

Eley Williams, ATTRIB. AND OTHER
STORIES (2017)

Alight at the Next

When the carriage doors do their thing, it being after hours
when my thinking is unsavoury and also far from sweet,
knowing we are at the stop nearest my house and I'm going
to have to summon the courage to ask you to come back,
the whole cadence of my composed speech set to work in
time with the slowing of the Tube train, the slowing with a
whinge of—

not-hinges but a kind of mechanical sighing and
when the doors

Please mind—

when the doors are opening and you are standing closer
to me than you ever have, and I have been counting, and

measuring, and the doors have opened and

// a man // pushes on // to get inside // the carriage
before I've had time // to step down

so without thinking and certainly without hinges I am
holding out my hand and placing a finger in the middle of
his forehead.

He freezes. The carriage freezes; a carriage steamed-up
and bulbous with umbrellas and the slapping batskin wings
of waterproof jackets.

The man doesn't look in my eyes, because this is London,
dammit, but he halts, there, one shoe up in the train –

I look like I'm blessing him.

I hope no one thinks I'm blessing him.

I hope you don't think I do this regularly, you
standing so irregularly close to me like this –

The angle of the man's nose is precisely forty-five degrees.
This was distracting; I wish someone had a protractor so
I could show you how precisely at forty-five degrees this
man's nose was but who carries protractors on the District

Line? And what kind of pervert even knew what the set
square in the school geometry set was for unless one is the
daughter of a naval architect or wanting to prove the angle
of a man's nose inches, Imperial inches, from one's own – . . .

I wish not for the first time that London had bars or, at a
push, a wooden buffet carriage on the Tube because I would
keep my finger there against his forehead, hold out my other
hand and perhaps you might slide a whisky down across
the bar to me and I would drink it and I would pull my hat
down as your arm came across my shoulder to show you
that we were a crack team at getting the Tube to my stop,
that we were as good as Bonnie and Clyding this evening –

(this thought breaks down when I remember I don't
like whiskey, spelt with an *e* or without)

(this Bonnie and Clyde metaphor breaks down too
when I remember that the real-life Clyde, in jail, in
order to get out of breaking rocks, took a spade and
cut off some of his own toes)

(I would not want you to have a toeless lover)

(I want you to have a lover who can *stop* this man in
his suit and tie)

(I want you to have a lover who is not embarrassed
to say the word *lover* in a carriage filled with tired,
final-round West Londoners)

and this man

this *awful* man in a tie that's red
and if I squint down at it <<<
the tie {{{{

past his set square 45° nose >>>
the tie looks like a botched tracheotomy
dribbling past his —

No — that's not fair, it's a nice tie and he just has somewhere,
someone to get to and I just want to seem like a person that
can stand up for themselves on the Tube let alone keep
standing when you are really, *you really are standing so close
to me —*

It used to have 'Mind The Gap' written at this station in
yellow on the platform edge but now it says 'Mind the step'.
The difference is crucial: even the platform is a coward and
uses polite, shirking rhetoric and less capitalisation now

even as my finger is still on his forehead and the doors are
shutting, and I will miss my —

we'll both miss *my stop*

and I might lose a finger, but Clyde of 'Bonnie and'
fame lost some toes and I might be played by Warren
Beatty some day so I give this man's forehead a little
jab,

the smallest pressure

(he has not met my eyes this whole time
like someone has thrown the book at him before)

and I make a boiled sound because I am the first to admit
that my spirit animal is probably a buttered roll and that
I create characters and situations where I am brave for the
same reasons some people love the stuffing of caught birds.
Pigeons get caught on the carriages sometimes: I've seen it
with my Oyster in my pocket, spring in my steptoes. I forget
sometimes what *preclude* and *nascent* mean. It has been a long
day for everybody, even for pigeons, and it is forgetfulness
that makes me brave at the sound of this gamelan of joists

and hot-steamed-grit-zoom that is pulling into stations. I am certainly braver than before, when the pre-you afternoon got jumbled with you-evening at rush hour, where throats squirmed with the old smoke and stream of tunnels: a world pinstriped by eyelashes, uproarious with the need for a Friday, downroarious with lost cards –

there are earphones trailing from this man's neck
and they squeak with chords that have the obtuse
delicacy of a dove retching –

the thought of you unscrews my head

and if you record the rip of glacier through ice and
modulate its frequency it sounds of whale-song, and
we often have cause to think of glaciers and their
place and pace on the District Line –

We are still here with my ET finger set against his forehead.
He does not wear a wedding ring and I construct a reality for
him wherein he, after an argument with his wife, stamped
out of the house and tried to remove the ring, could not, had
to buy a cheap bottle of salad cream at the cornershop by
his Tube station to use as lubricant so that he might loosen

it from his hand.

I had one drink this evening so it's unlikely to be the
stout that makes me brave or foolhardy, stout that tasted
feminine, of ashtrays, bran and old lipstick. You are so
clever, I remember thinking, badly. You are so clever and
you know so much, and I often think the only way that I
could protect you (if you ever asked [because, you know,
you would never need to be protected, and would kick me
for trying – you are certainly standing close enough]) would
be to snap your head off and roll it out of harm's way for the
nation's sake.

I forgot. I simply forgot the way that love becomes a
whimsy and the full-throttle of throats, the buzz of flightless
eyelashes against pillowcases on a winter's evening when
pigeons grow full-fat against the frost and the letter *p* in the
word *receipt* begins ticking at the clocked teeth, the watched
rim of a clock when I wake up to find the time, from being
a cameo in my own dreams where I occasionally look
straight to camera and spoil the shot. I forgot about waking
to dumb punk dawns – me, a hopeless sometimes-son-type
whose act is hardly ever there delivering UNHEIMLICH
MANOEUVRES like this finger on the centre of this man's
forehead.

Somewhere beyond us an escalator squeals, a pushchair squeals, the child in the pushchair squeals. I only did not squeal because you really are standing so very close.

Look how far my arms can go around things, I want to say. I could hug a whole telephone box. I have had too much, perhaps, of the good stuff and Lord knows there's a lot of the world we're missing as I do something important with this here man in this here tunnel:

for example, we're missing an overly busy sky, with a warp and a weft to it. Like tweed. Starlings making a tweed of the sky.

For example, we're missing a snail insisting that he's in the haulage business

, we're missing drinking hot chocolate in the continental way, kissing in a gorse bush

, we're missing chewing gum until my jaw is black and blue and the world is tired mint, District Line-coloured, but

THROWAWAY LINES like this WILL BE ALL RIGHT

because

today, my eyes are chintz; today, my eyes are tigerskin; today, my eyes are traitors; today my eyes are delft-ware and he's met them, finally

(is *beneathe* a verb?

perhaps I'm thinking of *bequeath* or *breathe*).

Each of his eyelashes is a candlewick and now I find that I can not look at him full-on in case I press my heart out through my teeth.

And time passes, in and out of consciousness and the man steps back, and the Tube doors doors shut

and you really were standing so very close to me as the train moved, itself, *beneathe*ing.