

From SIX SHORT SCENES FROM A TOUR DIARY

i. They Should Have Been Bigger Than The Beatles

So I'm packing poems, pants and paired socks into an artisanal kitbag handcrafted from rough tweed and patterned with faded dreams, and I'm avoiding the gaze of my electric guitar, leant untouched against the wall since god knows when, steeped in dust and recrimination. Two hundred quid she cost; and that was twenty-five years ago. *And* I bought the flight case, too; the heavy-duty leads. We were meant to go places.

There should at least have been a tour. There should've been *many* tours. There should've been a tatty Transit van, driven by a drug-dispensing drummer who never spoke. The bass player, he should've been a no-bullshit mother-hen, gaffa-taping that village-hall bookings secretary to the weather-vane of the Baptist church; hanging him by his ankles til he coughed up our agreed fee. That bassist should've been shooing me outside as I expounded our revolutionary manifesto to a wide-eyed angel in a hand-knit tank-top and sturdy outdoor shoes. *Plenty of action in the next town* he'd have said. *That's* what it was supposed to be like. A *gang*. A gang and guitars and gigs and girls. Instead it's like this: poesy and gazing out train windows and a guitar that just sits staring at the wall as I throw an extra pair of socks in the bag, just to be on the safe side.

That guitar.

Look, you know what it's like when you flatshare with someone you've always really fancied, and you move in all your books and records and hopes and expectations and then suddenly, one morning, you wake up with the cold, sad certainty that it's just not going to happen; that somehow you've missed that moment when it all could have blossomed, become *something more*, something big, something beautiful?

Yes?

Well, that.

ii. Heroes

GIG / LIBRARY / STOKE-ON-TRENT

The lady double checks the audience
has emptied their bladders;
the stairlift's playing up again
and *no-one wants a repeat of last time*

Well, that's one I've got on you, Lou Reed.
I bet Iggy never gets told to flag up the
induction loop for the hard of hearing

And just try to picture Bowie
as they show *him* to the fridge
where they've put the rider-

A Tesco Meal Deal sandwich
and a Meal Deal bottle of water.

The crisps he'd say, coming on all diva
Where's the Meal Deal crisps?

Picture *his* face, when informed *the crisps*
are for the support act...

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AT THE COALFACE OF THE NEW ROCK 'N' ROLL

*I blame it on that Kate Tempest;
borne aloft on the shoulders of public acclaim
like a tiny rhyming elf*

is how I explain all of this
to the lady from the Literature Festival
as we speed through the streets
of the small Suffolk market town
in her clapped-out Micra

and tonight I think I killed it;
the Book Club ladies sighed and nodded
and the girl in the tweed trench coat
with eyes as dusty and inviting
as the windows of second-hand bookshops
slammed her head to the rhythm of rustled paper
and awkward silence

before we all melted off into the night
like poems melting back to raw ink

and now back at the B&B
the Lit Fest lady cracks open a yoghurt,
lines up the earl grey slammers
as the girl with the bookshop eyes
leads me to the bed
and as the Nurofen starts kicking in
we lower heads and lick HobNob crumbs
from the plump stomach of a naked librarian.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG VIRGIN

I would dread going 'up' the village, past the nursery and the school, toward the recreation ground and, though they were of little interest to me, the pubs. Going 'up' the village entailed the danger of going past the foot of Meadow Cottages, the council estate of my mother's warnings; a feckless sodom of lemonade and ringworm, white bread and ITV. Most dangerous were the young ladies. Michaela and Alison were their names. Alison; a pale, huge and terrible object encased in a tartan overcoat and topped with a frizzy mane of dark Pre-Raphaelite hair, like a poodle mounting a giant bagpipe. Michaela; dark and cold, thin-lipped and with an air of the gypsy, more bare-knuckle fighting than mischievous twinkle. They would haunt the lane that wound through the centre of the village, through the centre of my world, pouncing from the shadows of driveways, from behind trees or from the cock-screwed cave of the bus shelter. Pouncing on easy prey.

Do you like girls, boy? You ever kissed a girl? You want to know what a girl feels like, boy?

Has a girl ever touched your winkle, boy? You ever seen a fanny, boy? Rubbed a tit? You bummed anyone?

These, I knew, must be *feminists*; brazen, forward women of the type that would upset my father, reclining on his chaise longue and spluttering oaths into his Horlicks as they paraded their liberated viewpoints on the Hades of the Fourth Channel.

These two knew their terrible power, and they flaunted it. Yes, they frightened me. But they were strangely alluring, too. *Feminists*. The very word reeked of the new tomorrow; of the new dawn that was beginning to probe insistent golden fingers onto my dull horizon, a dawn borne on the sleeves of anarchist punk records.

But this was grown-up stuff. My Saturdays still belonged to the platform end; my veins pumped diesel and my heart beat faster only for locomotives, packed lunches and scribbled numbers. In a year's time, things would be different. I would have crossed the line. A girl will have shown me her breasts on the Euston-Glasgow overnight, and though prudence will have caused me to gaze at the magical orbs only as reflections in the dim light of the compartment window, it will have been with a longing hitherto foreign to me. An hour later, outside Carlisle station, drunk on new experience, I will have bitten into my first kebab.

I will be of the world of men.

IN THE BOGS AT THE POWERHAUS

I look up
and I'm surprised to find
I'm urinating next to John O'Neill,
the guitarist from the Undertones.

Life's strange magic has drawn us together
here, in this dim dungeon

and I can't help but stare at him,
but he stares straight ahead
at the chipped black wall,
covered in torn stickers
from eighties indie bands.

I know it's too much to hope
that he will stare back at me,
or thank me if I tell him
how much he means to me,
how *precious* our seconds together are,
and he won't welcome me turning round
and shaking his hand, because his hand
is holding his penis.

So we just stand there,
micturating in the stiff silence
of social convention

and it's left to our urine,
merging uninhibited
in the trough below,
to celebrate this
serendipity-

the piss of a nobody
and the piss that wrote
Teenage Kicks-

swirling joyously together,
shouldering a sodden fag end
and dancing off down the porcelain,
into the strange sunset
of the Islington drains.