

PEDESTRIAN VERSE

Gavin Baird

Day 1 in London

DThumping, staccatoed piano. Repetitive. Played by the hands of a childhood friend.

A falsetto quivers its way in. I know Scott's voice better than I know my own.

I'm in my flat in Clapham, brand new in London. First day of work.

I'm listening to Frightened Rabbit, the brand-new album. First day of release.

Will it live up to expectations?

Will I live up to expectations?

I'm distracted by the worry of meeting my boss and first impressions and handshakes, and the infinite ways I could make it awkward and I've lost the thread of the first song so have to start again as I leave the flat, 7:30 in the morning, an anonymous face in an already dense crowd on this bricky, smoggy street. My suit is hot and tight with

humidity and nerves, but every line makes me feel safer and better and myself. He's speaking to me, or maybe on my behalf, it's hard to know.

I am that dickhead in the kitchen

Have been.

I seeeee...

Part of the fatty British average

Who lives in the houses around you.

Ooft. As Scott's redolent accent fills my ears, I glance around at these sleek-shoed professionals and wonder if they really are that much better than me.

I jostle politely as the pinstripes thrust past me underground.

Day 4 in London

Work is going okay, if you ignore the moment on Day 2 when a colleague asked me to repeat myself four times. Surely you just nod politely at three?

"Sorry, it's the accent," I would have said, had she not got there first.

I am just like all the rest of them; sorry; selfish, trying to improve

As I step out into London's offering of morning sunshine and smell the pollution, Scott's voice soars into my ears again. It's almost attritional, but in that subtle, sung, soaring reminder of who I am, he's managing to convince me I might be enough here, a million miles from home. I just wish he had some advice about enunciating.

Day 10 in London

Out, drunk, uni mates. Drinks are too expensive, and the open-collared men are too loud. Perfume, alcohol, aftershave, alcohol. Even in my whisky haze, I sense a difference here. In a more sober moment, I'd call it an entitlement. Pervasive, expected, accepted.

While the knight in shitty armour rips a drunk out of her dress

Not here, not here, heroic acts of man

Scott's words worm in my brain as I watch and want. He draws me back.

Day 17 in London

End of the calendar month is payday. In my case, it marks the start of the eternal battle between good and evil, employee and HR.

My bank account has the empty desperation of a junkie seeking the next hit. In my case, I seek the £700 rent due tomorrow.

As I'm logging in, my boss peers over the bank of desks in our plain, grey office and asks me if I've been paid okay. I mumble something about needing to check. Am I embarrassed because of the voracious wealth I see everywhere?

My soul clammers onto the desk between us and screams that I'd been watching my account at 00:01 that morning when, I'd been told, the money would transfer, and almost wept when nothing happened.

I'm properly fucked.

I'm trapped in a collapsing building

Just before lunch, just at the point when I'm fingering the coins in my pocket and wondering what they'll buy in Pret, my boss's head appears round the screen.

“Any luck with pay?”

Maybe it’s the panic. I grasp forward at him.

“No, actually. Do you know how quickly HR can fix it?”

He’s got thick, black hair that he sometimes styles to create a less appealing version of himself and these eyes that look both worn and alive, like fire down a deep well. He strokes his hair, and those eyes investigate me. He knows that I’ve just finished uni.

“Are you stuck?”

Maybe it was the panic he could sense in my stilted reply that prompted such kindness. Why it was a brown paper bag full of 20s rather than the simplicity of a bank transfer, I’ll never know.

“We’ve got to stick together down here, you know,” he says as he hands it to me. His accent doesn’t suggest it, but he has mentioned a mum in Aberdeen.

I was too relieved to wonder what I’d have done if I was English. There was enough for two months’ rent. And today’s lunch.

Day 35 in London

All our secrets are covered in dirt, underneath paving stones

I’m beginning to enjoy the comfortable anonymity of crammed tubes, a thousand pubs, and a city paved with liberalism. I’m adapting to it.

