

Of All The Places

By Matthew James Friday



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Thanks, Mum, for the excellent proof-reading.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

“And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?”

Rumi

Held

Middle-aged woman with long black hair,
thin stem of a body
sunglasses on a grey day
stops to sniff roses outside
the Parish Church of the Holy Gospel,
bending each one down to her,
drawing in each offering
holding herself there
for seconds that smelt of years.

The Lambeth Walk

He doesn't appreciate the irony.

Bent over,
an inverted L
a right-angle of a man
shuffling down the street
snail pace and creaking.
For some reason he's
holding his trouser leg
above the ankle, swinging
it a little, perhaps to help
that side of his body move.
Old man muttering. He
moves so slowly, bent
over, an inverted L
a right angle of a man
doing the Lambeth
walk.

Banana Man on the Bakerloo Line, London

With the delicate, cautious care
of a first-time mother
reaching for her crying baby,
the man on the Bakerloo line train
tip-toes his fingers into his bag.
With surgical precision he extracts
a blackening, limp banana skin.
Not looking up once from his paper,
he sneaks his hand behind his back
and deposits the skin there.

Reading continues
as if nothing has happened,
just like the cigarette butt flickers,
the chewing gum spitters
the wrapping-paper discarders.
I should speak out, start a revolution
of responsible rubbish but
like the million of tongue-less
citizens, I just watch, and now
dump these words on this page.

Les Miserables

Outside the theatre playing *Les Miserables*
a coach splutters out Chinese tourists:
the adults hauling off bags, the children
hanging back, passive like the three bodies
huddled together, unseen, at the curbside:
one young woman nodding, her face lined
like an ancient mountain, a younger man
vacant and staring, between them the foetal
form of someone even younger, asleep
on cardboard. Everyone missing home.

The Wetherspoons Pub in Epsom, 11.32am

Time measured in pints,
sipped slowly by late
middle aged men;
one dotted at every table,
replicas of the same crumbling
form: hair line receding,
eyes emptying, conversations
stunted to grunted remarks
about newspapers read,
friends seen, pints drunk
between the unemployed hours
and the ache of not being wanted
by ex-wife, ex-boss, ex-life. Ex.

Outside St Anselm's Church, Tooting Bec, London

An elderly man coughs, retches, chokes
like a dog possessed by a demon. He growls
and phlegm hangs in a thick yellowy string
from pink-white lips. He holds his head,
rocks it as he jerks and coughs and chokes
and turns in circles and circles and stops,
not spilling the cup of coffee – maybe empty.
The congregation pour out, flow past,
not noticing, turned blind by habit, perhaps
or the light from St Anselm's raised hand.
Three boys ahead of their parents sing mockingly:
“Ar-men, men-Ar, Ar-men, men- Ar, Ar-men.”

Moon Rising Over Start Bay, 3rd March, 5,38pm

The evening yawns, stretching out cloudy arms on the tired horizon. The fluffy ends drip the last drops of the day onto the sea as the sun sinks, leaving a sense of settling. Seventeen minutes later the full Moon

appears above the clouds, rising slowly, a pale orange drunk recovering from last morning's fall. The surface of the sea is now metallic blue-grey, a wide mirror to reflect the pitted make up of the moon as she rises

into a sky. From the window of the Seaview Bed and Breakfast I watch that oddly large face opening, a vulnerable goddess gaining confidence, becoming brighter as the sky darkens. The time tips over 6pm and the sea

is now entirely grey, a silken bedsheet for the Moon to lay down her trembling reflection, orange torchlight made watery by the waves. She winks at me. I consider drowning in her. Now it is 6.25pm and the sky is drenched

in the dark blue of night, the sea's silk turning to heavy wool. The Moon is bright and her image shimmers on the thick water. I walk along Torcross beach, crunching the pebbles in the panting silence, admiring

her full, round beauty; I have never known such beauty before in my wi-fi, high-street, high-stressed out life. I have never heard what the sighing waves say to me now:

Do not forget her. Look for her again.

Djibouti Welcome

3am outside the Crown Plaza hotel in Cambridge:
two energetic East African youths are peering
through the dark glass of the front door, knocking

on the glass; unwelcome silence. No entry for them.
They are not trying to break in, not amateur burglars.
They want to get into the hotel to buy cigarettes.

They apologetically ask us for help, explaining that
they are from Djibouti. “We welcome everyone
but no one welcomes us. No one knows where it is.”

I vaguely know, picturing a dark nail of land
on the pointed thumb of Africa. I risk a guess,
they’re impressed. They warmly shake our hands.

I’m the first person in Cambridge, England perhaps,
who knows where their country is; who believes them.
For a few early morning minutes we are all friends.

We use our room number identity to let them in.
They buy cigarettes from the machines and melt
back into the middle class white Cambridge night.

Cheap Tricks

Near the Eiffel Tower, tourists
worn indifferent by cheap tricks,
hassled by North African salesmen
jingling chains of miniature Eiffels,
and three armed guards in red berets.
None of them notices the magician:
the handsome man-boy skateboarder:
Top Gun sunglasses, stubble, t-shirt
tight over his chest, wide arms finish
with bunched fists scuffing the ground,
propelling his leg-less body around
on the skateboard, past the jingling,
the touts, the tourists, the guards,
the towering trick of puncturing steel.

Blind Hunchback at Notre Dame

Outside the Notre Dame cathedral
a character comes to life: blind hunchback
hassling tourists, umbrellas shielding
from splattering sleet. One eye white,
the other rolled up to where angels point;
face scrunched up with suffering,
splashed by rain. A flurry of polite French
for every tenth tourist; the success ratio
perhaps, or talk more and there will be
complaints, the gendarmerie called.

The blind hunchback taps his white stick,
clicking off the damp paving stones,
striking a couple of legs – accident?
Revenge? Attention seeking. Inside
the cathedral the sea of tea-light eyes
flicker up to the distant ceiling, a chaotic
yellow dance more spiritual than stained
glass, prayer, choral humming, bibles.
Blind hunchback sees none of it,
just begs and hopes irony pays well.

