

Nether

Edward Knight

Prologue

The following poems were written while on the London Underground, and, by way of spoiling the senseless purity of this theme, in train stations. Also buses. (I think they were entirely night buses, though my notepads offer no confirmation.)

Events described in the poems happened for the most part while they were being written. Where speech is recorded (in italics), it was likely heard only a few seconds before inclusion. ‘\’ indicates a switch from a platform to a train, and ‘/’ indicates a switch from a train to a platform. The poems are in what I believe to be chronological order, stretching from spring 2013 to summer 2015.

I am aware of the voyeurism of this method, or what in hindsight I call a method. I am also aware of – but possibly do not fully understand – the arrogance of collecting and taking seriously a selection of poems which in sum would not pass a breathalyser test.

I am absolutely unaware of what the city is. But this is fine. Its complexity and essential unknowability are the blanket under which we sleep, dozing rat-like in the tunnels.

We sleep soundly, bar the odd nightmare.

Edward Knight
London, October 2016

1.

Under pavements we sit
Recalling improperly the heads and voices
The flickering grins of
Up There

Farringdon now
Arriving quicker in the morning
Than the same stretch
In the evening
Perhaps due to some
Subterranean time dilation
In this buried black hole
Or perhaps it just goes slower
Slowing our minds as we're
Lullabyed by phones
And e-readers and
Questionable music while some
Let their faces die
And stand and stand and stand

It makes time collapse
And thoughts stretchy
And it makes you forget

Here there are others' thoughts
Or non-thoughts near us daily
Sub-thoughts stacked impossibly
But we learn not to care
It's easier
Knowing these ideas and fears
Really knowing
Would make our heads explode
And have a detrimental effect
On work performance

So this chamber of dreams
Between the clunky wakefulnesses of above
Carries us

Whitechapel now
And the doors slide like eyelids

2.

Cheekbones loom
Fingers slip beaklike from tailored sleeves
He assesses our wares
The sagging cuts and bargain faces

Off he steps leaving we remainders
In a cautious nylon sea
Away-fans standing in that foreign civility
Here for the final fusßball endtime
Until August and the new season

Everybody in this room is wearing a uniform
Said Frank Zappa through Dad and
Dad through me
In this carriage of breathable fabric
Breathable silence
The uniforms are all that remain

Unless we sneeze
And are temporarily alive in space
Or if we happen to smell
And so become for instance this molasses
Twisting with lurid pungency
From the bag on my lap

Better though to be the odd smell
Than the manifest fact
That this jacket
And these trousers
Just don't go together
At all

3.

Spinning on a pole
Five years old
Pink balloon orbiting
A yellow metal pole as
It and we move
Unknowing of the motions
The broader orbits
At play

Bored she lunges down
Chewing the balloon's stick
And is now up spinning again
Into strange futures
To chase larger more complex balloons
Which are equally
Full of air

And now mother has it
Leaning in advice of calm
Withholding its pink latex dream
To make it all the more alluring
To make us daily repeat the motions
In the air that is without substance
That is nonetheless
What we breathe

4.

Burger-meat hosed off a
Hulking femur and
Down my neck
Sitting in chargrilled
Jalapeño mulch

The bus is pulled like ground muscle
Along the oesophageal route of the N76
Past faces smoking on granite steps
Bursting in absurd heels
Clutching to partners who
Had a basically alright night
Standing shirted in the winds
Gym-hours bulging

North across the river
And others move gleam-shoed
In delicate suits
A dicky-bowed man
Staggers mad zigzags
Lost inside his phone

He scans I imagine
Through successive images
Of meat

5.

Dull rustle bottle-clink
Of sprits huddled in a bag
Past a woman wheeling her mother
Who groaned insensibly
I clinked insensibly to Monument

/\

Changing I saw a young mother
Fuchsia-haired
Push a twinkling infant to find
The hundred-stepped escalator stopped

A man carried the pram down
The entire way
Mother gushing fuchsia thank yous
Baby grinning up at him with
Supreme curiosity
Bumping down supremely
Sensible to it all

The man then free
He ran against the shutting departing door
Shut for his travails
His good deed

And then it opened

6.

The grinning teeth
Fill my universe
As I tread heavy the steps
Of the 25

25 again through Holborn and
Buildings I know from the distant day
Its jolting seriousness
Now never less jolting
To these beery limbs

English people are shy
Comes an English voice from on high
Correct
And this mishmash metropolis
Hides us nicely

That is a terrible place to be in
Says the step-shaped voice
Of minds or boroughs
It's hard to say
Of serious mental strife or
Living twenty minutes from
A station

The sky is too bright
I worry the sky is changing

7.

In radio-shapes and dark chatter
For days brewing they've said
A storm is coming

It comes now above
Trees telling it redly
In dried autumn words

We find ourselves descending
On this pretence or that
Prodding at phones with signal long dead

Feeling we are cocooned
In cement and soil
From electrical overheads
And duties ever crackling

8.

Birthdays are the longest trips
With ends of long-time hellos
And shaken hands or hey smiles
Which have thoughts whirring behind
But which at the end of things
Are sincere

Another year they say
And who could see it pass
In the dark of below
Moles emerging for meetings
And five-pound pints
But that's okay because
It's been a while
And what else would we be doing anyway
Digging ever in circles
Thinking we're on
The annular Circle
Which on birthdays we see was
The linear Metropolitan
All along

9.

Will these seats recall with affection
Or horror the smells of decades
Of anxious bachelors
Squirming in something like fear
Something like excitement
From the abyss of bullshit
Which fills the night places
And which is everything to them
Right now

If only there were a club just for we
For whom it's untenable
Maybe this train is just that
Silence and
Time for inward esoterica and
Whatever other distractions
From that abysmal distance
Between each and the next

Will we recall with affection or horror
This time

We'll recall the tracks
And coins clattering on bartops
And the laughter which
May or may not have been

10.

