

Childhood: A Definition

OR

All the Ways to Be

Acknowledgements

Thanks, Mum, for your excellent proof-reading.

Poems from this collection have been published by or in association with:

Bolts of Silk, Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal, The Brasilia Review, The Dawntreader, Of Nepalese Clay, Paper Swans Press, The Origami Poetry Project, The Peacock Journal, Red Ink Writers, Sheela-Na-Gig. Stepaway Magazine and South Bank Poetry Magazine.

Website: <http://matthewfriday.weebly.com/>

If you carry your childhood with you, you never become older.

Tom Stoppard

All children, except one, grow up.

J.M. Barrie - Peter Pan.

Two Toddlers

Two toddlers – smiling atoms
of pink dresses, fine blonde hair
pinched in pony tails, faces made
of cheeky balloons and chocolate grins.
They find everything funny: standing
still, standing next to each other,
waddling around tables, jumping
on the spot, banging the café glass
counter, peeking out of the window;
holding hands with each other.

Funny,
everything to them is hilarious,
as if they were made smile first
and the rest of their little bouncy bodies
followed; two giggling Cheshire Cats.

When does this change?
At what age will the humour tinkle away,
drop by drop, the smiles stop; frowns
take their place, and worries weary them
until they're left mid-thirties watching
two toddlers and wishing they could find
everything funny again.

Toddler Tyrants

Pity the pigeons, ducks, sparrows
that have to scatter in terror
when a giggling tyrant wobbles
at them, wailing, hands clapping,
not applause, wants to catch them,
terrorise them into the air.

All the birds have to do is rise up:
stand their ground, turn on tiny
heels, fly into those red dictator
faces and send them screaming,
traumatised forever, afraid of every
bird on earth, Mankind made kind.

Being 3: a Definition

Wellington boot on one foot,
just a sock on the other,
chasing a pigeon,
slice of toast in one hand,
mother rushing up behind,
hands outstretched to catch.

Being 4: a Definition

In red pyjamas
riding a scooter up and down
the empty road.
Seeing us, she wants to show
more. She grabs a skateboard,
boasts she can ride both
at the same time
which she does,
wobbling like an old tooth
until she tumbles off
unhurt but hesitant.
We drive off,
and she watches, worried
about what comes next.

Too Many Worries

A girl aged three or four waiting
with her father, head leaning
to one side, face set in a look
of separation, anxiety, fear,
already serious, adult, knowing
of late arrivals, a person missing,
the pantheon of relationship woes.

I hear a squeal and see her leaping
with delight, calling out a name in
a high-pitched Austrian German.
I hope her delight lasts longer
than her anxiety, that she jumps
for joy when adult, and her face
is not creased with too many worries.

Multi-Coloured

A four-year-old girl on a scooter. Pink jumper. Curly blonde hair. She
scoots through an underpass that cuts an underground carpark in half.

‘So multi-coloured,’ she says pointing to the red,
blue, green and yellow railings either side.

‘Yes, beautiful,’ says her father.

For a moment he doesn’t notice he’s in a carpark with oblong
shadows and silent cars and scudding rubbish.

He sees the colours on the railings.

Miniature Steam

Desperate to see the miniature steam train
leave the single track train toy station
in the *Grossen Garten* of Dresden,
the father has his daughter and son run,
run fast. The little boy squeals out in panic,
his sister grabs his hand and pulls to piston
his legs. They arrive just as the train gushes
away from the platform, smoky carriages
full of smile-smearred faces. Hooting father
aims his camera at his children as they stand
to attention, in awe of the steel and steam.

Pink Plastic Shoes

The high heat had brought out
the flying ants. Every inch of concrete
was crawling. A little girl with
pink plastic shoes was slowly
stamping on ants, taking great care
to squash them so they never moved
again.

Little Legs

A small girl sits in a chair,
both hands on her biscuit,
little legs kicking under the chair,
feet not reaching the floor;
red shoes clicking against each other.