Café Störchen

(Störchen means storks in German)

They sit stilled by middle
age, wealth, white blouses,
tight white jeans, rippling
white scarves, shawls. On

the *Limmat* river's edge
they sip coffee and cola,
staring at the water, waiting
for friends, husbands; some

tap out cigarettes, others
paint hard beak lipstick.
One has a Yorkshire Terrier
in a red tartan bag. Solar

panel sunglasses part wings
of fine black hair. She cradles
the dog, tickles it, kisses it,
whispers. Below, the *Limmat*

and small fish flit around,
unaware of the pair of swans
kicking out at the current,
trying to stay in the same place.

Orange Day Dream in Vaduz

Sweet dreams are made of this.

Who am I to disagree?

Travel the world and the seven seas.

Everybody's looking for something...

Damn the sarcastic guidebook:
the bus ride was worth dreaming;
bobbing between pointed peaks that
hush the gurgling Rhine out into the

current world. But the guidebook gets
me back. Vaduz is as empty as my sigh.
I take sleepy refuge in Café Amaan
where every chair is orange, where

hemisphere lampshades shower bright
light over the lonely, yawning mid-morning
customers: a woman in a red t-shirt,
whose vast body swings from side to

side. An elderly man is making a giant
glass of beer last until a waking hour;
and other aging men and women
stagger into their morning's coffee.

On the Liechtenstein radio channel, classic
pop-rock invites me to dream, to have
whatever I want, to believe I'm
simply the best. But, of course, there's rain.

Sweet dreams are made of this.

Who am I to disagree?

Travel the world and the seven seas.

Everybody's looking for something...

The Blind Beggars of the Lisbon Underground

Day 1

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Big blind man.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Rounded head a fleshy orb.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Call for contributions, oddly musical.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

“I am blind, I am blind,

I cannot work, please help me.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

A smell follows him.

Day 2

Evolution.

Now the blind man
is taller, much thinner and

tap, tap, tapety-tap.

A fork on his metal cane.

Tap, tap, tapety-tap.

But he doesn't sing
and no smell follows him.

No money either.

Day 3

He is she now.
She has no tap. No tune.
But she sings for help.
No smell, no money.
No one listens.

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.

5 Stars, China

Opposite the Garden hotel –
the only 5 star hotel in Guangzhou,
the boast – a man lying on the ground,
limbs like skewered steak, tenderising
the dirt-patterned pavement with his fists.
Local people stroll by, blind to angry begging
but shocked tourists stare. Above beat
the bats, the blinking skinny wings
of bats, circling in dark holes, looking
for an early meal in a smoggy grey sky.
The stars cannot be seen.

Lisa in the Toilet

We meet in the toilet
of a bar in Guangzhou, China.
I recognise that smiley frown instantly:
Paris, six years ago.
You don't remember me.
I was one of many, I know
surprised how small you are.
But what would your father say?
Would he be proud
that you have travelled so far?
Would he sigh sadly,
regret letting you leave Italy.
Would he ask for royalties
for this miniature copy of you
stuck to the side of cistern,
part of an incomprehensible advert.

Prostitutes and Sesame Seeds

At the quiet end of Soi 4,
the hushed end of seedy Bangkok
where the old men creep
away from fruitful bars
with their young, giggling
paid-for complimenting companions,
hoping to slip them into hotels.
Here is a softly lighted private spot;
a pharmacy whose normal business is
selling contraceptives to grandfathers
roleplaying *Little Red Riding Hood*
with daughters of other fathers.
Today the pharmacy owner smiles
properly, not politely. My fiancée,
Jill, has bought a packet
of peanuts and sesame seeds.
"My family make them. Mostly
the taxi drivers eat them.
All day long. They love them.
I hope you like them."
So happy to sell a packet,
have a conversation,
see a tourist with other interests.

Keeping it Up in the Air

Her job,
hour after hour after hour,
is to keep a toy drone hovering
above the disinterested heads of passengers

in Guilin airport terminal, China. The toy:
a pink plastic fairy with a helicopter dress
that spins with a buzzing magic
bobbing up and down, sea sick and bored.

Bobbing back down, the woman holds
out her hand, gently encouraging the drone,
tickling it back up into the air to hover, buzz,
attract a crowd that doesn't care.

She is not alone.
Three or four women do the same
the length of the departure lounge,
looking up at the pink plastic,

hoping we do the same.

Guangzhou

Welcome to the city cave,
stalagmites of steel and concrete,
we all fossilise inside
or melt outside in acidic rain.

Endless beeping, lights that gigolo
the night, bouncing purple light
off low cloud or suffocating smog;
you give up trying to know which.

Wear a mask, soldier on. From
a distance that city looks entombed.
Commuting meets archaeology,
you chisel your way home, down

through damp layers of your chest.
Aching head, sore eyes, screaming
alveolus. Think of the residents,
the real victims. Progress is lung cancer.

Uprooted

We visited Borneo to see Orangutans,
to be amazed by everything we are losing,
irreplaceable rainforest trees; the people
of Pangkalan Bun uprooted by us all.

The young man arriving suddenly on
his bicycle, urgently practicing English
while we squatted in the heat outside
our hotel, opposite his uncle's bike shop.

The waving children huddled in huts
on the banks of the malaria ridden river,
diving in, dispersing the garbage,
staring at us with rising sun-lit smiles.

The boys who clambered on fences
to rise as tall as me, begging me
to play football on the muddy field
so they can beat a sweating English giant.

The teenage girls in coloured headscarves,
all giggles, taboo-breaking handshakes,
crowding around, taking *groupie* pictures
on smartphones of a wandering white man.

Pickled Onion Flashback

In an Ibis hotel in Semarang, Indonesia
flung as far from home as I have ever been.
Relief in a jar of supermarket pickled onions,
a prize worthy of Argonauts. I crunch
into the first pale bulb, the tang of vinegar
peels back the memories of childhood
reminding me of my Dad's advice –

*eat them from top to bottom,
not sideways, the centre might shoot
out and stick in your throat
and choke you to death.*

I gorge on the onions, on memories
of the dinner table and Dad salivating
over the sharpest ones. We eyed out
the biggest but he always forked them,
claiming Fatherhood Rights, a manly mouth.
I could wrestle the medium sized ones
out of his grip with a Herculean effort,
until, a teenager, I claimed onion equality
and we took turns, like grown-ups

Now I take the biggest ones from the jar
and miss having Dad to offer it to, his
decline a sign of full maturity. These imports
are pathetically small, soft, not worthy
of any debate. I am still grateful to
peel back layers and find Dad
at the centre with a warning and a wink.