Day 55 in London

That comfortable anonymity. I feel it beginning to infect me. A path free of consequences starts to lay itself out before me, decision by decision, interaction by interaction.

Pedestrian Verse



11 July 2013, 04:46

Just in bed. You get home
okay?

11 July 2013, 08:48

Yeah, can't believe you abandoned me! Phone died.
Night bus saved me. Tho waited on Oxford St for
ages. Not the best at 3am.
Should have come home with you!

11 July 2013, 09:43

Haha yeah should have. Woke up
to a message from Kelly saying she hoped we
exchanged numbers. Wiser than she looks.

11 July 2013, 10:33

Yes she is!x

11 July 2013, 11:06

I am knackered. Can't function after three
hours sleep.

11 July 2013, 14:11

Oh no, I'm so sorry! Hope it was worth it
though...?

11 July 2013, 17:10

Haha yes definitely was! You up to
much tonight?

11 July 2013, 17:36

Supposed to be seeing some friends but
might cancel. Tired!

11 July 2013, 23:01

Reckon a repeat is likely?x

GAVIN BAIRD

11 July 2013, 23:03

I hope so! Okay by you?

11 July 2013, 23:07

Erm, well, yes...xx

11 July 2013, 23:09

Maybe a bit earlier next time?

11 July 2013, 23:12

Haha yes. People were setting off for work when I got home.xx

12 July 2013, 13:00

Actually going to see more comedy tonight if you fancy?xx

12 July 2013, 20:19

Sorry, I'm heading back to the flat as i type...

12 July 2013, 20:21

Oh okay no worries! Shame.

12 July 2013, 20:56

Could maybe do next week

12 July 2013, 21:1

Well I've tried so ball's very much in your court! I could do Wednesday x

14 July 2013, 16:42

Hey you, how's home?

14 July 2013, 19:33

Nice thanks! Sunday roast and watching TV with the dog. Heaven.

Pedestrian Verse

14 July 2013, 19:40

Sounds lovely. Might go to the
pub for a roast myself.

17 July 2013, 12:12

Hi, I'm sorry but I'm going to end
up having to work late tonight.

17 July 2013, 13:03

No worries, to be honest I wasn't sure
we'd be doing anything anyway.

19 July 2013, 08:41

Hey, are they still working you hard? Any
chance you'll be free for a drink at some point?
Not sure about you but reckon it'd be quite
nice to see you again!

20 July 2013, 11:22

Hello! Afraid I'm away in Budapest this
week, so not being worked hard but also
not in the country!

20 July 2013, 12:41

Lovely. Bet Budapest is warm
just now. Far better than hard work!

23 July 2013, 08:46

Hey, how's Budapest? Just wanted to say that
if you fancy meeting up when you're
back then that would be brilliant. But let
me know what you think. I know you're
busy and texts are difficult to chat
properly through, so thought I'd just ask
straight out. Take care.

Day 72 in London

I've moved in with a couple of school friends and a guy they know of old. He's a fund manager in the City and seems to have shed his Scottish accent, although it does sometimes reappear in the pub. Same age as us, but I saw on the lease agreement how much he makes and, honestly, it's a number that I didn't think normal people could earn.

Sunday morning, and I'm going out for a run just as he's coming home. His 50-year-old boss is with him. They're swaying, eyes glazed. Two girls follow through the open, rusted gate.

"50s for the lads!" he shouts when he sees me, and hands me a fifty-pound note straight from his jacket pocket. It's the first I've ever seen.

"And the ladies!" he shouts again, throwing two notes at the girls. They have to bend over to pick them up.

My flatmate can't get his key in the door.

*I see the stumbling pinstripe trouser,
flecks of sick on an office shoe*



28 July 2013, 09:52

You awake? Lee's just back with his boss and, I think, a couple of hookers. ffs. Just going a run, fancy brunch at Milk about 1030? On me, got a 50 from him. Large one at casino I'm guessing. Can you bring me a jumper if yes?

