

*Spring Journal, Canto XIV*

by Jonathan Gibbs

The next day we drove – by day –

On roads again crammed with cars and lorries and motorbikes and  
scooters,

All full of an insane sense of themselves, like a spray

Of roadside flowers revived by a long-awaited downpour,

Out on the A12 and the A133

Past Thorpe-le-Soken and Kirby Cross,

The odd St George's Flag hanging limply,

The odd roadside stall with plants for sale and an honesty box,

That mix of amour propre and the need for outward show

That says, this is England, we stand for what we believe in,

And if we don't precisely know

The meaning of our beliefs, well belief is a kind of feeling

Better understood in the gut

Than the brain, and as much inchoate as incoherent:

England land of piers and painted beach huts!

Nowhere more than seventy miles from the ocean!

And at the beach the tide was in

With only a few families still splashing and playing

And we stood with the waves slapping our shins,

And let the dirt of the North Sea cleanse us,

And while we stood there like so many useless Canutes

'Statue defenders' were pouring into

Trafalgar Square to make Nazi salutes

And attack the police – and remind us that football

Has been away for months, and that overweight, balding, violent thugs

Are as much part of the national picture

As monuments to murderers and commemorative mugs.

And we sat on the greensward at Frinton

And drank lemonade and ate cod and chips

And watched a kestrel carefully hovering over

The bluff, and move on and hover again, and the light was rich

And the people were gone, and an hour of early evening  
Early summer sun  
Is like a foretaste of eternity; smack your lips and  
You can taste it on your tongue,  
Salt and sweet like a can of pop drunk within reach of the breakers.  
And three days later I sat on a bed  
At St Thomas', by the river,  
And I watched the nurse unbag the needle and spread  
Its green plastic wings, a mechanical mosquito,  
Proboscis prepped for my vein,  
And he tapped my arm and leaned and pressed and  
In it went, no hint of pain;  
And as if by magic the snaking tube was sleek with claret,  
My blood, and on went the vacuum  
Tube and I watched it fill, slowly,  
The red of my life and the quiet hum of the room,  
As if all of this was something entirely ordinary,  
And it was hard not to see the world  
As made up of primary colours, like a picture book or a nursery poster,  
The serenity of it was absurd:  
Yellow sharps bin, green scrubs, red foolscap folder  
With my obs and my consent,  
While I watched my life being deftly extracted,  
And only then the main event:  
The vaccine – or not the vaccine, this being a blind trial –  
In its own splendid syringe  
Presented for injection in my opposite shoulder  
And in the moment just before the plunge  
I saw the liquid in the barrel was transparent  
As if there was nothing whatsoever there,  
As invisible as the virus, begging you not to believe in it,  
To see conspiracy only in the air,  
Then just the itch in the skin to say something had happened.  
And the room where I went to wait  
For another nurse to check me over

Looked right out at the river, at the great  
South Bank Lion of County Hall, the London Eye, the tourist boats at  
anchor,  
And she, like everyone I'd spoken to  
Except the receptionist and Matt the curly-haired doctor,  
Had a foreign accent; we owe so much to  
People who come here to save us from ourselves.  
And I cycled home through Burgess Park,  
Where people stood on tiptoe to pick cherries  
From the trees along the cycle path,  
And then down the Camberwell Basin canal, that we walked up  
On Millennium Eve,  
There was so much more of the week to come: Union Jack planes,  
Marcus  
Rashford,  
The rainy return of the Premier League,  
But for the moment leave me here, on my borrowed bike, legs turning,  
arm  
throbbing.

*Written 15 – 18 June 2020*