Collagen lips join in rigid pout
Beside arms throbbing in polo sleeves
Baby pink and sky blue
Those playroom hues
Of the early night-out throng

And I call this people-watching
And note these details as if
This conduit of humanity
Is revealing itself
Pinned like butterflies
Beneath a biro

But where I should see roots
I see shoes
And I note what kind of shoes they are

/

No alcohol on the Underground
Says a force we feel but never see

We smash a bottle to it
As that man has
On the platform slabs
In sacrifice

Embankment station is closed
And my anger at this is tempered
By knowing I could have checked
But didn't
By smashing a few minutes in sacrifice
To avert the Tube's long finger

\

More bottles now
That's the other thing as well like
They say
I don't trust him for a second
With liquids tipping
You are gonna have a hard time

Lips tilting as they now simply
Count upwards
And they've counted me to my stop

/\

Except it wasn't
I duck back into the next carriage
Cursing those numbers
Beyond my interpretation
Piling ever behind

11.

A man eats sandwich-matter
Directly from a plastic bag
While a younger man looks back
From the black glass opposite
As he looked from the bathroom mirror
As a boy
Weeping newness from eyes and fingers

The older man rootles fingers
For perambulatory bits of ham
With eyes of incomprehensible knowing
Because he is a normal man
Nearing the end of things
His memories amazing
For all the younger knows
With his own memories that
Are to be amazing
Were to be amazing while a boy
Tiptoes on bathmat
While slouching in
District Line window
Amazing time ahead
The quest of life and living
The quest of fingers
In a plastic bag

12.

A certain smirk flicks friendwards
In the dense Jubilee Line carriage
And back to the unknown figure
And back again

And something's happening
Or is it just his face

Just the people piled
And the shimmers of intent
Which ghost and die
On face-muscles pulled

Now he's seen me and I wonder
What dark network of meaning I'm involved in
For the mere fact of my recording it

Multiple smirks are on me
But the truth is not the
Warren of subtext to which he is
Gatekeeper
Archivist

It's rather that I am its gatekeeper
Architect
For the fact of my recording it

Of this the smirk is mere projection
All is projection
In this dense Jubilee Line carriage

13.

A man in a fedora strokes
His enamel cheek
Like from the past like
He's stalked un-ageing through the tunnels
For eighty years
Emerging on this platform of water-colour walls
Historical Shadwell scenes
Which perhaps he recognises
While we all are glazed
Wondering where the ads are
Thinking of a friend who teaches here
And her minaretted pupils with
Glittering little minds
Kids yet to be stilled
In these watery colours

14.

I was told once
Everything that needs to be
Known of a person
Can be seen in their shoes

Here then must be a
Sensory apocalypse for those
Foot-fetish savants because
All see is footwear

Trainers boots heels sandals
Velcro lace-ups slip-ons
Loafing in crosslegged
Moneyed calm

Or what appears as calm
But they too see only shoes
And heels press in fear to the seats
As a new pair enters
With long leather tongues
And endless eyelets

15.

She stands shuffle-kneed
In the tall trackside barrier
Of Canada Water
Lost in the grey reflection
Of which she is maybe pleased
Maybe not pleased

Hard to tell in the grey of her face
In the grey of the face which
Watches me watching her

\/
\/

The barriers again peer back
I've missed my change so rerouting
Through Waterloo
While the grey face mocks

The train pulls up packed
And I'm fucked if I'm
Getting on that

So to the platform's end
In a bid for space
The barrier here curves
As a lens to the void-black tunnel
And imposed upon it the grey face
Opens in awe and drowns

16.

Somewhere in the miles of silence
And thoughts withheld
Thump hands on plastic fixtures
A rhythm of rare honesty

All we want is a massive pair of tits
Sing twenty in neat shirts and swilling breath
6pm Saturday Gregorians
Chanting from their church
Drinking the quiet
'Til all that's left is noise

/

I swill through them
To the most deferential *Sorry mate*
To the violin resounding down the chambers
Tiled and reverent

17.

The stairs are stacked with squatting
Chip-sucking revellers
Applying condiments with ceremony

An American girl says *No* nicely
To the nice English proposition
Delivered like
A sachet squeezed

The driver drives past stop after stop
Of twenty thirty fifty people
Some of whom could get on but
He says no
Smelling perhaps a rush
And that lack of control on which
Things teeter

Why am I on this ridiculous bus
With all these people
Says a man

18.

It may be a bit of a leap
To compare the splitting of
Of the Northern Line
To the cleft of certain organs
Which channel life around the chest
But trips to smirking galleries
They tickle you to thinking
This way

19.

*And I got my brother that game
But I worry
Every year you're spending over
Fifty sixty quid on me man*

And that's Christmas coming
In black baubles floating
Weightless in the tunnels

Playstation 4 he says
Philosophical
As Farringdon arrives in
Graphics life-like

*A big fucking list
About what he wants and
Everything else*

A time for the broken magic
Of wants and gets

*It's the eczema thing innit
Worse than your daughter
She says
And I've lost the thread as she tips back
Laughing life-like*

20.

The bus's insiders bark purple
As outsiders slink in multiform
A bowtie enters in adjusting steps
Chat rattling off St Botolphs bricks
As I yearn for chicken fried
In wire cages and drums of oil

Liverpool Street leans in
Buildings bent to reflect us back at us
The trick is never to look up
Look only at the drumsticks
Skittering beneath the seats
Of the 25 in twenty-five
Top secret spices

The East London Mosque
Winks approval as we pass
Its congregants readying the feast

21.