Day 90 in London



casino I'm guessing. Can you bring me a jumper if yes?

15 August 2013, 10:41

Got a couple of tickets for a gig in Stoke Newington tonight. Fancy it? Was going to mention but you were gone before me this morning.

15 August 2013, 11:02
Sounds good. How you getting there?

15 August 2013, 11:03

Bus, believe it or not. Meet you about 7 on Waterloo Bridge?

15 August 2013, 11:05
Sound. Who's the gig?

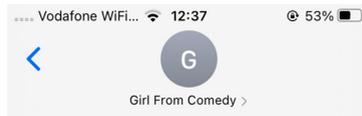
We find each other, and the bus, and the front seats of the upper deck.

Jim and I grew up together in a small (three pub) Scottish town, and there's a shared sense in where we've ended up. We weave through the London gloaming, our seats giving the city the immediacy of a virtual reality headset as we trace the river past theatres and courts, then go north through a universe of neighbourhoods that we know by the name of the nearest tube station. The only thing that bears any resemblance to home is that the bus smells of piss. Outside, we can see the world gathering in delight at the warm evening. I watch the

weaving and unweaving, al fresco tables and claustrophobic pavement pints, queues at restaurants and rushing briefcases dodging buses, a tapestry of what I say to him must be the best place in the world.

We hesitate at the door to the venue; there's a bouncer and an assortment of smokers. The sweet, acidic smell of weed floats towards us with impunity. We look like people who don't belong there. But buoyed by the journey and, more importantly, the tangible sense of entitlement found in the paper tickets in Jim's hand, we push our way in and order at the bar as boldly as our meekness will allow.

Day 124 in London



me know what you think. I know you're busy and texts are difficult to chat properly through, so thought I'd just ask straight out. Take care.

20 September 2013, 23:02
Hey, long time no speak! Sorry, somehow managed to miss your last message. Fancy a drink tonight?

20 September 2013, 23:04
Well this is a blast from the past!
How's you? It's nearly midnight!
Bit late no?

20 September 2013, 23:10
You can stay at mine if that helps...?

20 September 2013, 23:13

I'm sorry, too late for me tonight.
But another night maybe?

21 September 2013, 07:54

Late one for you last night was it?
Hope you had fun

Day 199 in London

My childhood friend Gordon, the Frightened Rabbit pianist, got me tickets to an 'intimate' gig. I'm metres away, and as the songs that I've come to see as a map of Scottish masculinity fill the room. I realise that it's a while since I've listened to the album.

I have a drink with him after and mention that I'd like to say thanks to Scott.

"What for?" Gordon asks.

I tell him about moving to London, about feeling out of place, about the sense of identity the album gave me that allowed me to settle.

"You feel settled now?"

"Oh aye. Completely."

Day 213 in London

It's one of those London nights where it feels like your life is probably building to a glorious crescendo.

Behind me: morning football on a litter-ridden pitch and a heavenly afternoon in the pub.

Before me: the future, every little bit of it. That didn't occur to me, of course. I was too busy being, as they say, buzzing.

I'm steaming. The sort of steaming where I carry my Scottishness like a personality, puffing out my oatcake of a chest and dialling my accent up to 11. I feel significant, and every conversation, every toilet trip, feels like a branch off into a new potential life. Anything could happen.

Here's how drunk I am. I'd been talking to a girl, maybe kissed her, can't remember, then saw her talking to another guy. So, I go up to

him and say, man to man like, that I'd already been talking to this girl and that if he didn't mind, I'd take her back.

He walks away, and I put my arm round her like I've bought my first car. I'm about to ask her back to mine, but before I can she's sick on my trainers.