Zhujiang Rude Boys

In England we called them Rude boys:
revved-up young men roaring
around town centres, windows wound
down, music blaring, sawn-off
exhausts gunning impatience.

Zujiang New Town, Guangzhou
has Rude Boys racing luxury cars
with import tax tags worth ten times
their cost, using the empty streets
of the early hours, the barking

engines echoing through tightly
nested concrete towers, *I am rich,*
so much richer than you, as bars vomit
out expats and exhausted Trade Fair
visitors gulping down fumes, envy.

The Guangzhou Dancer

For just a few seconds
but I can still see her
dancing alone, arms held stiff, high,
holding her invisible lead.
A departed husband, an imaginary partner.
She dances, turns, arms still held high
amongst the other ballroom dancers,
circling a statue of a grey-green couple,
arm-in arm in an outdoor oval dance hall,
roofless, under Dongxiao Road Bridge.
The dancers follow the music,
the lapping, watery music; old-age
partners, some just friends; everyone
forgetting their concrete coffins,
unaware of onlookers, overhead traffic,
anything else. Just dancing.

No Beeping

At a Hong Kong island
crossroad normal
traffic abnormal man
rickety jiggers
to the curb
whole gait
shaking
right leg
stuck
out straight
left leg wobbling
so much
earthquaking
rusty iron
about to snap
knees shattering
walking stick with
four toes

touches down
hard
hard
hard
hard
while he jiggers
shunters
shakes
every bone
trying to break
across the road
cars wait
no horns
no beeps
too painful
an ice age
passes
then he does.

Football Not Breakfast

So now I understand
why my wife talks to strangers,
scooping out secret life stories
from soul shells
in tiny bites of time.

In a microwave-size elevator
of an Ibis hotel in Hong Kong,
a small man smiles, greets me,
asks if I am going to breakfast.
I nod, gulp and make my wife proud.
Are you? Two words to prize
the shell open. As the lift slowly
counts down, he offers his pearls:
an engineering intern visiting for three weeks
today invited by friends to play football,
so no, no breakfast for him.
A minute later we part
as warmly as found friends.

But I am an amateur at this game.
I don't dig out the most easily
mined jewels: his name,
the country he is from.
I am embarrassed to just say 'Africa'.
But I have panned enough nuggets
to keep me at the riverside.

Pink Dolphins

I did not appreciate -
screaming across the Hong Kong bay waters,
on an unlicensed ten dollar tour
boat arcing at an accident-prone gradient,
driver grinning, black teeth and gaps,
throttling for fun, father in the front
panicking, grabbing hold of yelling children,
this soon-to-be fatal fairground ride -
how rare they are now.

Pink dolphins,
as pink as chewy kid candy,
sexist toy branding given to girls,
the pink of all things pretty. So playful,
they leap, belly flop, flap flippers
around the boat, making us forget
the journey out and *awwww* in wonder
until they duck under the oily water
and disappear into coming extinction.

The boat revved, captain chuckling.
We returned even faster, the cutting
angle coughing up grey wave foam.
My gripping pink knuckles bleached
as I prayed for land. So relieved to arrive
legs wobbling as I tottered off, cursing
the captain, unaware of the luxury,
the lowering count every time
they resurface.

Anything Unusual

An Indonesian Starbucks, Semarang,
sheltering from the welting heat,
the heave of flying across the Java Sea,
over tropically piled cloud pillows,
fears of air safety, arriving in traffic
spinning city centres, hustled
by well-meaning university students
politely demanding to speak English,
disgusted that we resist, worrying
it's some kind of scam. Instead,
the scam of coffee prices but
at least that frothy familiarity. Sitting
opposite a group of teenage girls,
hair covered in scarves the colours
of the chemically preserved cakes,
all on smartphones and laughing
at the same time, in two worlds.
A third one erupts: menstrual blood
spilling into the dress of one girl.
All her friends rise, a tornado of care,
whirl around her, block prying eyes
and whisk her away, heels clicking.
Ten minutes later, coffee not cooling,
they return, friend cleaned up, fresh
clothes magically appeared. They sit
down and continue laughing, being
on their smartphones, waving away
the idea this was anything unusual.

Under a Blue Sky

Unlikely to be found outside
with the grey huff of mainland China
coughing up history and tropics.

So instead, head in
to the Venetian, the world's biggest
casino, and the pretend Venice:

shallow golden canals
complete with singing Gondolas
who charge to punt

up and down the golden water
bordered in high class boutiques
topped with historical awnings;

mime artists, dazzled tourists.
Above, the pretend blue sky
smeared with light cloud,

brilliant blue. In the heavens,
the chiming casino,
endless pretend.

Danny Silver Man

The co-owner of Green Garden Cafe
in Ping'an, Guangxi. A man who served
with a thousand "sorries", as if just
appearing at the table needed apologies.

The man who laughed at the start
and end of every sentence. Giggling
his new kind of grammar. As cheerful
as the barn sparrows gliding, swooping,

he scuttled around, always in a rush
for us, his only customers, while his wife
shopped online. For his amazing spring rolls,
vegetables folded with a desire to please;

the smoothest coffee, banana pancakes
with only apple because there isn't enough
bananas, he says. Mojito amazingly minus
the rum - *I get distracted. So sorry! So sorry!*

He promised rum every time we saw him,
returned to him, his smiles as refreshing
as the rain that quickly clouded the view
of ancient rice terraces, mountains, China.

But not Danny, a man lined in silver.

Dead Geese Hanging

A public tantrum in a wet market;
this couple is fresh in China.

She insists they search for
something, probably British:

tin of baked beans, recognisable
shampoo. Boyfriend is busting

with swell of the heat, fruit
fantastically overpriced, smog

clouded eyes, apartment blocks
a new Babel. He throws arms up,

voices rising, a sub tropical row
ignored by locals, just as invisible.