She Danced

She danced
to the song,
for her baby sister
watching in her chair.

She danced
a whirl of arms and legs
and wobbling head
and jittering unaware.

She danced
and I wished
I was a child again
so I could dance

She danced
and the milky world
in my peripheral vision
swirled out of focus.

Skipping

Crossing Balham High Road
holding her father's hand
she walks and then breaks
into a skip, then walks again
but the skip slips back -
that happy current of bobbing knees
that is slowly straightened out
and drawn up into still adulthood.

Her father doesn't skip.

No Scam, Affection

Mondul 3 village, Siem Reap, Cambodia

No Scam. No hassling.
No dead-eyed demand for a dollar
from the inner city beggars
who scurry around the 24 hour bars
and bustling fake-goods markets,
sniffing out the easy-touch tourists
when they should be at school
adding up their few chances.
Just my hand. Snatched
from me with a Cheshire Cat grin
by a little girl, as old in years as
the number of fingers she is clasping,
hair rough like the muddy road
that slithers through her village.
A boy joins us, taking my other hand,
swinging it, swatting it, laughing -
he could give 'high 5's' forever.
Another boy, flapping about inside
an adult's collared shirt, so happy
to be with, so shrunken inside the shirt,
grabs my thigh and won't let go.
We walk and more children
come and go, tiny slum-eyes
smiling from hope to hope.
When we leave one tiny girl,
smaller than her chances,
watches, waves, eyes widening.

For Fun

Five year old Megan – blonde hair and pretty, plump face – asks if it will hurt if she stamps on my shadow.

‘Yes it will,’ I say, for fun.

And then she stamps on it. A lot.

For fun.

Banshee

It begins like a Banshee.

A wild wail coming from a small, blonde haired girl in a pram. Her hands claw the air, rising like her red balloon in the sky. Her wailing rips into a scream.

Her father lets out an angry sigh and then a limp, apologetic, ‘Sorry, sweetie.’

The little girl continues screeching for a few seconds as the balloon shoots up above the empty shell that was once Woolworths.

Her father pushes the pram on quickly, humming soothing noises like a cruising train. Her wails die down as she lets go, accepts, grows a few minutes older.

Why God Loves Five Year Olds

Boy 1: Well when I fell off *my* bike, I split my head.

Boy 2: Yeah? Was there blood?

Boy 1: Yeah, lots. All over my face. My head was split from here to here.

Boy 2: How come you're here today at the party?

Boy 1: God made me. God made us all. He has powers.

Boy 2: Yeah?

Boy 1: Yeah. God likes birthdays.

Being 5: Definition

In an alley outside Starbucks
a boy and his grandfather
bat a brown balloon up, down,
back and forth; a game of giggles,
sudden swerves, childhood
under the layers of the grandfather's
beer oiled face and bulging belly.
Their few minutes of play
could be hours until, until
the Moms come by, stare
into shop windows longingly.
All move on, staggered order,
balloon and grandson bursting ahead.

Being 6: a Definition

On South Kensington tube station,
 tap-dancing through the boring wait,
 feet softly scuffing the gummy platform.
 She taps, looks back and up
 at Daddy, taps more and edges away,
 closer to the train line. Not testing,
 just tipping into her world of dance.
 Daddy reels her back with an umbrella
 and they talk technique, train times,
 something caught in her corn-gold hair.

Down An Alley, Guangzhou

Behind the apartment block,
 an alleyway. We walked down
 after a coffee with cute foam
 in a café with English Tea
 Shop tables. We stop
 by an outhouse with a side
 room no bigger than a shed. Occupied
 by a family with three children.
 Youngest crying. Tiny secret
 slum. Didn't believe it
 until I saw the one bed,
 kitchen stove, toilet bucket;
 coffin-living.
 Three
 steps
 later
 a road, traffic, shops
 and the rest of Guangzhou,
 China, world unaware.