The Cutty Sark clips by to the right
Please move towards the centre of
The train says clientele boarding in
Mouthless ventriloquist unison
This is Island Gardens they soon say
Sitting choreographed about the place
Calculating via phones signalling
Each other via tattoos *This is*
Mudchute yes this is Mudchute
They'd have me floundering in its
Faecal tides hounded by that demonic
Tea clipper able to hunt me mercilessly
Due to its flattened bow yes I've
Read the plaque *This is Crossharbour*
They say all together while
Pretending to have conversations
Cheery and unrelated to what can only
Be plans of my imminent assassination
This train is for Bank and that is something
You can bank on *I'm about to have*
My card rejected says the woman opposite
In an enormous burlesque dress which
I concede is an excellent disguise and
Her companion says *Yes that is it* which
Is surely the final signal the constituent parts
Of the plot now assembling with boots and
Phones and handbags all placed as a
Rapier-point to my neck *This is West India*
Quays and new conspirators board speaking
In languages I can't even understand
Chattering lacing their tea with horrible
Poisons like I don't even know if
This train is even going the right way
But the answer is in their tattoos *This train is for*
Lime House and the truth here emerging
Is more bitter than that of even my immediate
Doom and that is actually I don't understand
At all what they're doing or any of this I
Don't understand I don't at all

22.

Would you like to sit down
Says the young woman to my left
To a woman toddler-laden
Entering to my right

The meaning of this unfolds all
Too slowly in my head
Which is trying to envision
A hydrogen atom's nucleus
The size apparently of my thumb
And the containing atom being
Relatively the size of the Earth
And then something about a ping pong ball
And amid such all important
All untouchable nonsense from my book
A basic decency eludes me
Like the dummy which
Has just eluded the toddler's mouth
And fallen

He forages for it among my feet
Then among the feet opposite
As *Excuse me* says mother
Now seated left
And the legs opposite just rustle their papers
Lost maybe in their own thumbs
And ping-pong nonsense
Missing the dribbling relativity
Right before us

The dummy falls again
And having written the
Above I picked it up to atone
Then awkwardly drop it as I hand it back
Mother takes
Thank yous
And this time puts it away

23.

I sit gazing into the hair of a Spanish man
Listening to the group in '30s garb
Who orbit a man in a sequined
Ruby-red dress
He lovingly flicks the face
Of a straggler in braces
Asleep against the pole

The sequined man
Now introduces himself to an
Unrelated Spanish woman and is
Feverishly speaking of tapas
We all cringe while
Admiring his moxie

My grandmother was called Ruby
And she did not
In the words of my father
Give a shit
And it's taken some years
To really know what that means

She got into Macmillan and Eisenhower
Speaking in a church
My child-father in tow
Simply because she demanded it

And this young man in ruby dress
Demands it
The attention of this
Young Spanish woman
Bothered and enthralled in
Seemingly equal measure
Though probably mostly bothered

I wish I could speak Spanish
Says a voice from the top deck
Also unrelated

24.

Oxford Circus and we fill up
Who knows what they do there
What they buy
Each impervious to the marketing
Of the thing in their shopping bag
Of the life they can demonstrate in
Their laughs and flicks of hair
In the cocktails on their collective breath
Which fills the carriage

This advertisement above the
Seat opposite is blunt against me
Of course
Against my superior critical skills
And bearing in general
Though I find myself wanting to
Buy travel insurance

And just really wanting
Some Neurofen
To join a sports-orientated
Social network platform
To stay hydrated
The inculcation of these
Cunning oblongs
In my ignorance of it
Complete

At Victoria they clop off
In heels saved for friends
And from Victoria who knows where they go
Perhaps the bus back to Oxford Circus
Looped like the electronic billboards
Which follow us around stations
Up and down escalators

In parting shot they
Move like the ads now move
25fps flicks of LCD hair
And the line between us and
The lives we are told to lead
Blurs like a passing train

25.

Isn't this you

I say twenty seconds ago

And off he leaps *Okay I'll*

See you Sunday from the train

On a platform on a bridge

On a river

Black friars chanting

At the venue we've come from

Blackfriars chanting

Isn't this you

Isn't this you

26.

The sole thoughts up here
Are burped from a beer can
Yet downstairs

*I do fancy a Maccy-D's actually
Carbohydrates aren't good for you
One slice of toast yeah one slice of
Toast*

Things have got digestive

*With half a cup of cappuccino my mum
Makes like a paste*

Turning of course to
The intestinal knots
Of family

*My dad's a solitary character
He's what we call
The inventor
He invented you know like the
Bottle opener on bars my dad
Invented that*

Though no patents will be made on
These words flushed out into the night
Through flapped-wide glassy slits
Into the Hackney air which
At this hour is packed to the molecule
With shit-talk

*You've got like a whole world to
Look forward to*

And all that lies beneath it

*No I'm so serious like
You've got skills and talents
No don't be sad this is a good time
For us*

27.

In a city of fair stations there is
In the interest of balance
Euston
Where cigarette fumes sit with us
On these courtyard benches
A prison canteen with the roof torn off
Robert Stephenson our lone warden
You know the one
Who made these Jekyll trains
Over bright fields
And Hyde trains
Beneath in long holes
Those broken-escalator trains and
Mysterious-brown-patch trains
Where beer cans are beakers to our lips
And urges are nurtured by dark

So unlike the Jekyll beers on Jekyll trains
Acceptable at all times to all folk
Made so by rushing greenery
And light

Though it's the same substance
The same forward motion

Stephenson knew this would happen
You can see it in his eyes
His creations proud by day
Coughing in unseen places by dark
A monster rocketing here and there

The sun tires behind his head
And we sit low in the smoke
Of his empire

28.

Long hair arced gappily over shaved head
Turns majestic in spears of Brylcream
The leather jacket says UK Subs
On a patch on the back
And I thought I know that name
A band I saw at Morecambe Punk Festival
Ten years ago

And proceeding from this was
An imaginary conversation
Where I somehow introduce the
Fact that I have seen the band on her jacket
A decade ago
And am therefore cooler
By her apparent standard of cool
And more so than her leathery friends too
And my more prosaic attire makes
It hard for them to believe this
And the upshot is that
I am very cool

But the thing is that
Although this feels real for a moment
An actual chemical released somewhere
It did not happen
And these little internal victories
Do not happen

What happens is the rails and
The wailing tracks and rocking and
Blackened windows and
Next station is and
Next Station is
And inner silence riddled
With the half-thoughts of things
Which never were

Which is hardly unusual
One supposes the trick to be
To keep on top of which chemicals are real
And which are not
Though one concedes

Before quickly thinking about something else
That this is impossible

29.