He orders her to look for herself.
He has had enough. Standing

protest, falls silent. She stomps
off towards the caged chickens,

bubbling tanks of fish rolling
over each other for space.

He sighs, head wilts, slouches.
Behind him dead geese hanging,

three bald yellow heads knowing
what all chicks can't escape.

The Declaration

"They don't teach English," she declares hovering above the glass cabinet like an unheard exclamation mark. "They teach *literature* but not how to read or speak. Grammar." She lectures openly to the mumbling masses in the exhibition in the British Library about the Magna Carta, the Great Charter. "I mean the good schools. Not *low class*. Good. They can't read *it*. They can't!" The *it* is the Declaration of Independence, the Jefferson copy, there to show influences through the centuries. "Uhuh," mutter two fellow American tourists in go-away embarrassed agreement, heads down, trying to read. "They come to America, those immigrants. Can't speak any English! So how can they read this?!" The ageing punctuation speaks louder, talking over her own history: immigrant ancestors spilt from Europe's overflowing cup, older voices, a thousand before, stepping back together to an Africa origin. Her trapped students laugh a little, hoping for the bell to ring. "If it was up to me - handwriting and grammar. Just like this." She stabs full stops on the glass with the urgency of King John's barons. Her views, a mild poison in our ears. Earlier she had regaled about the beauties of Pennsylvania, apologised for obstructing the view (but not moving). Now she finishes with a few mumbles, shuffling out of the Library, into London, that soup of stirred languages and evolving English, her footsteps leaving no fossils.

Just Lost Children

Two days after Christmas and the cheer has left
the driver of Bus 35 from Downtown, Portland.
Two young Japanese tourists tenderized into inaction
by the driver's beating insistence, voice rising,
repetition the only strategy. *Your app is wrong.*
It's wrong. Ladies, listen. It's w-r-o-n-g! Passengers
laugh in shared shock, Rosa Parks rising
to offer her seat, but only my wife Jill helps,
bridging the gap of a tiny percent of genetics
that justified internment camps, atomic revenge.
Jill acts as intermediate, speaking no Japanese,
offering a kind voice, enthusiasm, the fairy magic
the softens monsters and makes heroes out of hermits.
Problem suddenly fixed, the journey continues,
the two Japanese students thankful in high pitched
delighted voices of children, just lost children.

Coyote Running

A sudden, sneaking glimpse
of that iconic animal, scuttling
along the roadside, dodging
under a fence on the edge
of the Warm Springs reservations,
heading towards the White Man's world
of oversized trucks and smartphones.
This is enough to know Coyote.
His name drips with stories,
footprints dusted with myths,
panting tongue soaks up omens.
For a few fleeting seconds
I run with Coyote and become...

Smiles Out of Kernels

Buying sugared almonds from a stall
at Náměstí Republiky in Prague,
my wife effortlessly unshells
the salesman's story, cracking up
because he's from *Ah Venezia!*
Born in Naples, worked in Venice,
then north, north to Sweden, now
Prague, London next. Selling nuts
here to tourists shivering in Autumn's
early encasing. Vague on the details:
the visas, the truth of drifting, serving
tourists barely grateful for just a few
snatching seconds. At least my wife
asks questions to crack the monotony,
and get smiles out of kernels.

Cemetery Run in Prague

We run through the Olsany cemetery
in Prague under a sky of yellow leaves,
yellow and orange splashed path,
wet black bark and wet black gravestones.

The names of the Czech deceased,
glorious consonants. No language needed
to read the universal loss of over
a million people. Google will tell you

the names of those searchable:
playwrights, poets, actors, the student
Jan Palach who burned himself
in Wenceslas Square to blow away

the Russians. Most of the million are lost
and cannot be found on a computer,
alongside yellow and orange splashed paths,
wet black bark and wet black gravestones.

Joplin's Reminder in Prague

The lonely piano standing between
the balcony and the *change* counter
at the *Hlavní Nádraží* train station.
People studying the departure board.

Suddenly it sings: Scott Joplin's
The Entertainer, happiness in chords.
Programming interrupted, waiting
people awaken, confused, smiling.

A tall bald man on the piano plays
hurriedly, a train to catch, perhaps.
Joyous notes bounce around the balcony,
lifting, cajoling, reminding the robots.

Then it's over, I applaud. No one else.
Within seconds the music is gone,
the tall bald man melts, we are back
to trains, checking time, automatons.

All the Eating

She is the Cronos
of the tiny plaza restaurant.

She spills
out of her seat, over
leaning shopping bags
placed to be seen.

She spews
smoke undeterred by coughs,
from closeby tables
stares, shaking heads.

Complains about the wine.
Bring me another then!
Nail tapping on the new
bottle crackling in ice.

Next to her, the prince
of Florence on his i-phone,
flicking back blonde hair,
not looking up, not eating.

She does all the eating
for everyone.

Charity in Rome

You hear the operatic voice
before you see the bulging eyes,
head rolling as notes defeat muscles,
twisted fingers interlaced like tensely
bound rope, foot keeping time
by squashing a plastic ball.
No one notices: going to work,
visiting the sites, beeping past.

On our your way back,
the pavement in front of her
is blocked by three orange-coated
charity hawkers, profiling the gullible,
clawing for an audience
that always ends in direct debits.
The view of her now blocked
but her voice rises above it all.

Smokers in Chemnitz

The bus back from Nuremburg
stops at Chemnitz, industrial city
of East Germany – once Karl Max Stadt
in the years of walls, ears, *Stasi* fears.

The bus spews out the smokers:
a cross-section of East Germany,
from teen to *oma*, all standing stuck
on spots, cigarettes hurriedly sucked,
no words spoken, no eye contact,
no secrets exchanged in the smoke,
the heavily-kneaded clay of every face
chewing over thick, quiet thoughts.

Driver says five minute break over.

Every cigarette correctly deposited,
the bin steams in rank approval.

The bus rocks as the smokers board,
and we leave, silence lingering.

The Dresden Hare

Almost midnight, the stars say.
The snow has stained into memory.
Hurrying home from a party
my wife hears a rustling, squeezes
me, scared and we see something
rabbit-like lolloping through a hedge,
but massive, like a monstrous mass
from a childhood nightmare. Ears
large and lolloping, back legs like oars.