The Hopes of an Autistic Boy

He has fixated on the Globe,
like a bored god, he spins it,
looking for inspiration. He finds
it in the patches of white that

he thinks are snow, the same
snow that fell yesterday in long,
soft showers. He spins the Globe,
finds the white patches, stabs them,

tells his patient mother that
it is the same snow, that it will fall,
'Because God made it so.
I prayed and God brought snow.'

'That's right dear,' his mother says,
ruffling his blonde hair – a normal
seven year old boy to look at.
He repeats his prayer, a mantra,

an obsession, he won't drop the subject.
'And God's going to bring snow today
because I prayed lots and lots. God
listens to me because I pray to Him.'

His mother agrees knowing she shouldn't,
that of all the prayers God hears,
this must be the weakest. But her son
is autistic. God will have patience.

The snow does not fall.

comfort sucking to feel safe.

Lorna, I want to help you.
I want to tell your parents why
you suck your fingers. But how can I
without implying their failures,
without them sucking their fingers?

Bubble Poppers

The children squeal and reach
for the bubbles that wobble on tiny beds
of air. They want to touch, to poke,
to pop.

Pop the bubble.

We all love popping
the shimmering, glistening bubble.
That wild desire to destroy,
as much fun as blowing the bubbles.

The children clamour to pop the bubbles
not blow them.

Falling Balloon

A small Chinese girl drops
her balloon. It falls, rolls
away. She looks at it, reaching
unable to reach, speechless.
Parents busy building a robot
with her old brother. No tears.
I reach and pick up the balloon.
I give it back and she accepts it,
looking up at me like I'm an
odd looking giant angel
that helped her rescue
her balloon.

Snow for Abbie

Abbie fizzed with excitement when
I told her there could be snow
this weekend, her beautiful face folding
up in origami smiles of childhood.

I awoke on Sunday and saw snow
coming down in a flow, a slow water-
fall of thick flakes that whirled
around like blinded birds. Everywhere
was white, the clouds grey and stiff.

I thought of Abbie jumping out of bed,
remembering what I said, giddy all day
long. I saw the snow hanging in the trees;
felt the stillness of the aftersnow, the
hanging moments of the weekend.

By the end of the afternoon the snow
had melted and gone, leaving white stains,
small patches of beauty, adulthood.

Sudden Snow

Emma calls my name, insists: snow
falling on the last day of November.
Bone of ice pooling in her hand,
half proof. She points to the door.
I stare through the glassy gloom
to see a white dusting. She nods.

Anna, the oldest sister, appears
smiling at their secret treasure,
hair sparkling with December gems.
She supports her sister. Yes, snow.

The youngest, Marta, face dotted
with chickenpox scars, shyly shows
me cold evidence: another slither
of winter wrinkling her soft skin.
Then she runs off, arms whirling,
laughing with blizzarding excitement.

Walking home, sudden snowfall,
my wife and I find young smiles
turns us back into children. By night
the snow was slush and rain.

Look Back

Two boys running
down an alley,
laughing, racing
but not in a rush.
At the end
they turn
and look back
to their parents.

The Bonus King

Boy looking into a *Bet Fred* outlet,
 peering curiously around the corner
 of dad's mumbled instructions;
 betting he won't be noticed. Squinting
 through the rippled glass at dad's
 grown-up games, his future
 being ticked away.
 Stripes on his t-shirt like a racing track.
 Dog tired, he manages
 the shopping trolley, bulging
 with hope dad will finish
 soon, take him home soon, be dad soon.

Or win. Be the Bonus King, for once.
 The long promised treat:
 Disneyland with my dad.

Boy in a Tree

On way to school?
 But the classrooms are full of white
 shirts. Or maybe to work
 in his favourite football shirt.
 The boy jumps over a low fence
 and crosses the river bank
 to a tree, *his* tree, perhaps.
 He climbs and sits on a broken branch
 overhanging the curry-green river
 stained by lily pads and sewage,
 shirking through Siem Reap.
 He sits for a while, fishing
 with his thoughts, flicking ash
 into the slow Cambodian waters.