The man next to me just switched
To a nearby double

There are some carefully worn
And ultimately quite shit hats
Here

Normally he's like super outgoing
It's just like why are you so tired
Say they from afar

How might I end up
In Somewhere of equal obscurity
But just elsewhere
That would be nice

Marius – M – A
Spells a voice among voices
As a snood is passed to someone leaving
Who had left it

Where do I live? New Cross
It's like New Greenwich
Says a woman among men
Who think their personas are built on something
Anything

I'd have switched seats too

30.

I've never been upstairs

Says one

Mate you're missing out on a joy of life

And they climb away from me

As Les Miserables passes enormously

As I am passing needlessly

Through the Centre

On bus routes I do not understand

And don't need to as long as

I go broadly south

Upstairs has a certain din now

Piccadilly has a certain

Aimless nothing now

As cycle taxis with leopard-print seats

And suspect sound systems

Flash banks of lights at people

Who promenade pissed

And looking to go further

Than peddles will carry

Shit I'm going west

31.

Saturday forks from the carriage
To a hundred days
A thousand
Activities indefinite
Though likely apportioned in broad themes
Cafes and pubs and assorted retail and
Making do despite the rain

Exit here for the Tate Britain
And off hops she in many shawls
This is Victoria and to my right the
He of a couple rubs the she's leg
Perhaps a bit too hard
Exit for Buckingham Palace and nobody leaves
Exit for University College Hospital
Exit for the British Library
This is a Victoria Line train
To the weekend you will have
Will have had
Will have again

32.

Across the tracks curves space
Rust-coloured nebulae
Blooming in pathogenic blots
On damp-aged walls

Unfilled Kennington ad space
Over premium footfall
Yet left for months or years
By the forgetful or kindly forces
Of Underground advertising
I'll choose kindly

Because in this space you can
Squint and drift
And drift

33.

He gives us a few Overground lunges
And complex stretches in the gangway
Before alighting in practical jacket
To the looks of we who think ourselves special

There was something in the way he sat down
Ten minutes ago
Something we couldn't describe
If you asked us
Those who truly do not care
Who are their own
Radiate this

While we radiate looks
Glances
Stasis

34.

They switch seats on empty trains
Because theirs weren't quite right
Reacting to variables I cannot see
Errors in the upholstery's pattern
In the floor's laminate
To odours of engine
Slipping through unslid doors

/\

To those bust bootsoles
To that paper bag of unknown contents
Reacting to messages of warning
Buzzed into their phones
Reassembling in a new order
The meaning of which they do not
Need to understand

/\

Which I do not need to understand
As I switch seats from one train to
Another
Adjustments of adjustments
Whosever they are

35.

Hands on rails with
Vein-handed night-thoughts which
Will never materialise
Thank god
But which are alive in the clutching
Of slick poles in thundering
Steel worms
In which we read over each other's shoulders
And sleep on each other's shoulders
And clutch the rail

I'll stand thanks
Though there's seats free
I've been sat down all day

All that sitting you see
It takes you places
From where it's best to bring nothing back

36.

Leathered couple take turns
Attempting handstands on soft seats
And failing
Though succeeding at something else
The golden inwardness
Of a Saturday night
Stretched to Sunday morning

They try now on the floor

Woman obscured by hijab faces them
In judgement I presume
Wrongly
As the window's reflection reveals
Her silken sleep

37.

It's busy on the Black Line
And no rail to hold
So we stand simply southward
Balancing in the swell
Falling across London's face

A woman entered the office today
Smart with elaborate nails
To lay mousetraps
Little houses of poison
She didn't look like an exterminator
Perhaps they never do

A man threatened to throw himself
From the seventh or eighth floor window
Today
Twitter couldn't decide which
Those glowing phone-tappers
In the park opposite

We worked on because what could we do
What can I do but balance here with
Pen and notepad and this instrument which
Now seems ridiculous
I wonder who it was
If I ever stood with him in the lift
I'd joked before that more people
Seem to go up to those top floors
Than come down

But police coaxed him down and
The intranet informed us
It was fine to go out
And buy sandwiches

Is this the side of the line
Where I have to change
At Kennington?
I hope not

I hope I stand with him in the lift again
Even as the office

Which is a nice office
Fills with tiny corpses

The choice is never to jump
The choice is to stop falling
We'll keep falling for now
Into a Balham practice room
To play away the rushing air

38.

There is no water at Canada Water
Nor is there Canada
Nor is there the sky which these
Far-apart platforms suggest
Is above

It is black paint
And we are underground

Canada Water is equivocation
Circumlocution
Circling the truth too big
To pass through directly

A method we are in this city
This island
Born knowing

39.

There is a time
Days from now
When we will not fret
And they will not be able to
Do that just-now thing these people
Sometimes do with their eyes
Which is inscrutable
And sort of troubling

There is a place
Miles from here
Where those things which
Are difficult to quite pin down
In the way they veer at you
Will slow to a happy stop

There is an age
You'll reach out to
With arm of slackening skin
At which the vague thoughts
Will thin to nothing
I think
Probably
But until this

/\

There is a woman
Whose foot I just kicked
And the feeling of it will
Buzz in my toes
And others' eyes
And the soils of places I've yet to go
All buzzing together
Until that mystery time
Clicks round

40.

Never run for transport
Call me vain but at least
I never look like these pricks
Scurrying past on the stairs
And now stood sheepishly
On the platform as
Infinite eyes pull away
Which can only seem judgemental
But all they do is recall
When it last happened to them

That girl in the carriage was
Just where I was
A change and several stops back
Underground in a sonic carpark
Lit in stop-motion strobe to which
The marker-pen K on my hand
Is home-made entry stamp
The best kind
Who knows what it stands for

Away she has glided left
I can only presume with
A K on her hand

The moral
Running for transport
Can only minimise the chance of
Recognising the thereness of
Those around
It can also make you look
Like a wanker

41.

