

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.