War of the Worlds

Two boys sit on the tube train between Wimbledon and Southfields, both wearing green school jumpers.

One boy asks the other if he has seen *War of the Worlds*. They gently rock from side to side as the train goes, *checkety-check, checkety-check*.

“There is a horn that the aliens blow to announce the killing.”

“Yeah, yeah. Wicked.”

“I was in a forest and a horn blew. I ran for my life!”

“No way!”

“You would, you know you would.”

The other boy pauses for a second, distracted by some blur of colour out of the window. Then he says, “Yeah, after the film. I would.”

Of All the Words

He could see two swear words standing out, magnified fat as fists punching his eyes.

The boy on the school bus with behaviour problems who can ignore the whole world’s pleas for calm, now as gentle as an angel, reading swear words out loud. I tell him with mock sincerity:

I don’t want to read that page of my poetry book.

Grown ups shouldn’t use bad words.

I make some theatre out of turning the page, *tutting, tutting, naughty, naughty, no thanks.*

This seems acceptable to him.

He doesn’t mention it again
and we start a game of tic-tac-toe
as if nothing has happened.

The Rain Collectors

The rain is sudden and spearing –
a million grey arrows mushing
onto Balham High Road. William
and his sister squeal, run outside,

stand and watch the water as if
this is a Biblical Flood, the First Rain.
They get soaked and then inspired:
taking plastic cups, they collect rain -

grey-brown run-off from the café
awning - and hurry back in to show
their mother; giggling as they go back
and forth, gathering, spilling, refilling

proud of their gunky drinks, of being
soaked. I'm reminded of Victorian
values: *children are vessels to be filled*.
Still the reason we pour facts and skills

into half-open, yawning ears. So much
better to give children empty vessels
and let them discover ways to fill it
themselves while it rains, rains, rains.

Finding a Skull On A Farm in Saxony

Six year old boy finds the skull
bleaching on the dry stone wall.
Reaches for it with reverence,
afraid at first to touch it -
it might snap at his fingers.
Then quickly claims it, lifts it,

hears applause, a distant roar
sacred trophy as long as his arm.
He runs to find his classmates
scattered around the farm,
declaring discovery, excitement
echoing: *dinosaur skull! A dinosaur!*

Junior scientists gather to review,
give giddy approval, wonder
So what type of dinosaur is it?
Ideas fly around like pterosaurs
until a more learned friend
points out *you don't find bones,*
you find fossils. This isn't a fossil.

The boy baths his new baby,
hoping the brook's waters will
cry answers etched in marrow.
So what is it? Sensible farm theories
bubble up: horse, pig, sheep
Ask the farmer! Where's the farmer?

They play Hunt the Farmer,
searching paddies and pens
and find him brushing boots.
His answer a relief for the boy.
Not a monster but still a thrill:
the skull belonged to a male boar.

New round of speculation begins:
How did it die? Who killed it?
Why was the skull on a farm wall?

Are there more monster boar nearby?
The farmer laughs, leaves them
to wonder the magic in mystery.

Girls Dancing

For these six year old girls there is only
dancing: no parents, teachers, no other
friends unless they dance with them,
abandon themselves with them, spin
and twirl and twist as if made of wind
and air and hope, not flesh and bone,
no groans or gasps for air. This endless
motion lasts minutes, flows across cultures:
Indian hand gestures, ballet pirouettes,
sudden city street hops, freestyle abandon.
I have no memory of the dance ending.
The girls are still dancing, dancing.

The Streets, Together

Flung from civil war in Libya,
the little girl whose smile is pearls
strung on hope because we greet her,
her mother, father in a wheelchair

as they enter the lift to be taken down
to the Dresden streets where so many
glare and grunt, Monday marches
by the right-wing boots ignorant of

gifts immigrant bring. No bombed-
out, rebuilt building as beautiful
as the way her face bricks with smiles
and her eyes tremble with happiness

when we meet her again downstairs
and we hold open the door for her,
her mother, her father in a wheelchair.
We enter the streets, together.

