

The White Stag

My grandfather drank there:
a detached building in North Street, Sheepscar,
near a Territorial Army barracks, but
you never saw a squaddie in it.

In the early morning,
Brendan would wrap the front and back
pages of the Daily Mirror around
his copy of *An Phoblact* before leaving.

The White Stag appeared in every pub guide to Leeds,
and each entry was a decade out of date.
The beer was terrible:
the pipes were hardly ever cleaned.

We sang and we played. We
argued about arrangements. People
called each other, 'You Dublin cunt'.
We harmonised until we cried.

The Socialist Workers came, and fitted in.
Some Glasgow Rangers fans appeared
and were asked to leave.
I bumped into some-one that I might have been at school with.

I went there to anarcho-syndicalist meetings.
I went there to Irish music sessions.
I went there to get so drunk I forgot my name and occupation.
It was the one place that made me proud to be English.

They used to turn most of the lights off
at eleven. I would still have three pints of bitter
and a large Bushmills on the table. I would
sway gently as I pissed in the dark, considering whether to puke.

It is now a vacant lot, surrounded by wire. Acquired by
Punch Taverns and demolished: old stone reclaimed, sold-on.
Sometimes I turn the light off in my toilet at home,
or close my eyes, and piss in the dark.

William Thirsk-Gaskill

A busker leaves the brothel on York Road

Circumspect as blackbirds
guitar strapped to his back;
conspicuous and giddy
he walks past the parade of shops
(shuttered frontage, newsagent, tattooist)
never had there been such music in him,
the ballad of his tingling groin,
empty bollocks knocking
together like coconuts.

The bus stop queue clutching onto
day rovers and unsafe jobs
knows he has made love to everything
that's wrong with this city -
only lice and inflamed skin to show for it -
but as far as he's concerned
that was his first girlfriend left
trembling on the mattress again
or the wife who left him now re-impregnated;
an act that warrants whiskey
in the Irish Centre and two offerings
of *Black is the Colour* at
the mouth of Kirkgate Market.

Matthew Hedley Stoppard

Chords

I take my father's Spanish guitar,
the one he carried on the bus, each week to the College of Music,
and we join a party around the campfire near the folly in Roundhay Park,
just the two of us.

We play, 'Let It Be', by The Beatles, and the only other song
I know, so far, which is, 'Yellow Submarine', by The Beatles.
We spend the night at Robert's house, inseparable
on the floor.

Robert is going to move to London, soon.
We walk home on Sunday morning, while the birds are still singing.
As we walk, I note the houses of the girls I know in school, some perhaps
susceptible to being serenaded.

I look at the numbers, the monkey-puzzle trees,
the bay-windows, the driveways, and, for once
I think, 'I could pull you, or you, or you' –
Alison, Kate, or Emma.

We get home before my parents have got up, but not before
they have called the police about my absence.
We are tuned to concert pitch, and I play them a few of my new chords,
but they don't want harmony: they just want fuss.

William Thirsk-Gaskill

On hearing cousin Melv died, suddenly, while out rabbiting

Talk of snubbed onions grown in my father's garden
puts me at ease, how he'd boiled malt vinegar and sugar,
removing the kitchen's net curtains, like lasering off a cataract
to avoid staining the cotton, and concoct a sweet liquor to fill
a Kilner jar, creating a solar system of pickled bulbs.
Put a lid on the usual banter because I can hear it coming -
it would take a century of liquorice roll-ups to crack
his Moses tone; Melv died that morning in a field near Lincoln,
a snapped air rifle over his forearm, .22-pellets spilling across
his chest, garlands of rabbits about his overalls.
We don't feel immortal anymore, exchanging football scores.
A cousin dies hunting vermin like dozens of cousins before him,
a son realises he will die with his father, as though
Derbyshire has been muscled out by its surrounding counties.

Matthew Hedley Stoppard

Light-bulbs

Some make a buzzing-noise for weeks, months
or even years, before finally giving up:
a flickering that gives you headaches and
persists, even after you have turned them off and closed your eyes.

Others maintain a steady current, as if daily
re-reading the definition of the ampere, give off
a warm glow as natural and effortless as daylight
but then, after sundown and when all the shops are shut, go out.

I knew one which had not lasted much
but had long-since ceased to shine, insist
that it was fine: somehow unscrew itself from its fitting, fall
and shatter on a paving slab.

I am glad I never got to see the fragments, the naked filament.

William Thirsk-Gaskill

'The Elephant's Foot'

(or Gaumont-Kalee Model 21, 1948)

*"... I knew with perfect certainty that
I did not want to shoot him."*

George Orwell, 'Shooting An Elephant'

There it stands
khaki-coloured like an infantryman's spats,
inoperable, gathering dust in Armley Mills Industrial Museum

reminiscent of WWII weaponry;
a Sherman Tank turret, stripped back,
once manned by scrawny projectionist not hardened captain.

It's double-speed shutter
fired a sepia beam rather than anti-aircraft shells
in a cordite blast,
although it was capable of creating images of battle
on a large scale.

When I first heard its name
I remembered Orwell's essay on shooting an animal
considered machinery in Burma, where he served

as a young police officer
equipped with .44 Winchester rifle
used to take down a life weighing four tons
hoping for a world in which cameras shoot
not guns.

Matthew Hedley Stoppard

Ode to an 18th century copy of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* in The Leeds Library

There it sits.

A book as thick as the pages are high and wide:
a cube, and much harder to unscramble
than Rubik's.

To touch it is undared.

It was written in Latin so that more people could understand it.
The three laws you learnt at school would not be recognisable:
it uses geometry, not algebra.

I sometimes think

that Lincolnshire has spent itself for good.
It produced the greatest genius who ever lived, but now,
it is just pork, peas, and Ukips all the way down.

When this book was new

this library was accused of having a Stupid Club,
members who stood next to the open windows and poured drunken
drivel on the people passing by.

I am a member

of the new, pork and pea-guzzling Stupid Club. My father died while I
was still spouting drivel: before we had had time for him
to teach me Latin.

William Thirsk-Gaskill

Eyes meet through library shelves

Recently returned novels
lean on each other,
the odd forgotten bookmark
peeping out the pages,
some religious, some leather -
there is a rumour that one
customer used a rasher of bacon.

Drawn towards non-fiction
all your interests have
a Dewey Decimal number:
love is kept next to nostalgia
preceded by longing.

A money spider struggling up
its almost invisible thread
pulls into focus the gap
between shelf and spines
where you'd expect to find
mascara and chocolate-button pupils,
the black hole of an iris,
Larkin's spectacles, unblinking regret.

None of the above, but a set
of older eyes; you rise above
the books and apologise.

Matthew Hedley Stoppard