A day of all points
In the pub in the park
On the concrete continuum
Of choice exercised among the places
Endemic to our demographics
Pure coincidence of course
That we happen to choose
What was chosen for us

In Peckham in the library
In a corner marked The Unexplained
A theme incongruous
For its municipal setting
I earlier found a pamphlet
Published it said by a man in Camberwell
And claiming in fevered detail
That received science is a sham
That the sun is a disk thirty-two miles wide
That the world is flat

Can I borrow this I said
Over the clacking keyboards
Of huddled job-searchers
And self-searchers
Of course it was not in the catalogue
And had been planted there
To grow in our minds
By the man who said no to the pubs
And parks of his demographic
Who knew choice like we do not

And I think of him out there
Crouched in his Camberwell garret
Aligning his feverish truths
And knowing choice
If little else

42.

And do I have any means
Of noting this whatsoever
Think I with emerging phone and
White squares darkening
To sudden touch
To skittish thoughts on amassing
London Bridge platform

The train pulls up
Packed like the last
Which I needlessly stepped off

Have all these people in nylon shorts
And longsocks
Really just been playing football
Really just been to the hidden sites
Of my astroturfed ignorance of
What goes on
And what fun's had
While I'm stuck on the same itchy letter
Like iron wheels itching on rails like
Tickly thumb-ends sated on
Touchscreen squares
This lighted alphabet laughing
With what it will not reveal

43.

How much would it take to step in front
I wonder if he thinks it
That furthestmost man
Edging slowly over the yellow line

The proverbial furthestmost man
Who you can see every day
Am I ever him to others?

But of course there's too much
To think about and to learn
Like it's Rotherhithe not Rotherhide
I see now despite having seen only
The latter a hundred times before
Dumbledore not Dumbledore
Realised after four books

I can't control my feet

Another now slumps heavily
Clearly no Furthermost Man
Rustling newspaper in which
He's seen it all before
Feet still like mine are not
Grown out of that senseless question
Of how much would it take
Grown into the web of middle age
No less senseless but
At least absorbing
He sees this coming train
He's seen it all before

44.

On London Bridge he sits
Knees against grinning mouth
While I drift past and away
From whatever curved lascivious
Corner of his mind is
At this moment active and
Happy for whatever warmth
This summer might bring

Behind is Liverpool Street
And friends trisected globally
With me staying right here
But we agreed to step up correspondence
So it's okay

/

Words will amass like coins in
The man's tattered hat
Amassed like we now waiting
For buses to everywhere
From Elephant and Castle
Beside a shop selling kebabs
And empanadas and burek
Eaten like words from London
And Bari and Bandar el Begawan

Things will amass and
I will grin like that
Mohawked sleepingbagged man
Who will be there perhaps
All the while

45.

Overground on this empty
Saturday morning
My restless peer walks
Up down up down
Adjusting checking
Removing coat
Standing pacing sitting
Forever eyeing the window
And now the sweatshirt is off

English weather at the moment
It's so unpredictable he says
And why not
Why not say something true
Every now and then
In rising restless heat
Why not start a conversation as
He has with someone opposite
A semipro footballer I think
Who contracts the restlessness
Immediately

But he makes do
Responding though conscious
Of us all listening
As the sweatshirtless one is not
And now I like this man
Even though he hopes my team loses today
He says

A nearby woman knows always what to say
Joining she keeps things ticking along
On a subject she seems not to know
But talks well nonetheless

And now they're gone
Away from the desperate pen
Which notes all but
Sees nothing

46.

*You know what you said Barry the other day
And I want you to remember this
You said all Babylon is is confusion*

*If you see a baby going under a bus
Whether black white Muslim Christian
What you do Barry is you say*

Barry stands to abrupt goodbyes as
The door bleeps the night's end
They each know how the words end
Anyway

On this spot on Woolworth Road
I once watched the words end
Dissolve into that smiling riot which
Saw the Turkish supermarket shuttered
With makeshift barricade
And homemade bats
And a press photographer's camera
Thrown twenty feet in the air
All in a funfair haze
Three years ago but it could be
Tomorrow

The words blew like burger wrappers
Off a fatherless Lambeth street
As JD Sports bloomed in a shower of glass
And flatscreens were doled out from Argos
Like goldfish in bags
As those young ladies and gentlemen
Boys and girls
Became winners for the first time
After a life of coconuts glued to their stands
Now become kings
They thought

But all Babylon is is confusion

The man now sits quiet
Who spoke of Babylon and dancehall in the '80s
He sees it all like I see him

Shapes bent in the glass ahead
His voice colourless or many colours

When my stop comes
I'll turn to descend the stairs
But I'll look down
And keep his advice as a voice
Bodiless and true

47.

Father and son in matching dashiki suits
Take two of empty three seats
Two women enter and
Sit down, sisters says the father
And offers his seat
And switches to one opposite
So they can sit together
Beside him now another man stands so that
The young son may switch too
And sit next to dad
But the son
Grinning at the women now beside him
Shakes his head
We all laugh
Waytago son
Just like your dad

The jarring epilogue to which is that dad
Seemingly well in there
Now lectures the women on paganism
Drinking blood
Noah's ark
And what he calls the social security system

Their faces are now of patience
And the son grins at the father
And two by two we disappear

48.

Bright bright lights
And everyone's fucked
And those are the shoes
I want

49.

Just on she nips
Between bleepshut doors
Attaining at the last
That expected thing
That realisation of destination
Attaining what on long steps down
I think I won't
If I stay here
Living down here with these
Phone-poking day-thoughts
These commutes post-beer
Post-day

What if I've assumed
I'll get it off reading
And talking and reading
But will wake up at sixty-four
And think no
No I didn't get it
I haven't got it and will die without it
Maybe I should have lived with a touch more
A touch more of something

/

But that unseen something
Is not here
And I will leave
Switch trains like these
Line-swapping Northern south-goers
Dizzied in the counter-intuition
Of lives lived underground
Ascending having never known
All there was to know
When they began

50.