Why We Grow Up Hating Math - 1

‘120 plus 120,’ stated the mum to her daughter, sitting opposite her in the café. ‘Come on, it’s easy. It shouldn’t take you long.’

The mum speaks sternly; her face lined with hard lines, her skin grey, her lips thin, her tone as hard as the table they’re sat at.

The blonde daughter, speaks softly, thinks out-loud by chewing her fingers, looks around, rubs her rounded face. She sounds younger than she looks.

Five minutes later, the daughter has an answer. She offers it in a hesitant manner, a kind of mental lisp.

‘220...?’

Stern mother stubs a sigh out of her lips. ‘Finally! What took you so long?!’

Why We Grow Up Hating Math - 2

A father, trying his best, belly
bulging over his belt, encourages
his young son to complete math
problems in a work book as the train

cuts through flat Saxony farms bound
for Berlin, hawks hovering over rapeseed
fields, wind turbines shrugging blades,
flat sky filling with pancake clouds.

The boy stutters, uses his finger
to slowly count, which Dad mocks;
he wants everything understood *now*.
An old woman opposite tries to help.

The boy gets frustrated, insists he's right,
turns away, refuses to try again, crossed
arms. Eventually, the boy sighs the right
answer. Dad relieved. Old woman laughs.

Being 8: A Definition

The cloud steams up our eyes:
countless frantic dragonflies
swarming under a darkening sky,
prehistorically old hunting frenzy.
The children zip out of the class
and are immediately *ooohed*
into reverence. Modern mammals
admiring ancient insects with wings
older than the Himalayas, dinosaurs.
The children estimate the numbers,
give similes to describe the chaos.
“they look like a cloud breathing
in and out, not sure of its shape.”

Margherita Has Her Ears Pierced

Her eighth birthday choice:
to shrink into the dentist seat,
back-alley Como pharmacy,
tightly gripping arm supports,
metal bolt punching one innocent
lobe. Squirm, suffocated yelp -

parents watching, nodding
knowingly - red rose blossoming.
A few seconds of doubt
as the man swaps sides, moves
the ear bolt across, calming
words in Italian, childhood waving,

stepping back, young woman
ahead, waving on. Gripping tighter,
the second bolt more painful,
a piercing animal cry, then adults
applause, hugs. Her reward:
bejewelled metals in a bruised garden.

Cherry Blossom Communion in Italy

Another flower parachutes
down, bouncing off branches,
deep pink lace dropping on
the lush green hotel lawn.

Father, why hast thou abandoned me?

Five-pointed hearts opening
with pinks and purples deeper
then the dresses swirling by:

young girls, sisters, mothers,
aunts, friends arriving for an
early July Communion Party,
sauntering in the finest shoes

accelerating into adulthood,
stomping up the flower-littered
path lit by candles, music starting.
A little girl, two blossoms old,

runs amongst the necropolis; so
many cherry tree gifts to kick,
not the Party Planner's idea.
The Communion girl in huge tutu

poses amongst the fallen flowers,
asks if the photographer is finished.
The men don't notice: there is
football on a communal television.

Boy V Swan in Bruges

A quiet canal in Bruges,
narrowing houses gaping
just enough for the boy
to set up his rod and net,
feet dangling over the edge,
scuffing the silver surface,
no school, no time limits.
He casts out his rod
and the red float bobs
catching the swan's arching
attention. The swan kicks
its orange paddles and glides
over to the float. Boy reels
in, waits for the swan
to grow bored, drift away
to tug at hidden river reeds.
Boys casts out and swan
turns and heads back.
So the battle begins:
boy reeling in, casting out;
swan spinning around,
surging back, beyond curiosity.
This is its canal waters:
fishing rights not granted.
Boy afraid to tangle the swan,
tries throwing his words,
harsh tone, waving his net.
Swan hisses, wings unfold
and flap, a white storm.
Boys backs off, waits
for the swan to calm down.
Does not give in. Tries again,
casting off to a new spot.

