you hear their screams at night
but in the day, they make no sound at all.

A decent length. Suggests maturity.
Circles awhile then settles on the grass.
A back leg primed to scratch incessantly.
Beneath that blur, its coat a tangled mass.

A small, round patch of fur gnawed bare by teeth,
no visible infection in the mange.
The mites dug deep, will offer no relief.
I read the itch can make them go insane.

So when they come, I briefly estimate
their size and health. Look closer in the young.
This old fellow, for now, maintains his weight.
No food found here, continues on its run.

My eyes sated with scenes of suffering,
who need see more - when is that well drained dry?
Much as I try to think of other things,
a long time since a healthy fox passed by.

Bush Radio

Another age. They liked to make tech big.
So sixties. Not to everybody's taste.
The carcass ridged with speaker partly hid
and large circular dial set in its face.

I'd try to sneak it up to bed at night.
My sheet a tent when arial unfurled
and as the disc was turned in that dim light
a silvered line would sweep across the world.

Slow Saturday

The light has scarcely broken as I see
two magpies on the road strutting around.
For flightless birds they move quite rapidly,
explore loose leaves and scrutinise the ground.

Incredibly, the flats remain asleep.
I scan for signs or movement. There are none.
At last, a woman walking up the street.
Unpacks her earphones. Tries to put them on.

What sort of play is this? The stage is set
and yet the players fail to take their place.
As first acts go, a little threadbare yet.
I draft a note. This script is short of pace.

Ancient Bigotry

Whose is the voice that echoes down the years,
detached from flesh, extant without a home,
and yet, refreshed, nests seamlessly in ears
that long to hear its sour, unpleasant tone?

What is the nature of the bargain made?
Why would you trade good sense to hold aloft
that stained banner, enrol in that brigade,
to wallow in the state of grace now lost?

Where is the flaw that cherishes such hate,
some part of us or nurtured from that seed?
Are we mere victims scattered in its wake
or willing, choose the sophistry we need?

Barricades

The current once has run has got away.
Not always raining water once and rain.
How travelling never seems to find a way.
A hard road is a hard road yet again.

Not satisfied - a bold and surly code.
Not satisfied - confusion and despair.
And who is left to lift that heavy load,
who knows the current feeding that despair?

And what has got away, not always pain,
not always loss, but sometimes memory.
It is a dream we dream again, again.
Not always raining water, who can see?

How travelling searches for a place to stay
not satisfied in chains or barricades.
An argument of one has found a way.
A hard road is a load that never fades.

It is a dream - the current run to ground.
In searching for that state we cannot see
the dream that drains the current never found.
Sometimes the barricade is memory.

A hard road is a quarrel gone astray
or different sort of water in my eye.
Forgiveness is a place we never stay.
The bold and surely code that we live by.

Regret

Mere words can never win that skewed debate,
why linger on the things we could have done?
And yet we barely pause, begin to shape
that sense of loss we cannot overcome.

What is this need to look back and dissect
the choices that we made? What is that for?
Within that process often to neglect
the good we did to only find the flaw.

So in the end, what then? What can we do?
Redact the scenes we think were badly played?
Let time and repetition rinse us through,
or wait until such recollections fade?

Mark Left by a Squashed Bug

A sad reminder of a frightened act,
a smeared, black smudge of no import at all,
a murder from an unprovoked attack,
a hunter frames a quarry on the wall.

How many ways to see a single deed?
All true and yet none captures everything.
A slew of feckless platitudes are freed
to sell their stories, paste the moral in.

Had thought to write a modest line or two
when suddenly the job got big on me.
I'll plan a book to work the issues through,
how many layers of meaning can there be?

I like to rest at night and watch the news,
consume the bluff conclusions they present.
Of course, no more than terse, parochial views.
Real truth too complicated to attempt.

Hot Summer, July 22

The ground baked dry, all records redefined,
advice to close the windows, stay inside.
Two fans ensure the temperature is fine.
A brief trip out to scan which plants have died.

The shifts we see cannot be reconciled,
who knows the scale of change we edge toward?
Enough, perhaps, to scold the dirty child,
or else, to halt the game and clear the board?

For now, a lowered blind becomes routine
as bushes burn and grass is turned to hay.
How long before much worse effects are seen?
My bones tell me far sooner than they say.

Lost Labours

The certainty of youth has passed me by
and seeded in that loss the thought has grown
my once-firm truths were merely fleeting lies,
badges of honour I no longer own.