Leather jacket torn shoulder to waist
Impossibly thin
She asks for a pound
Thank you she says to the young woman who gives one
(It is always a woman)
Sincerity astounding considering
How much she must say it
Or maybe not

I saw her yesterday morning elsewhere
Leaving Brixton station
As we all oozed in

I saw an old man in luminous children's clothes
In Euston six months ago
Saw him again from a passing cab
On St Pauls pavement
Last week
Noticed only for his striking getup
While we oozed greyly by

How many do I see and see again
In Balham Dalston Liverpool Street
How few
We same few drifting
In a bloated membrane across London
Cerebrally joined
Maybe just eight hundred
Deluded into eight million
Because we face only
Each other

/

The drums start up the stairs at Brixton
Pounding down and over the gates
The eight hundred are here to meet me
Or me them
And we'll march off together
Faces down

51.

Egg white on my tongue
The cover band sang of rolling in rivers
From lungs of decent range
Unlike the phone speakers now blasting
From the Technicolor girls opposite
Drawing tight-throated Londonish speech
Through necks in chains
Cans of readymade Pimm's
Rising and sinking
Making enough noise as to be heard
But not enough to not to make a scene
That goodtime tightrope
Trode so well in the Camden from which we slink
To soon change at Euston

/\

A change in which
Revellers hunched solo over burgers
And fur coats spun in exasperation
To the signs speaking of escalator maintenance
And byzantine redirections
And as I board there is that rare wonder
The genuinely tuneful whistle

A man stares with dark intensity
Down his collapsed umbrella
And I wonder if a single one of us is sober
Is it simply a given
Past a certain hour
That we have escaped
Whatever the day held
Via egg whites and technicolour lungs

52.

There' s a mirror on this train
A human mirror
Who scratches at a notepad
The first I've seen

The mirror's hand
Writes stops writes
Regards the advertisements

The mirror hunches through swaying suits
And shuffling October soles
Scrawling likely snotty thoughts
On a page ruled strangely
It can just be glimpsed
Perhaps a list of unorthodox design
Or a schematic

What terrible thoughts might
The mirror hold
What fun and what horror
Has begun with a notepad

53.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if
The train wailed to a halt
And after the silence we saw the possibility
Of being here for a long time
Together in this tube
The transience obliterated
At the prospect of enduring
Inside each other's lives

I wonder if there would be moments
Of mirth or rage and if
We would cling to the seats we were in
When it all stopped
Making our homes in each
Like houses on a street

I wonder what society we would build
And who would take on what roles
According to previous expertise
Or perhaps according to new lusts
Which will be glimpses for the first time
Beneath the city's skin

These seem a sensible lot
And I'm sure we'd get along

I like to think that I could be the librarian
Collecting up the books and loaning them out
So that all have access
Like those old men who run library carts in prisons
In films
With wrinkled grins and who have maybe
Committed the worst crimes in there

And I wonder if my library would be
An egalitarian thing
Or in fact quietly despotic
In my will to possess all the books
This is of course how it will be for us all
When our initial plans for getting along
Gently slip
Into some other form

And the teeth come out
And the lighted corners become no refuge
And the words lie torn on the floor

54.

Laughter from the jungle gym
Of royal blue rails
Hand rails which I cannot properly negotiate
As many pour on in precise sobriety
An affront to my insulation
Though they will never know it
Unless I sway
Like I've seen men do
Always men bouncing around
On the rails
On their phones
In their heads and untouchable
Unlike the brogue which just
Recoiled from my mishap touch

Some such men are here now
At scattered points in oversized suits
They are impenetrable
The gods of the lines

And having sat I now want to stand
To rejoin them but will not
For fear of manifold offenses
To these sober sitters
Decent folk all
Thus proving that I deserve no place
In the royal blue ranks
Bouncing as untouched gods
The pissed Cityfolk whose lives hinge
On the counterpoint kiss
Of three-too-many beers
In some noisy wooden pub
The method proved through repetition
And the observation of many others
It is the release
It is the sway
Pole to pole

55.

The Battle of Agincourt

Enlivened in the weekday evening fog

Roiled up from this stuffy book

As two French girls breathe Gallic titters

As the woman opposite clacks knitting needles

Like arrows on breastplates

/\

Changed at Stockwell for Brixton

And a second knitter clacks

The sound weaving with me

Through the burial pits of old London

The pattering arrows that we English

Will never quite get over

56.

November is objectively the worst month
Where the bad things are not the result
Of the whirling minutiae of life
Complex and explicable
But where they happen simply
Because it is November

The escalator will be down for
Maintenance until the month's end
They said
Or no sorry we meant July next year

Many are exponents of January
As the worst month
But they are fools
Blind to those bright reborn days
Absorbed in hangover fuzz
And amassed Yuletide depressants
Forgetting that the groundwork
Was laid long before
When the world was slowing under black sky
And extended only two feet from your head
Making subaquatic and far-off sounds
At you

Yesterday I saw a Camden platform
Empty at one end of people
Who had relinquished it
With anxious sidelong looks
To two small rats
Who gambolled freely on the tiles
In no other month would that happen

So do not dress your ills
With explanations coiled and connected
Empirical
Beneath them is only November

57.

N35 again past plate glass
Where Shoreditch takes off its mask
To reveal the City
Where neon seeps up the uniforms of dull-eyed guards
In the foyers of multinational banks
Dark hangars with villainous fishtanks
These spaced with pubs
And their shoals of banished smokers
Dull-eyed with middle-night booze
Sufficiently loosened up
But still just holding the evening together

A woman squats on a sleeping bag
Adjusting her pearl-effect necklace
In the glow of cashpoints

It's not a giant hole
It's okay but overpriced
Says a German accent behind
As we pass an unrelated giant hole
A square mouth readying
To vomit a new tower upwards
Or simply the reality beneath
The towers that are here
Mirages in money's heat

He whose birthday I just left
At a reasonable hour
Was displeased at my leaving
Despite what he'd given me
My handshake left unshook

There was a giant hole
In Shoreditch

Today in a news article about here
The testimony of some bright young thing
Said that it just feels like something creative
And important is happening here
And a bright-eyed comment below
Said yes it feels like
Is the key

It feels like

58.