Being Like Him

11am on a Sunday. Boy on a bike wheelying down Balham High Road. Side of head shaved, tongue sticking out, as he shows off some early smatter of manhood.

Walkers on the pavement smile and shake their head.

Silly boy.

But they remember being like him, or wish they did.

Dropped Tissue

In Horní náměstí, the Upper Square in Olomouc in the Czech Republic, there is a bronze 3D model of the Medieval city. The men like to stand over the model talking, waving over it – masters of their own miniature world. The children love to feel the houses, finger-walk the streets, test the spires – will they come off if pulled? Can the marvels be unmade?

A toddling boy runs around the cobbles, defying new found gravity, fresh ankles, uneven stone. He throws himself at the model, reaches up to feel one house, runs off in a lumpy circle, boomerangs back. The boy's three year old sister - blonde hair rippled like hurried water - mounts the model, giggles Godzilla, then scooped off by her sighing mother.

Later an older boy nurses a smartphone, his soul is in his hand. Ice-cream stained tissue in the other hand, he examines the model, finds the inverted bubble where the city walls bend into the belly of the city. Drops his tissue in the hidden clavicle. Skips off, smartphone held up in triumph. The tissue shrivels up in embarrassed commentary.

The Boy and the Bull

Caught in the fat angry eye of the bull,
the boy, red handed. A flick of his wrists.
'Come on, fatty cow! Come on!'

This is *my* field, snorts the huffing bull.
Because the point of his horns had been doubted,

he charges.

And because the boy is only eight,
brave but unable to taste his future
he stands his ground, thinking he can dive to one side
super-hero style. 'Come on, fatty cow!'

Boy is not quick enough.
Bull crashes into boy. Boy is broken,
shattered like china. Bull is broken

later by his father's silencing shotgun.

The boy lives on, his arms in plaster.
every taste of milk is this memory.

Boys of That Age

The security guard at the international school speaks bluntly to the three excited boys who have brought their best sentences to him, proud of their writing, feeling brave.

“It doesn’t move me at all,” he states – a dryly delivered swing. No prisoners.

One boy has imagined the last tree being felled, questions for the guilty woodchopper. The second boy wonders why his grandfather wasn’t alive when he was born. The third boy is emotional for the first time since his mother died of cancer. He writes about the darkness rolling in when friends fall out. So proud, he wants to share with the security guard, a family friend.

All three boys ordered away and I’m told in Sergeant-Major tones: “Boys of that age shouldn’t be expressive. Shouldn’t be taught that. I grew up hardcore. That’s that.” He marches away, his bullet-proof vest never crinkling, and returns to his post, monitoring the school car park where the rain falls and emotional boys remain hidden.

Dragon Slayers

Denise, the artist, moulds
a clay dragon out of the sand.
With the help of Drew and Morgan,
she dribbles the sand onto the spines,
sculpts the snoozing head, curves
the body around a treasure pool.
Then they all sit back and wait
for the hungry tide to come lapping.
Slowly the oily white tongues of water
lap closer. We wait and then forget.
The dragon starts to snore. But before too
long (and in the children's world
that's about fifteen minutes)
the first licking wave comes close.
Excitement from all of us
and the snoozing dragon awakes
but cannot escape the sudden flood
that collapses its scaly back,
smudges its snarling mouth.
The children join in the destruction
gleefully squealing and stamping the monster
back into the sand it was born from.
The adults are just as excited
to see Kahli's work at Pacific City, Oregon.

Packaging

Her name was Emsie,
glued together from Emily and Kensey
her mother's two favourite names.

She helped us label and repackage soup
at the Oregon Food Bank.
A school trip before Christmas.

Her Grade 4 classmates managed
half the time emptying boxes,
labelling, repackaging, sealing

before boredom, dancing to music.
Emsie came to us, wanted to lift
the heavy weights, organise, be helpful,

Tell us about her life: mother takes care
of baby brother, works only Wednesdays.
Father: a shrug is all he's known for.