A hare.

Our first ever
sitting still, grey in the night, still
the stunning stars above Dresden,
the still skateboard park usually
clanging with kids, teens, scuffed
knees, bike tricks. Sitting, waiting
for us to accept it is a phantom
and float off, over tramlines, roads,
the many dusted roofs of the winter-
stilled city centre, snuggle back
into dreams of furry legends.

Snow Strain

In the centre of Seefeld, home of
Winter Olympics and Nordic skiing,

an elderly Muslim woman begging,
arm outstretched, cardboard cup in hand

face down to the snow-strained
ground, a praying mime artist

in any other tourist spot in the world,
except for the snow, falling in sighs.

Diagonally opposite, outside a café,
a middle aged woman with high dyed

hair, wrapped up in possibly fake fur,
coffee steaming, a fashion magazine,

splayed open like amateur's skis, a smile
of icy contentment, eyes frozen over.

Art Stops at the Border

From Dresden to the Polish border
a troupe of university students
and their grinning arts professor perform
on the train, zig-zagging body length
mirrors, step by step down the carriage,
entombing a young woman hooded
and cloaked like a superhero, carrying
a fictional blood-red country flag.

The professors politely asks us to pull
our feet in so the artists can safely
shuffle by, make their point repeatedly
about migrants, assimilation, hiding
all the way to Wroclaw, three hours
of art. At the border, the guards change.
The small, sweating beer-fat man
leaves and is replaced by a sour tongue

woman, face carved with steppe winds,
standard of living slashed by geography.
She immediately orders *Stop! No, not
on this train, not here. Not safe. Blocking.*
They ask her to speak in English. *Nein.*
Barked German commands, explanations
in angry Polish. The English she later
uses on us, a gift to rule follows. Art over.

The professor laughs. Such a circus!
Now they must sit squashed for hours,
mirrors reflecting unexpected irony
as we roll through stations with sagging
sheds, boarded-up buildings, the fields

freshly green and damp, young birch
woods, so much empty space and a late
autumn only just allowed entry.

I Stand at the Vistula

Frozen in thoughts,
encased in premature winter,
stillier than the river,
dozing ducks, swans eyeing
up a milky white mate.

Stare at me, tourists, wondering
will I jump in the river,
cry, shout, a mad woman
stoned by tragic tectonics.
I snap, turn and head back

into the Old Town to melt
into cobbled nothingness,
nothing more than a few
lines in a poem for those
who saw me in Krakow.

Dog Walking in Krakow

Tail between his legs,
back legs stiff with fear
he faces the stairs. Behind
his owner wrapped in age
and sighs, tiled hard by too
many tourists. She rams
his rump so he staggers up,
whimpering all the way home.

In the Drogerie Bistro

Erfurt, Germany

He sits in the window, his window,
staring out into his evening. His past
pictured on laminated boards by
the entrance: a middle aged man,
snapped with smiling personalities,
actors, musicians. *High Society*, says
a young man leaving, pointing
at a picture. *This is you?* He gets up
slowly, creaks over to the board,
studies so memory and eyesight agree,
nods confirmation, sits back down,
stares out of the widow, his window
in his bistro, a converted pharmacy.
His portrait hangs on an opposite
wall, smiling as retirement is served.

Trashy Wedding

Assembling outside the Hofkirche,
becoming part of the baroque skyline
that Canaletto loved to paint,
the wedding party with balloons,
a hundred or so lime-green wishes
of everlasting love for the couple.

On command they release the balloons,
which float up in a bulbous flock,
confusing the resident hawk in the spire
of the Hofkirche; slowly line up
to the outstretched hands of
saints and philosophers struck dumb

in blackened stone on the church
roof; bob up above the Old Town
into a blue-grey storm clouds
to be blown beyond Dresden,
join in almost everlasting toxic
happiness with other plastic lovers.

Better Words

When you're traveling on a tram,
yawning with evening's end
and fishing around for change,
trying to buy a ticket home,
realizing you don't have enough
but hoping to find a bronze miracle
in the belly of your coat pocket,
a man shoots up and approaches,
a young man from East Africa,
you guess, those sandy springs
in his hair, smile made of slow
cooked soil, speaking in broken
German, you assume he wants
something when in fact he gives,
depositing money into the machine,
you watch amazed as two euros
thirty chunk in, choking up shame,
out churns a ticket, you offer
him a fist full of change to prove
you are not cheating him, tiny
coins adding up to the right amount
but not accepted in the machine,
now not accepted by him, a kind
wave to you and he sits down
with his other young friends,
giggling over smartphone games,
you stand the whole way stunned
that someone so foreign to you
with so much less could be so
much more, so leaving the tram
you wave goodbye and thank again
to be sure of that miracle,

he smiles back, a full-milk smile
of a young person with hope.

Carefully Cutting

Across the open courtyard,
in a halo of yellow light,
the old woman sits
eating her lunch, carefully
cutting apart her meal,
making the most of each
morsel, chewing over what
has been: children, husband,
parents just a faint taste,
nothing to say, eating alone
under a yellow light.

Later

she shuffles past windows,
a flickering image on film,
a grainy reflection
of my wife without me.

Old East German Man

In the basement of our apartment,
an old man slowly decants rubbish bags
into recycling bins. He shuffles back
to the elevator, right foot sloping
in that italicized signature of a stroke.
I peer down at his bald, blotchy
head and hearing aid. I guess, 70,
imagine him wailing his first breath
as the fire bombing gulped Dresden
Days later he's playing in the rubble,
kicking dusty bricks as footballs.
Becoming a man in a grown-up
secret police state, separation
shaped as Socialism. Then confused
by that blundered fall of the Wall,
wondering what comes next: bright
adverts, too much choice, smart
phones and young people identical
to the children of those he was once
divided from. Now he ambles out
of the elevator, mumbling thanks
to me, an English immigrant, grandson
of a man who aimed a tank's turret
at his father or uncle, Germany.