An OPEN sign winks beside rotating meat
Open it says and behind me are two couples
Although couples is not right
But two twos anyway and explaining details
That acquaintances would already know
Having accepted each other
On this Friday nightbus night

I only need five microlites

One says
I have no idea what this means
And maybe neither does his new partner
But it matters not
They have accepted each other
In a city of rejection
But where the meat ever spins
And the open signs are flashing
And bright

59.

Seven months
To a year
Is the ratio of time
What we live
To what we feel we ought
To live

Seven months
To a year
Is the fraction big enough
To glimpse a certain wholeness
But small enough
To feel short changed

Seven months
To a year
Is the hollow mantra
Of he who's experience of death
Has been mostly pets
And grandparents who
Even when he was eleven
He knew were leaving as part of some natural order
Which is very old

Seven months
To a year
Is on all their faces
In seats and standing
On the man a few weeks ago
I remember now
Suited and silently crying
Or the woman a week before
Crying too
What bad news had they all had
Which I couldn't see then
Which they can't see now

/

We stepped off and there was a man
Who did not stand
Who could not get off

Who could only listen to the driver
Saying *End of the line*
End of the line
Who I sit on this bench to write
Before our memories leave him behind
Unable to follow

Seven months
To a year
Is the prognosis

60.

Try changing from Circle to Bakerloo
At Baker Street
I tell them
You'll be down there for weeks
In the brick-vault labyrinth of

*(To the gentlemen with the
Bright orange jacket
Blares a static-wrapped voice
Stand away from the platform edge
Immediately)*

Labyrinth of what I'm coming to
See is a work of

\

(He sits across from me
Orange Jacket
Still on the edge
Sartorially speaking)

Of broken cunning
Compulsive in its geometries
Dreamed through rings of opium smoke
Of old London fog trod with the fevered mind
Of a certain deerstalkered figure

Try changing at Baker Street
I tell the tiled silhouettes
Of Sherlock Holmes
And he looks at me like am a hallucination
And laughs

61.

With dead-woman smirks
These men lean warmly
On the seats around
Or sit alone
The night trailing past their shoulders
Together gestating
Amid the silent walls of St Pauls
Of Whitehall
Of Bank
Their plans

They have been told
That this is all theirs
And their belief makes it true

62.

I've heard this for six months, Kerry
And I've not seen any action
Says woman front-left
As a tunnel's black blade
Severs her signal

She now taps as the man far-left
Zooms ever further
Into the cells of a vast spreadsheet
But it rings and he speaks
Into the cells
Lone flats in the Excel high-rise
Seven thirty he says in reply
Speaking presumably the numerical tongue
Of the spreadsheet

Now again Front Left is
Connected to another but this time
She listens

Bleep goes a new player
Immediate Left
As Front Left signs off with a
Mere glance at her screen and
Knowledge of no bars
And the phone is down
And the phone is up and she taps

But Front Right is who bears real analysis
Silent Front Right
Always of course on her phone
But face in perfect stillness
Never looking directly into the pool of pixels
But eyes slipping somehow
Beneath the glass
Reshaping

In it she is still
In it she is
Still

63.

A huge iron ceiling contains all the words
So they reverberate
Shawn and bobbing
Made liquid in the tank of
Darting bottom-feeders
Clicking heels to the departure boards
The coffee stand
Rattling change at toilet turnstiles
A canned G&T for the train

They are all on their way
But they reveal not where
Known only are their elsewhere faces
Their proclivity for order
In the queues they compose
The music in their minds and fingers
Caught by the upright piano which
Smiles pearly keys from the concourse
A gift from a staff member
Says the sign

Marylebone is the way home
The childhood home
And so is itself home
Its embassy in The Smoke
Yes sometimes you are permitted to feel
That this can be home

The pigeons however swoop head-level
As if to say they own the place
And we know they are right

64.

Packed and catted we hear gunfire
Cracking from tiny speakers
Commuters are as one mind
And share in their bacterial cram
A disapproval which of course
Is wordless

The phone-soldier gives not a shit
And despite my own annoyance
My own synapse in the hive
I admire him

Above stands someone from work
Who I don't really know
Who I've noted as quick of expression
Coloured of trouser

The soldier now booms deeper
Rams a weighty bolt home
Having I guess found a higher calibre disturbance
For us
For my maroon-legged colleague
And I root for this hunched man
Who slays the monster
We have conglomerated into

Below me a different man selects his sportscar
Assesses its attributes
As we race into the stasis of

(There's a broken train ahead
Says driver through broken speakers
Though we don't need to hear all the words
His thoughts being ours)

Stasis of this delay
We cower in the slick jungle heat
As shots rain and ricochet off fixtures
And project ourselves elsewhere

65.

There are dogs here
Two dogs
And we all look at them
In the calm lax-eyed way
We wish we could look at each other
Like the way the dogs look at us
Seeing rolling tundra and frosted trees
In those level husky eyes
Rimmed in smoke-white fur
Perfect and undishevelled
Deep under-earth rings of the past
Of the rolling black beyond the glass

We are here drifting
We are wondering whether
To go back to the office
After the external meeting
With a 4.30 finish
The dogs will decide for us

Their answer is ancient
And wise

66.