My job is to do good at school.
She stays committed, small for her age,
Pale skin deprived of sun and smiles.

Blonde hair lines of exclamation marks.
Only leaving do we realise: she's
packaging food for her own family.

Raw Absolutes

Walking to school we see her ahead,
something large and furry flopping
out of a sandwich of napkins. Shuddering
we run up to her, urgently tell her

to deposit her load: a dead pine marten,
head hanging out of its tender shroud.
Did she think it alive, a new pet?
No. She worried the birds would

plunder the Picture Book form.
She wanted to bring it school, find
a quiet burial spot in the Garden:
a homemade cross, penciled prayer.

Her autistic mind all raw absolutes.
Body deposited in a bush, we now
debate washing hands while wiping
down her well-done disappointment.

Belly Floppers

Record high July day in White Salmon.
The community pool pulsing with dares.
In the shallow end, boisterous boys
pump the air, cheer on braver buddies:
Belly flop! Belly flop! Belly flop!

Boys and one girl line the diving board.
Most jump in, feet zigzagging at odds.
Some, including the girl, pencil dive,
straight down, holding their noses.
A few take the challenge and plunge

arms wide, belly flopping, slapping
the water. One boy has plenty
of belly to flop. Cheers turn to cries
of splashing pain, wincing, groans.
Boys resurface and swim back.

They stagger back to the board,
red chapped chests, arms raised,
basking in the Coliseum glory.
This goes on for half an hour
until inevitability dive-bombs the fun:

a taller boy gets carried away, dives
too close to another and the teenage
guard whistles time, orders the miscreant
out to sit, crossed legged, time out,
the chanting dies down. The flops stop.

Stimulus

Stimulus cafe in Pacific City, Oregon.
The side-seating area invaded by
a family wanting a break from the sun:
A babushka and her two daughters
with a tagia of children, mostly girls.
Add a baby, two three-year-olds
playing *peek-a-boo* around the tables
as if the world was made of trunks.

They all really want hot chocolate.
The one boy wants *actual* chocolate, *only*
fair. Two older girls watch, comparing
whispered notes with American accents.
They go in and out of the toilet together,
nothing better to do. Both overweight
mothers wearing black: two tired faces
talk in stressed Russian, sipping coffee.

Grandmother nodding, not listening,
staring. Hot chocolate excites everyone,
even the boys - better than nothing.
The older girls return from the toilets.
The two toddlers abandon the table legs.
Everyone sips, slurps, stirs, spills, cries
out requests for more hot chocolate:
boys begs, toddlers wail, older girls sigh,

shaking heads. Mothers look at phones,
Agree - time's up. Coats, bags, babies.
The boys last of all. All leave in the same
many-tongued flurry as they arrived.

Shiva Moves

Three children appear
 built by Brahma's sandstone hands,
 sculpted from beautiful smiles, dark waves,
 skin loved by the sun. They follow
 us around the temple, like monkeys,
 laughing, playing along but sadly, we know
 the real game is coming. This is Shiva's
 temple: her story is written in exquisite
 detail in the stone lintels, hanging in humid
 air for over a millennia.

Shiva moves

first in the boy, the leader of the trio,
 Cambodian urchins for a sweaty Dickens
 and the boy is an Artful Dodger (of school).
 His smile sinks into dead-eyed distance,
 the voice lowers: 'give me dollar, give me dollar.'
 The demand has no *please*, no manners.
 Rebuffed, he flicks his head to the oldest girl
 who stands posing as tall as the silk cotton trees.
 Her stance tells of tragic street corner knowledge.
 Shiva whirls her arms and now her soul slips
 into temple dust: 'give me dollar, give me dollar.'
 Hand held out, head cocked to one side.
 The smallest child stands back, giggling,
 watching the show, learning.