Check-Out Time

The breakdown begins in the fruit aisle. Suddenly an old man staggers on the spot, legs crumbling, hand shaking. His wife steadies him, drags his hand to grip a shelf. Continental resistance but she is stoic, no panic, no call for help, steadily there while he crumbles.

We continue shopping unsure if this is a sudden attack or some degenerative tragedy. Wife still saying nothing. A middle aged couple intervene, hook the old man like a carcass and carry him to the check out.

I hover, wanting to help, paralyzed by poor German, unable to understand that they want a chair. I interrupt the beeping cashier and ask for help – phone – Ambulance. *Hilfen!* Bells ring, staff scuttle, someone brings a chair over. The old man slowly unfolds, his wife a stony guardian. He sits pumping still active legs, an engine on overdrive, his face crumpled in embarrassment, pain, humiliation.

We continue shopping.

Three On One

The harbour wall of Stralsund is packed
under bullying Baltic clouds, the April sun
chased under the arm of the Fatherland.
Three generations of fishers squash
together like sardines, lashing lines ribbed
with silvery snatches, Tugging rods back,
nudging luck a little. A miracle no lines tangle.
A middle aged man calmly unhooks
a silver fish, smaller than his hand,
then bangs the thumb size head three times
hard on the lip of his fish bin. Tossed down
dead, mouth agape at being moments ago.
A boy cries in delight: "Opa! drei auf einmal!"
Grandfather! Three on one! Three on one!
Then stares in wonder as his suffocating
catch slap themselves on the ground.
Wrists flick, lines zip, silver weights hang
dead, some men start to pack up, leave,
bait bins bounce off cobbles, rattling
with disappointment. The wind gangs up
with flatfish cloud and the day slowly dies.

A Different Toy

I see the gun first:
a blackened Kalashnikov type
in the hands of a boy,
rocking it from side to side

as his family cheerfully cross
Piazza San Michele in Lucca,
once a Roman Forum filled
with centurions and slaves.

Father smiling as if in a dream,
mother staring up at the blazing
white walls of the church
of San Michele in Foro, two

siblings skipping along beside.
The young recruit looks as serious
as any Paradise-promised terrorist
tensing for a tourist massacre.

Silent Comedy

Father and son both dressed as Charlie Chaplin.
waddling past the cafe, stop, a twirl
of opportunity and they waddle over,
begging cup tingling under every nose.
Nobody knows their farce: how long it took

to wash off the dust and blood, memories
of fractured cities, sights blasted
into memory. Now two poorly painted
faces: felt-tip side burns and moustaches.
Why Chaplin? Does the boy know him?

At the last table a spit of angry German
from the tattooed young woman, ending
in *Deutschland!* The father Chaplin calmly
breaks a vow of silence, thanks Germany,
tugs his son onwards, cane twirling.

Deaf and Blind

Outside a mundane shopping mall
in Dresden a moment of magic:
yellow leaves swirling in senseless
circles, concentric confusion
around the feet of two bald, gesturing
men, talking in voice-less gulps,
deaf to the quiet vortex under
their feet; every other shopper blind.

I Will Never Go to Perth

Great Auntie Doll died
in a nursing home in Perth,
a dicky heart upturned by news
her son Harry, injured in a bike
accident in Thailand, unlikely

to walk again. I always planned
to go Down Under: swing by Doll's
nursing home, hear stories of
immigrating in the 1950's with
with husband Harry and baby Harry

on a 10 pound one-way ticket,
A Better Life. A few months later,
Harry elder smashed into infinity
by a land-train truck, no chance.
Doll depending on neighbour, Fred,

later marrying, another son, another
chance to re-start life. Years later,
Fred refused to attend his step-son's
tropical wedding to his Thai love.
Arm-crossed defiance his whole life.

I'd travel: Ayer's rock, the Bush,
kangaroos and koalas, say hi to
Sydney and its sights, but now
Mum's last link to her father
is gone. The boat won't pick me up.

Never Left

I call Berlin home
but when called back
I make the same assumption:
I know my home

like the back of my hand.
But this hand
is too lined, older.
I turn it over

as I am turned over
by the same streets
I think I recognize.
I mislay my bearings

long enough to be
young again.
My compass is spun
ninety degrees east

confused by radioactive
memory. A giddy tourist,
I turn to the map,
find the city blurring

sounds of the underground,
street names like siblings,
even the fonts
are family,

lining for my nest.
That wall snaking across

my hand, older,
more lined.

My home never fully
known, always returned
to afresh from warmer
climates, never left.

Scraping the Gutter

We see him every Friday.
on his knees, pulling up
the metal gutter grate
dividing the casino
from the kebab shop
and the fake gun shop,
digging out cigarette butts
with specially made tools:
fine tooth hook, soft
brushes, a collection pan.
No dentist, no gold nuggets,
not what he dreamed of.

Adult Play in Berlin

A rare thing in a city resisting:
a cafe that offers wifi. Silence.

The e-junkies all tapped into
elsewheres, chunky power packs

slapped down like foundation stones
for a New World Order. Rapid ticking

thumbs, barely blinking, faces
sucked into the screen, sitting inside

or outside. Only hushed talking
from those not converted, embarrassed

to use Old School voices not fingers.
The waiter struggles out a smile,

a few words of an old alphabet
as he feeds the addicted *flamkucken*.

At the end of the street, the Freidrichshain
Volkspark, screams of playing children.

The Journey We Cannot Join

We met in the city park in May
on her great grandson's first birthday.

She spoke a few nodding words of English,
us no Danish, but she added more

with handshake, smiles. Half an hour
later we parted like long lost family:

many handshakes, a little more English,
hugs, tears rolling down her cheeks,

with her stammering words, she said
she loved meeting us, *really* loved.

She knows she won't see us again,
not as herself, with this greying clarity.

Her mind will have travelled by then.
Already she is confused about Alaska.

Are we going with her? She is going
on the journey we cannot join.

Poems from Poole Hospital

In late 1999 I spent some weeks on an Elderly Care ward volunteering as a resident poet. I talked to the elderly patients and noted down their stories. I then wrote poems about their stories and gave the poems back to them.

All the subjects of the following poems have now died, along with most of their generation: the children and young people from the middle of the last century. The following poems have been edited a little here and there over the years, but the stories remain exactly as told to me. I hope my poems can properly honour these people and the privilege I had of knowing them, albeit for a short time.