Day 250 in London

There's something about the train home. Home home, I mean. The rush at King's Cross, the cosying into a window seat with headphones on, the gradual emptying of the carriage as it trundles north. The change at Edinburgh, onto the main concourse, and the rickety journey home to Dad, always always waiting on the empty, cold platform with a bunnet, a smile, and a handshake. As we drive up the very walkable road to home, he suggests a trip to Alloa tomorrow, to the ground we'd visited infrequently decades ago because of its locality and cheap entrance prices. Twenty years on, only the first of those now recommend it.

Day 251 (not) in London

He parks the car metres from the stadium.

"Don't think you can park here, Dad. This must be for officials or something."

"No, I don't think so..."

This isn't London. This is the other side of the world. Most fans would be walking to the game. The few coming from further away could easily fit in these little parking nooks.

It's a glorious January day, and the sun is casting a nostalgic glow over post-industrial central Scotland. Dad pulls two brollies out the boot.

"Ach, you never know do you," is the Calvinist response when I hesitate.

Having negotiated the creaky old turnstiles, a criminal total of £40 lighter between us, I notice each new arrival is greeted with a familiar nod and a question.

How's Morag? Paddy's team do okay this morning? Hear about Tam down the garage?

Those who didn't know each other did, and those who did really did. An old lad is trying to listen to the radio updates through his phone. He turns to a boy, a quarter of his age, to ask him to fix the volume because he couldn't manage the wee buttons or the wee screen.

"Never hud any a this bother wae the auld wireless."

The young lad obliges, presumably with no idea what a wireless is.

They all settled themselves into familiar positions,

propped

against

the same

floodlight base

that they may have been

using since I was still in nappies,

or leaning against the yellow barrier that surrounded the pitch, the risk of a football to the face being a price worth paying for the feeling of being a part of proceedings.

Over the damaged roof of the single stand, rusted from years of perpetual storms, are the Ochil hills, resplendent against their clear blue background. Long and undulating, uncertain peaks, shades of earthy green and dull browns jigsawing up the gradual climbs, shadows wandering aimlessly along. These are the hills that I could see from my childhood bedroom window, seen now in a new light. Almost worth the entry fee.

The smell of hot vinegar and pastry draws me to the pie stand. The half-time pie and Bovril is served with forcefulness. The pie is crispy on the thin crust and soft everywhere else, the meat inside congealed into a single entity. Brown sauce covers the pie as if it had no other place to be. The Bovril is gritty, salty, and hotter than the sun, the polystyrene cup doing nothing to protect my fingers. Somehow it was ambrosia, a middle finger lazily raised to the Michelin stars I had started to seek out in my new life.

After the game, I wondered about asking Dad if he fancied a pint, but I knew what the answer would be.

“Och, I’d love to, but best get home to your Mum. Not nice to leave her alone for too long.”

She was always his priority. Is always.

Let’s promise every girl we marry

We’ll always love them

The next line is

when we probably won’t

but, as we drive home on familiar back roads with equally familiar voices summarising the day’s football on the radio, I glance at my dad, who has both hands on the steering wheel at ten to two, and

I think about all the things that I've forgotten.

But if blood is thicker than concrete

All is not lost

Day 252 in London

On the train back south, I've got the album back on.

I'm here, I'm here, not heroic but I'll try

The line feels new and draws circles around my ears as the train's rhythm lulls me to sleep somewhere north of York.

Day 279 in London

The overpaid flatmate bangs on my door and wakes me up. It's 4am. He barges in and jumps on top of me.

"I brought you someone!" He's squealing in my face, and I'm in that purgatory between sleep and the disappointment of everything else. "Come and meet her!"

His thick rugby arms are strong enough to lift me out of bed and force me down the stairs. I can smell their presence before I see them.

All thighs, hair and magpie handbags

Saturday's uniform for the 'fuck me' parade

But then they're not. Well, one of them is, and my flatmate's spade hands are already all over her. The other girl is standing as close to the door as possible, her legs and arms crossed. Her dress is pretty.