We wonder on, trying to escape the children
 but the boy, the Lost Boy with his Neverland eyes,
 listens to Shiva's whispers and begins making
 fun. The older girl, driven by the Devas,
 dances close to us. She makes farting noises
 and jumps back. The demons in the stone
 reliefs applaud with crumbling hands.
 We put corners between us and they peer
 around. Shiva will not give in so easily.

A gasp. They scuttle back in time,
 a monsoon sky threatening above. Why?
 The three guards with *police* uniforms,
 the modern day protectors, Vishnu's finest,

counting the money hustled from tourists
for the VIP access, crossing the wire and into
Shiva's heart. We had declined them earlier,
the role-models for the youth who now slip
back in the mists and gloom, retreating
into the myth of their own childhood.

Back of a Bicycle in Berlin

She waves at her friend on the bus,
affection bustling. She boards
the back of a bicycle, holds on,
smiles a smile that lifts up the earth,
a Cheshire Cat in the cosmos,
reminding the void why being alive,
so happily alive in one moment
in a Wilmersdorf street in Berlin
is worth the millennia it took
for carbon molecules to travel
from ancient Supernova to smile
to back street in Berlin. She bolts
off into teenage years, bouncing
curbs, screaming, the cosmos proud.

On Rua Luciano, Lisbon

A car turns
onto Rua Luciano Cordeiro
and beeps get out of the way!
at a teenager - spiked hair, red
sweatshirt hood down. He makes
manly gestures, shouts in a deepening
voice, fiercely throws his water bottle
at the retreating car. The bottle titters
down the cobblestone road and
bounces boyishly off the rear bumper.
The teenager looks back, muttering,
flicks up his hood, shrinks into it.
The pedestrians, paused on the pavement
mid-crossing, have tennis heads,
looking left and right, at teenager and car.
Teenager, walking on now but still
looking behind, seeing if the car
or his boyhood's coming back to him.

His Master

The barn doors erupt and
out stutter two stallions
dragged by the farmer's teenage
daughters, tugging at the reins.

One horse trots on willingly.
One girl hops up and rides off.
The other rears up, kicks out,
turns back, but the older cowgirl

whips the reins, shouts, tugs
hard, tugs again, turns that lolling
head and rolling eye, refuses
to be beaten. She makes the horse

understand in taunt lines, slapped
flanks. Calmer, she climbs him,
strokes his mountainous head.
One last rebellion, he rears up,

but she's glued to her mission,
holds on, staples his belly
with thighs, piercing knees, hauls
his head, whispers into his ears,

reassures him that he's still the
power and the pride, still stallion
but she's his master, right now,
today, tomorrow, his master.

Gulping for Words

A group of teenagers ganged
up in exaggerated gestures,
hoods and low jeans, stream
down the street towards me.

I stay the course and the shoal
flows towards me, around me;
I'm submerged and surprised:
the teenagers are silent.

Deaf,

they gulp the air for words,
punch meaning with fists.
No signs to think them any less
teenage, any less indifferent of me.

Above the Traffic

We stumble up the steps from the congested, coughing road. Up to the Sky Train, the floating arm of concrete and steel that moves when the arteries underneath are blocked by Bangkok cholesterol.

A band is busking: teenagers from a local school, dressed in blue trousers and skirts and pristine white shirts. A girl is the lead singer; she sings confidently and with talent into the microphone, leaning into it like she is sharing secrets. A boy strums an electric acoustic guitar, head bowed. Another boy hammers an electric drum. A girl holds up a smartphone with the music score on it. Together, lost in music.

Other friends loiter while a larger group sit on the steps and applaud. We sit down and watch, letting the press of commuters pour around us, spilling along the different levels, stairs, elevators. Rain starts to fall, smearing the glass tube walkway with dirty tears. The girl sings and occasionally laughs like a tingling river, losing the flow of the lyrics. The band's bravery is infectious; they are entertaining the crowd after school when they surely have other homework to do.

We drop a few dripping coins into an open guitar case and that elicits a surprise from the entire band. They jump up, one by one, like reversing dominos and politely thank us, as if it's their first ever tip.