Daddy Boat

Baby Anna in the bath.
Born out of wedlock. Her head
burned before the baptismal.

The water dribbled down her back.
She giggled through the radio weather report,
playing with her toy boat. Her Daddy Boat.

Her Daddy on the last convoy for Russia.
Not every U-Boat had been found.
The Last Convoy. The phrase stunk of tragedy.

Then news came. Anna fell quiet.
How could she have known?
Her Mummy turned the sound up, slowly,

so as not to ripple the bath water.
His boat, HMS Somalia. Struck. Smashed.
Sunk. All hands lost.

Three days Mummy wept.
Little Anna wailed. Left alone in the water,
like her Daddy in the ice-cold Arctic.

Then a telegram arrived.
It took a lifetime to open.
Baby Anna stopped crying and waited.

He was safe. He had found a lifeboat.
Saved fifty friends. Due for a medal.
Daddy was coming home.

Help, Help, Help!

Drawn to Paris, 1939
by the scent of something silky.

Sucked slowly up the Seine
into the city's soft sheets.

David's thirst for life
dried the bistros and nightclubs.

He was a proper writer now,
His hand hurried by inspiration.

He never stopped to question the fact:
so many Poles in Paris all of a sudden.

It finally hit him in a letter:
orders from his own Fuhrer.

A war had started in Europe.
There was no ignoring it now.

David's calling changed.
Before he could kiss Paris goodbye

he was off to Singapore, a Signalman.
His wordly hand tapping

Help, help, help!

Big Keith and Big Tom

“I been ‘ere forty years, I reckon,”
says Big Keith the fattening fisherman as
he flicks his hook and whore-dangle out
over the river. A plop and sigh as it sinks into

grey-green silk. “Never caught him yet,
never will, I reckon.” Big Keith sighs thinking
about Big Tom, the monster pike, so
fat the river mud folds over him; his rare

movement changes currents. For forty years
now, casting out and hoping. Sundays spent
trying to catch Big Tom, eating sandwiches,
reading the paper, dreaming of the day.

Any weather: wind, rail, hailstones so heavy
they shoot holes in his fishing tent and scatter
the maggots. For a chance to catch the river Moby,
slap him down on the grass, marvel at his jaws.

“Reckon the Misses don’t mind. Good
to get me out of the house,” says Big Keith.
His line tugs. The rod wobbles. “Jesus bloody
Mary!” Big Keith kicks over his can, the ale

trickling thick and frothy through the grass,
dripping off the riverbank and into the water,
all the way down to where Big Tom sits sniggering
at the sight of Big Keith’s line snagged on a trolley.

Like Rabbits

Jack lays
 on his hospital bed
and thinks back

Four generations.
“I’ve started something now.”
Children of children of children.

He counts his grandchildren.
I ask their names.
Now he struggles.

“There’s so many. Like rabbits.”

Jack is amazed, every day.
“My children. Pensioners!”
He shakes his big, blotched head.

“I still feel like I’m fourteen.”
Jack laughs, remembering games played,
doors knocked on, windows smashed,

witches found in overgrown gardens.
A long time ago, remembered
but not his grandchildren’s names.

City Feet, Sea Soul

Legs of concrete, city feet
smelling of fast food, car farts.

The bob of any boat
could sink Mary's stomach

but something of the spirit,
the freedom, a sail billowing

like her bloomers on the line.
She was called over the line,

over hundreds of suburban
gardens

to Oban.

A chartered boat, learning to sail
with other sea virgins, the grizzled

captain giggling at his cubs. Two
weeks around the Isle of Skye,

being sick over the side, shouted
at by the Captain, tossed around

her bed like a bad book, mouth
frothy with salty thoughts.

The time of her life.

Cold Feet

Feet were her life long fascination.
Fiona studied them, microscopically;
knew any friend by their feet.

A stranger met – foot first, please.
“Life is printed in the feet.”
An expert on the little differences:

crinkled ridges, vein valets, knuckled
lumps. “You can cure any illness,”
Fiona said as she knitted socks.

“It’s just a matter of knowing where
to press, which toe to tweak.”
Some straight, some twisted, some

sore. Little brittle twiggy toes,
fat and heavy hoof toes.
“I know, I know,” Fiona said

beginning a new pair of socks.
“But you’ve got to have a hobby.
So many people have cold feet.”

Cycle On

Eighty years on a bike.
Thousands of miles of fleeting hills,
flashing rivers, woods whipping past.
Snatched time every Sunday.

Six days a week he worked:
bricklayer and builder from boy
apprentice to master craftsman.
Six days a week but Sunday was his

to race across Purbeck, unzipping
fields, outstripping the wind, flicking
out the sea's secrets hidden in coves,
reaching horizons before any cloud.

He found a wife who liked cycling.
Trophies busied the mantelpiece,
polished with passion, placed
in the space of missing family photos.

When he retired, his business bought,
he brought a brand new bike: twenty
gears, suspension, tandem seats
so that they could both buzz about,

two bees causing chaos in the traffic
shouting like teenagers, legs out,
trousers flapping, years retreating.
Eighty years on a bike.

Tips For Sarah

“You’re a saucy one,” he said grinning,
his hands snaking behind her back.
“I’ve got a tip for you,” he slimed.
And here’s one for you, Sarah said,
slapping him hard and storming off.

London stank of fog and sticky hands.
Sarah was sick of the cigarette butts,
knifing traffic that tried to slice her.
Go to Bournemouth, her angel told her.
The sands are clean. The people nice.

The sea calm. Sarah never left a note.
Father too drunk to read it, Mother too
pregnant again to pick it up, to care.
No bad tempered bacon and eggs, Dad.
No more tears around the teapot, Mum.

*I want to go where women don’t swear,
where you don’t get ketchup in your hair.*
Took a slow train south through buttery
hills and toasted trees, tops browned off.
Got a job on the first day, never looked back.

From waitress to café owner in ten years.
Fried herself up a sizzling young man,
cracked out a couple of kids. Thoughts
of a family left in London. *I miss you,
Mum. You to, Dad. I wish you were here.*

Sarah named her café, *Pride of London*.
Finally wrote home. Dad had died:
coughed up his last in a late-night gutter.
Mum bubbled down, squeaking about
seperation. Reunited around the teapot.