What use is age that only serves to make
us look behind instead of moving on?
How insight built from years and past mistakes
becomes the two-edged sword we fall upon.

What is the mark we leave if mark at all,
convictions that we held and then forgot,
our callow days, the triumphs we recall,
or when we chose to love - when we did not?

Interview of Sorts

The safest course at first is stick to fact
and when a trust is gained, to move ahead.
Experience the key. Light touch and tact.
To tacitly approve each word that's said.

He spoke mostly about an age now gone,
a landscape which he knew in infancy
and as that wistful narrative played on
delved deeper until locked in memories.

In that unnatural state, had built his home.
The past outweighed the present in his mind.
A childhood which was held as cornerstone,
archaic views he'd never left behind.

And soon the coded slurs, dogmas emerged.
The type of comment that he'd normally hide.
Inside his world, the tasteless jibes deserved.
We all think what we do is justified.

We parted then as strangers. Journey done.
A passing conversation on a train.
He left content to designate someone
as lesser than himself, to fit the blame.

Granddaughter Aged 1 Month

Remembered now, the wonder with the fear.
Emotions roam in packs, seldom alone.
The fragile new-born state that first appears
too slight for life, soon, happily, outgrown

as weight anchors a child into the world
and age moves on, the body surely grows.
Stood humbled by a tiny, perfect girl.
The worry fades, yet never truly goes.

Granddaughter Aged 6 Months

I had forgotten how strong life can be,
how well a child shapes carers to their needs,
the endless list of practicalities,
the lack of sleep, stained clothes, repeated feeds.

How small she is. We lean over her cot
but do not speak. She's only just gone down.
Take off our coats, unveil the gifts we brought.
We'll wake her when her parents not around.

Granddaughter Aged 12 Months

In short, more difficult to apprehend.
She feeds herself, has found her own technique.
So keen to walk the child no longer bends,
will only rest when scrambled to her feet.

And knows exactly what she wants to do.
When does our inner nature first unfold?
This young? The iron will is something new.
Will not be placed now setting her own goals.

Observe the intellect behind her stare
which does not understand but has begun
to map the world, increasingly aware.
Is visibly re-cast each time we come.

Granddaughter Aged 15 Months

I wish that I could see through Robyn's eyes
a guileless land of play and food and cats
before the world surrendered its surprise,
each turn of page a fresh, delightful act.

A joy seen in the clutter she collects,
the wonder in another nursery rhyme.
My gaze is more discerning, circumspect.
Her vision far superior to mine.

Granddaughter Aged 17 Months

They brought her here complete with *Birnham Wood*,
short notes, mashed food, a toy not seen before.
Explores the kitchen, pulls knobs as she should,
no fuss when mum and dad slip out the door.

Bright button sharp, she now runs everywhere.
We empty bags and soon the games begin.
Re-plans the room and starts to climb the chairs
has grandma dangling on a piece of string.

Granddaughter Aged 18 months

I envy her the things she does not know,
how simple worlds can seem to fall apart,
the smallest loss, a toy, can sometimes grow
a million times to crush and break a heart,

and her first weeks at school, the learning years,
the friends that she will find, the ones she'll lose,
how sometimes all her hopes will end in tears
yet give her newer, better roads to choose,

and as an adult all those fledgling steps,
to make mistakes, then make much bigger ones,
the triumphs she'll enjoy and then forget,
those brighter, darker, greater days to come.

Indentured

Perhaps the time has come to look ahead
and dream of what the void may have in store.
Within that fugue think aimless thoughts instead,
escape the ties and burdens we endure.

And yet there is no choice but to remain,
obey the brutal voice that has my ear
which speaks of work to do, reminds again
of debts I owe, of those no longer here.

How do you clear that sum or ever start
to price the obligations we accrue?
With no pretence of worth or trade or art,
to stain an empty page all I can do.

A Confidence Told to Me in Error

The right to tell the story never mine
and yet my pen endeavoured to break free.
A minor change and conscience would be fine,
some modest sop to tact and decency.

Two deals were set in order to proceed.
I tasked myself all views would be portrayed
and detail would be blurred so could not lead
a reader back to where the content made.

But who am I to be so indiscreet,
does truth insist I press on undeterred?
Or is this verse a lapse I must delete
the past to keep its secrets undisturbed?