"Hi," she says. We look at the other two, already grinding on the

couch. I worry about stains, briefly.

“How have you ended up here?” I ask, not wanting to suggest that she’s unwelcome.

Her head flicks towards my flatmate. “He told us there was a party.”

“Ah.”

“Where are we?”

“Balham,” I say. I can tell she’s relieved.

“I live at Clapham South.”

There’s a strange silence, one that I can’t interpret. I wonder what it would be like to kiss her.

“Would you mind...” she’s awkward “...walking me home?”

That is not what I expected.

“Eh, well, yeah, course. Just give me a second.”

“You don’t need to, honestly. It’s just... I can’t walk home myself just now. And I don’t really like getting taxis myself either.”

I uncover a pair of jeans and a hoody from the bottom of my bed, and as we walk up Balham High Road, under streetlights, past dark pubs and over fag-end littered pavements, she wants to explain herself.

“I’m really sorry to ask. But I don’t think men understand just what it’s like.”

Her blood is thicker than concrete forced to be brave

She talks, and I listen, and she’s right; we don’t. I find it hard to believe and believe her at once.

We reach her flat and she turns to look at me. The night is cold, and her side street is badly lit. There’s a scurry in a nearby bin. We’re both

waiting for the other.

She really is beautiful.

She makes me want to... But then that line comes back to me.

I'm here, I'm here, not heroic but I'll try

“Thank you,” I say. “I’ve genuinely learned a lot.” I want to say something funny to move on from that gloopy earnestness, but all that comes out is, “I’ll make sure your friend gets a coffee in the morning. It was a real treat to meet you.”

“You too,” she says with that smile that I want to make promises to.

There’s a quick hesitation in the space between us, but if I can’t be heroic and I can’t be my dad, then I want to do better, and it feels like this is that, so I say bye and retrace our steps south. I find headphones in my jacket pocket that smell of her perfume and Scott’s voice guides me home.

Shut down the gospel singers

And turn up the old heartbreakers

It feels at once like an opportunity grasped and missed.

Day 346 in London

I learn love at first sight with a girl who appears at work, and I’m trying desperately to present the best and most interesting version of myself.

On our second date, I play her a song from the album on my big headphones. She closes her eyes. She’s smiling. I kiss her.

Her heart beats like a breezeblock thrown down the stairs

I wish.

Day 348 in London

“Do you know when you kissed me?” she asks over dinner in a restaurant serving food from a country I’m not convinced I’ve ever heard of. I don’t follow the question.

“Right when he said *cunt*.”

I flinch.

9th May 2018

I wish that this story didn’t end with Scott. Songs from the album still appear on Spotify playlists to transport me back to the floundering early London days, but it’s no longer the overwhelming influence it once was. He sits in my brain like Shakespeare might if my English teacher had been different, waiting to speak profound truths when life requires it. And there he might have stayed.

But Scott went missing tonight.

10th May 2018

They found Scott’s body today, on the banks of the Forth, down from where he jumped.

Obviously, obviously, obviously, this is not about me. But I sit and drink and listen to Pedestrian Verse on the record player, in the flat that I share with the girl I kissed to Scott’s songs. I wish him back, and failing that, I wish I could have told him how his truth had become my truth and how much his words had meant to me. And I’m a cliché with a whisky in my hand, but it’s real.

I text my dad to ask how he’s doing.

My last week in London

I'm getting married and leaving London. I'm writing my speech, and I want to use his words.

I have never wanted more to be a man, and build a house around you

But it seems too personal and possibly too patriarchal, and so I leave them out.

I put my pen down and my headphones on and press play.

Thumping, staccatoed piano. Repetitive.

A falsetto quivers its way in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gavin is a civil servant by day, Glasgow Uni MLitt student by night (and sometimes by day, but don't tell his boss). He recently moved from Arran to Bristol, where he savours the breadth of takeaway options but misses the sea.

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