Her Ace

Back and forth between lousy London
and lively Liverpool, shuttled between
the bombs, rallied by two distant aunts,
neither pleased to see her, false smiles.
Making do for the King and Country.

Margaret's only comfort was a tennis
racket. Up against the wall for hours
on her own, *thwack, thwack, thwack*,
smacking away the lonely years
until in peace she could move back

to lousy London but living in Wimbledon,
serving strawberries on the courts,
dreaming all day, practising all weekend.
Thwack, thwack, thwack. The man who
returned the serve became her fiancé.

He had contacts. Got a ring on her finger
on the promise of one game with a Champ.
He was ready to beat her, a hint of rain.
Margaret serves, he returns, rain holds;
In the last set a dream come true: a return

volley smashed home. An ace! The Champ
amazed. Margaret loses but the fiancé brings
strawberries, his lips juicy with red kisses.
On her wedding day the Champ sent a card:
no ace next time, and a brand new racket.

In That Eye

Fattest kipper ever hauled out of Poole Harbour.
Flaps as it slaps down on the sand. Fisherman
Fred sits back and sighs for a weekend's weary
work. He looks down at the gagging kipper. In
that upturned eye the past bulges back: bobbing

tugs and barges in Dunkirk bay, the drone
of the bombers, squashed sailors all flapping
kippers. The whiz of bombs falling, explosions,
blood milking the sea red. Zipping bullets, panic
drowning everyone. No one survived unharmed.

The kipper blinks and the memories leap
forward to happier times: fruit farms
in New Zealand, tender lamb on the table,
five young women as guests, smiling shyly,
their mother whispering to him, *take your pick*.

Blink and now the fisherman is on sea again,
leaving Trinidad, teaching the ship's parrot
to swear at the Parson when he came for tea.
The joy of grown men watching dolphins
racing at the ploughing bow of the destroyer.

The kipper blinks and the fisherman sighs.
He unhooks the crooked mouth, holds
the fish up high and shows it the high seas.
Then plop. The fish is back where he belongs.
Fred is back to dreaming of the next catch.

After the Army

John was a Royal Engineer. He castled
the sandy gulf of North Africa, cobbled
together the gaping coast of the Med,
filled in every bloodied pothole in Italy.

John's wife was in Poole. Little ones
only glimpsed when he's shot back
on brief leave from bridging Europe.
Proud of a Daddy they barely knew.

When the War ended he was kept on
training confused cadets in Dorchester;
marching them around the old Roman
walls, teaching techniques of history.

He flung them all back two thousand
years, stripped them of radio comedy
routines, canteen banter, baked beans,
spam, hatred of the Huns. The rough

untrodden country stretched out.
Roads had to be hammered into it,
walls raised from broken flint stones,
rivers forged anew, woods spliced open.

The time came when John's war ended.
He placed his plumed helmet aside;
his polished knowledge not needed.
New manuals now, electronics teachers.

After the army there were his children
to learn to talk to, a wife to learn to
love, a modern day to understand,
sand to shake out of his worn boots.

The Price of Men

Danny's dad came back from France
a hollow stump and a humming head;
every reason needed to not be a patriot.

Mum swore never to let him go again.
Danny swore because his mum swore,
and got a slap on the head for it.

When the second call for patriots came
in 1939, Danny knew better. He drove
trucks up and down England, breathed

clean meadow air, ate under ancient oaks,
knew the names of songbirds; no bloodshed
for him; no friends to lose on the beaches.

At the depo they gave the men a choice:
fight for your country and die like a man;
continue working in the trucks, carrying

tank tires and train engine parts to ports
and know you'll always remain a boy.
Danny had never grown up anyway.

His legs were short, his face freckled.
Too soon called a man, too narrow the name.
His ashamed parents rejected him,

memories fading, both voices humming
about the need for war heroes. Local women
not interested in conscientious objections.

As the *real men* stammered with fear,
Danny fed the ducks on the river.
As the *real men* sunk into the red sand,

Danny squelched through country mud.
As the *real men* returned in bags,
Danny scooped marmalade out of jars.

The men and the boy cried for their mothers.

Not One Cold

In ninety years not one cold,
not even in the Ardennes, the worst
winter of the war, ground so hard
it hurt to walk. The other men rattled,

teeth clattering as they gathered
around a spluttering fire. But not Ted.
He pulled out his spade, spat and
smacked into the solid forest floor.

Magpie laughter around the flames.
“You’ll never make it Ted!” they cried.
Ted dug so hard, he bent his way through
four shovels until he had himself a hovel.

Lined with leaves, he bedded down,
snaking into the soil, curling up. Snug.
They made a sweepstake around the fire.

5-1 on Ted's life. The next morning

Ted was first up, fresh faced, leaping
into a river. Caught a salmon. Freshly
roasted on the fire. Woke up the men.

The sneezing magpies, backs bent by
hard beds, threw their money at him.
It fluttered down like hurried Autumn
leaves. Ted gladly shared the fish.

Ted's marching stride as huge as his smile,
as the hands that dug the earth,
as the health that lasted all the life,
until he was telling me in hospital.

Oh, What a Lovely War!

“I shouldn’t say this,’ she says blushing pink. She lowers her voice to a sewer gurgle and says, “I had a lovely war.”

Betty was a train attendant working all over England, pride in neat hair, straight hat, pristine nails, manners as perfect as the gentlemen ferried out of London.

All over England, in between Blitzes, hundreds of children broke her heart, torn away from their mothers, bleating lambs to live in country mansions thick in cobwebs and abuse.

Her only moment of danger: one day a Stuka bomber dived, tempted by the train tottering over an aqueduct. Betty watched spellbound as the plane Screamed towards her. She didn’t jump

when the guns ripped the air, windows smashed, guests gasped, hands filled with shattered glasses. A carriage full of sailors leapt on her. She giggled as the plane passed overhead.

“I shouldn’t say this,’ she says blushing pink. She lowers her voice to a sewer gurgle and says, “I had a lovely war.”