

Not a girl
Stuart Maconie

This train stops, not at Adlestrop,
But Meols Cop and Burscough Bridge and Tyldesley,
all the scattered halts and one horse towns
strung between the shy sea and the deckchairs at Southport
and the Sea Breezes and Decaffs of Manchester

You could grow rubber in this carriage
And in the tropics of the rattling stock
of the hastily franchised train, tempers are fraying
like trackie bottoms off Oldham Market

An Asian schoolgirl, books on lap, rests her head on the
window,
And Bolton's embankments drift though her reflection
Whilst all around her the madness of little men reigns

Schoolboys, the kind of which
not more than three are allowed into newsagents
at any one time
playfight and roughhouse, hair jagged with gel,
green gold-crested ties slack and askew
swinging their Nike holdalls like sandbags

Hoodies trade blithe obscenities, their skins the colour
of cigarette paper and dappled with acne like cheap Anaglypta
They lie lubriciously about what they have done to and with and on
girls with names like old lags fag coughs; Jax, Kaz, Raych,

A Golem of a toddler, his popped tube of salty snacks
snatched from his puffy hand by Mum
begins a slow, ominous crescendo, like an air-raid warning
His lower lip pulses like a fish, he stalls his lungs
And the siren blossoms in the chip fat air.

Mum is nonchalance in budget bling. Dad thumbs glumly
in an earphone hiss. No-one comes and no-one goes.
The birds of Lancashire do not sing.

Suddenly Mum's had enough and hisses too,
into the ear of son and heir..

'You're not a girl.'

A bandsaw rasp as curt as a smack,
then back to 'We Love Telly', job done.
Son subdued and pink with surly shame

The Asian girl barely stirs, hardly aware of those
who one day she will tap with stethoscopes and bring
the worst of news. Me, I am thinking of

a swan of a cellist playing Elgar's Concerto.
Or East End Matchgirls caught in a flash of sodium
Arm in arm, laughing at the sweatshop gates.
Or an ebony girl, as tall and slender as a bullrush
walking back to her village with a jug on her head,
as a 50s debutante learning deportment might balance
a book,
but nobler and lovelier, coming through the shimmering
heat of the Veldt, a mirage written in ripples.

And we pull into Piccadilly and spill like quicksilver
Into a city of girls and the ghosts of girls,
Suffragettes and Shelagh Delaney,
Mrs Gaskell and Elsie Tanner

No, son, you're not a girl
Worse luck for you and me.
And there's your birthright and your curse,
Your lucky break, your epitaph
All there, overheard,
In your mother's offhand treachery.