All copies were destroyed eventually,
the only proper outcome from the start.
My fear, a blameless person bound to see
the cold deceit that scars another's heart.

What is the cost or discount of a lie?
Does time reduce its scale till none remains?
Still cannot prise the image from my eye.
Though not one of my sins, I bear the stain.

Rite of Passage

The bullies wouldn't leave some kids alone,
would strip a victim of all self-respect.
Their displaced anger searching for a home,
a solace in the pain that they'd inflict.

A guy in infant school, big for his age,
picked on his mate. He relished the control.
The friend would stay as punch-bag for his rage,
as if he too had stumbled on his role.

What sort of parents weaponize a child
or is that nature scripted long before?
First time I ever thought about or tried
to look behind the end result I saw.

Damaged Tree at Victoria Park

A branch is splintered, almost breaking free.
The wreckage from a gale two months ago.
Surprising find. The land groomed expertly.
Why leave this here, I wonder if they know?

The fractured limb about twelve foot in length.
Leaves touch the grass. The stem barely attached.
A twisted splay of wood summons the strength
to bear its weight and keep the joint intact.

The bark reduced to half the girth and yet
its foliage, though dry, is still alive.
A miracle of sorts. You would not bet
that rump of green could possibly survive.

No doubt the staff will come to cut it down.
So much timber, a stump will not be missed.
A shame, given its fight to hold its ground,
how doggedly it struggles to exist.

Cull

This garden has been left too long, I fear.
A path lays choaked with weeds and as I toil
all hopes of simple rescues disappear.
I mourn the leaves now scattered in the soil.

So clear the land and let fresh growth take hold.
The past will cling and not yield easily.
And yet the new must always purge the old.
No roots so deep that time cannot pull free.

Diagnosis Shared

There will be time. We'll speak again at length
on other days. Or when we better know
the lay of things, and have a clearer sense
of what we can hold on to or let go.

The way it is. We know there are no words
to set this right. For now, we need to find
the best in this, no matter how absurd
that that might seem at this uncertain time.

A need to pause. To not become obsessed
with what has gone. But, rather, understand
what matters most, then sacrifice the rest,
to price each hour as fully as we can.

The Unthinkable

A thought which I once had, securely bound,
broke free from sundry ropes that life supplied,
searched for an edifice it could tear down,
doubted all truth, took other people's side.

Ideas should be behaved and logical,
must find a well-known fact to build upon.
This farting, belching creature could not tell
what day it was, discarded right and wrong.

I watched it for a while, tracked where it went,
sought unsafe ground, content to stand alone.
It bought a torch to shine fresh light and sent
some lines I used. Much better than my own.

Untidy Garage Space Opposite

The weeds have formed a barrier to leaves
who draw a line of brown along its edge
as yellow headed flowers spit and squeeze
between the paver's cracks up to the hedge

which, overgrown, has blocked a window's light.
And yet, they have not thought to trim its spread.
There is no trace of conscious hand in sight,
the plot a shrine to nature's whims instead.

How odd to see this littered, unkempt space
among its peers so ordered and pristine.
While neighbours passing by reduce their pace.
Pretend to look ahead but scan the scene.

Victoria Park in April

The entrance to the park is in full bloom.
A fitter, bolder spring emerged this year.
Now free of sleet and snow people resume
their daily walks and families reappear

to fill the playgrounds, climb on frames and swings,
and suddenly there's children everywhere.
Replenished by the energy sun brings
their shouts and laughter permeate the air.

How quickly things transform, can be reset.
Two weeks ago, dishevelled, strolled about
with fog hung overhead, mud underfoot,
the final rump of winter playing out.

But older, sense the steel in that display,
the constant drive to change and reinvent.
How nature does not hoard but clears the way,
the world we think we know so transient.

*An overcast morning. Nothing to say.
The cold seeps through an open windowpane.
It promises a bleak and windy day.
Although no clouds, the sky is grey with rain.*

*A couple with a pram absurdly dressed.
As parents do, have packed to fight a war.
A thickened plastic sheet unfurled which rests
across the child. So large, it skims the floor.*

*Another woman walks along the road
and wearily adjusts her clothes and hair.
Then scans the heavens trying to decode
the need and aptness of the coat she wears.*

*And later, as the world awakes from sleep
and people start to scatter from their homes
a muddy palette washes through the street.
No dabs of colour only muted tones.*

from 'Drab Thursday'