In grey striplights the red kites wheel
As only carrion can
On flecked laminate are muddied dress shoes
Thin heels descending beneath wet grass
And the commuters are all there now

Mourners beneath the birds
Results of a wildly over-successful breeding programme
The red kites I mean
Watching he who was told
Seven to twelve months
And given one

So this train is mourning now
Learning middle names for the first time
On orders of service
Our stoicism cracking
At the odd unexpected word
In a hymn or free-paper headline

*And there is another country
That I've heard of long ago*
Says the Evening Standard
Preparing us for the night
That we know is coming
But cannot truly understand

And there will be time
They mumble in tune
That line which comes to me
Always at funerals
Strangely because that's when
There manifestly isn't

And there will be time
Thunders the chorister
Through the train's speaker
Knowing that this is the final stop

But it is a good stop
There is at the very least
That

So up

67.

A suck-pop of chewing gum
Sucked open-mouthed to my left
Hair twirled on long fingers and
Straggler strands plucked with rubbing tips
To be dropped primly on the shoes of
Those standing packed
Above our seats

Her noise and fidget and noise
Jackhammered through the walls
Of my novel's already flimsy universe
And I considered writing something but no
It would have been spiteful
Negative

Conveniently she leaned and hooked the
Attention of a certain standing woman
Five persons distant
And said *Excuse me*
Excuse me do you want to sit down

Because of course she is the most
Considerate person in the entire carriage
So I can pull my phone out to write
Having gladly taken a dressing down
As the saliva-pops resume

68.

There's a day when the words you say
Are bigger than their anticipated meaning
And when it comes you'll think
Shit yes it's now
The Borough pubs in which you
Say them decree yes it's now
It's happening

You plan a proposal
A bottle of ersatz champagne buried
In woodchips beneath the park bench
Of ten weeks hence
But are the woodchips in depth greater
Than a sidelong bottle?
And suddenly the logistics are dark
And entwining

Maybe you'll hide it through the fence-bars
Of the power substation beside the park
Beside the fencing contractor who
Chased you and friends off so many times
Years ago
In that village of home

You were still young when you met
She and you on that June bench
Ten years ago from ten weeks from now

Things are inexorably in motion
Real only when said aloud
When the words are in your brother's ear
In the Borough pub
Where they grow realer
Without you

69.

So that's it then

So that's all you have to say

He says hands-free on this

Sunny Highbury platform

I wish you all the fucking best

It is unclear if he's finished

As unclear to us as to him

And perhaps to her

But the train clanks up

And we move on

70.

For all its surfaces filmed in darkened grease
And collected sebaceous residues
Of people slipping in cracks
And malting idle fears

For all its phones scratching ringtones
And the whining mechanical creaks
Behind the walls of unknown buildings
On unknown streets

For all the faces glinting
Limp-tongued in polished shoe-points
Domed to pervert my features
And all our features

For all that
These people of sculpted austerity
Terrifying and terrified
Are brokenly beautiful

Are fine
We are fine

71.

Thank you

Thank you so much

Said he this morning at the escalator's foot

Its twin boxed up for maintenance

As it has been all year

So each morning he calls we descending mutes

To walk those last sliding steps

To alleviate crowding up in the hall

In the entrance and on

The busy Brixton pavement

I'm just passing on thanks from those

On the street

You're doing so well

And we don't smile but we smile

You lovely people please move

To the end of the carriage

Crackles the breakneck Jamaican voice

Floating through slid-wide doors at Victoria

On the way now home

Please move along and look out

For your fellow man

One love

Says the voice with a conclusive

Jah Rastafarai as the doors close

And we do not smile yet we each

All of us

Are smiling

72.

What is the diameter of the tunnel
I've shot through again
Edges always unknown
What is the gauge of these boys' youth
Folksy throwbacks twanging banjos
To the Marylebone concourse
What is the breadth of this old woman's time
Hunched and hooded in black
Wetwiping the payphone receiver and speaking
I think to no one

What is the width of the finger

All things I've seen and will see again
Allowing so little in
When I should have been making
Detailed notes

Now the girls harmonise and commuters watch
Unabashed because it's Friday evening
When London train stations are at their worst and best
And who knows what hidden joys
Scuttle in corners

Having fled work and plunged the widthless tunnels
To pick up a small black cube
Delivered at the last possible moment
A young man sat in a toilet cubicle
Ten minutes ago
Unhalved a Post-it on his knees
Trousers down merely because it is customary
And aligned a hoop of affordable sunlight
With a circle traced previously
On the paper square

What is the width of her finger
Because tomorrow is the day

I wait with the cube in my bag
I watch a barefoot tattooed man
Convulse habitually over his zimmer frame
In the foreground is an oboe

Alone on its stand

Perhaps such things are always
At the edge of sight
Beyond these distracted eyes
Looking only inwards

The tattooed man sees the girl
Whose oboe it is
He stops
And catches her eye

Epilogue

I once read, or imagine I once read, that during a lifetime's commute on the London Underground, the commuter inhales an entire human body's worth of dead skin.

You'll have to bear with me when I say there is something nice about this. Consider it: the raging Monday-morning commuter, mouth-to-shoulder with the swell; the furtive Casanova muddling jokes at his new companion, who smiles; the reveller leant giddy and howling across her friend. All devouring each other with every breath.

It's an emotional cannibalism that we repressed islanders would do well to appreciate. Our desire for leaving things unsaid, for gaps, can leave us remote and imbalanced, so we need somewhere for sustained but highly controlled interaction. Public transport therefore occupies a special place for us. On it we get human company, no questions asked.

There may be something sacrilegious, then, in these poems which now look like an attempt to write those unsaid gaps, to drive the hand without stop through the raw quick observations which more typically would fall unrecorded between the lines. But an attempt is all it can be. The good stuff – life – will always lie beyond the words. The hope is that some words will be improved by their nearness to it.

An example. The abrupt and inadequate end to the final poem is because at that moment she for whom the writer was waiting, she with the finger of unknown dimensions, appeared. The writer slammed shut his notepad, on the sudden belief that she might decipher his toddlerish handwriting and learn of the ring in his bag.

She did not, and together they took the train to where they grew up.

Edward Knight
London, October 2016