



The Final Year

CONTENTS

Part 1 Before We Begin	4
Part 2 Some Stuff Ya Need to Know:	
The Family	10
Part 3 End of Year 5	28
Part 4 Summer Holidays	58
Part 5 The Final Year	83
Part 6 The Final Poem	282

PART 1

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Ya need to be able to pin
this down

so ya can see it in ya mind as it plays out –
picture where it's happenin.

Imagine it's summer.
A hot one.

Leave the suburban semis to their leaf-dreams
and head for the city,
straight into the streets that surround the centre.

See how things are different?

It's tighter 'ere.
Can ya feel it?

See the take-aways and neon-washed litter?
The disfigured pigeons
huddled under railway bridges and flyovers?
Taxis buses pizza-boxes vape shops?

This is not a place of labradors and lattes
and electric Audis
this is a place of staffies and cider
and exhaust-pipe smoke,

a place of one foot in front of the other brother
cos what else ya gonna do?

See that tall, skinny kid with the ball in his hand
sayin, *see ya later* to his mate?

That's me:

Nathan Wilder
Nate.

10 years old
and a week away from the end of Year 5.



One more thing

The woman over there pushin the buggy,
hair scraped up in a top-knot,
headin to the shop for milk and cider,

a little kid
dressed as Spiderman
trailin behind her,

that's Mum.

The kid is Dylan
my nearly-four-year-old-nuisance-of-a-littlest
brother.

Always up to no good,
straight out any open door.

The bigger kid further back,
kickin stones along the road, ignorin Mum's shouts
to *GET A MOVE ON*,

that's Jaxon or Jax as everyone calls him:
my other brother

8 years old

he's alright.

Nearly forgot

The school ya can see right next to the park

in the middle of the estate,

the one with the fancy new claddin
the council are puttin on top of all the
crumblin bricks and callin it
'regeneration',

the one with the main road right next to it
rattlin the claddin back off
and the corner shop opposite the main gates
where Mum's headin to,

that's Poppy Field Primary.

My school.

These are my streets

these are my people

this is my story.



PART 2
SOME STUFF YA NEED TO
KNOW: THE FAMILY

Me (gonna do mine in rhyme)

Tall thin
like to win

on-point hair
long-distance stare

love football laughs
not down with maths

read everythin
make words sing

write don't fight
not a coward though right?

(Just swear I'm scared I'll lose control
of The Beast that sleeps within my soul.)

Mum

is bonkers

says it herself
not in a 'needs lockin up' kind of way
though she has been before

she's just damaged
I s'pose.

Ran away at 15
been runnin ever since,
won't ever say why
or what happened to make her leave,
but it was summat bad.

Had me at 17.

Always tryna fix someone,
people at the door with a broken wing.

Loads a lipstick

goes to Bingo round the corner
most days
laughs a lot loud proper head back snortin.

Cries too,
when she thinks we're asleep.

The story of the three wheres

No. 1: Nick – my dad

The reason I'm tall.

Mum keeps a picture of 'em together
dun't know I know it's in her top drawer.

Looked like Jesus
she says
and I see what she means
long black hair
little beard
graceful.

He was young
too young
like Mum.

Was gonna save her
help her escape the past
right up to the point she got pregnant with me.

Got cross got scared
got gone

went walkabout in the wilderness
never came back.

Could be dead
could be out there
still walkin

depends what ya believe.

I'm past it.

Mum'd deny it
but

she's always been lookin
for Jesus

it's just that now she only sees his face
at the bottom of a bottle
or the back of a Bingo card.

No. 2: Brandon — Jaxon's dad

Big bald bear

body-builder biceps

bouncer bully

beer beer beer

banks balaclavas bullets

behind bars

bye bye baby.

No. 3: The question mark — Dylan's dad

A lottery

many tickets sold

no winner's yet come forward
to claim the prize.

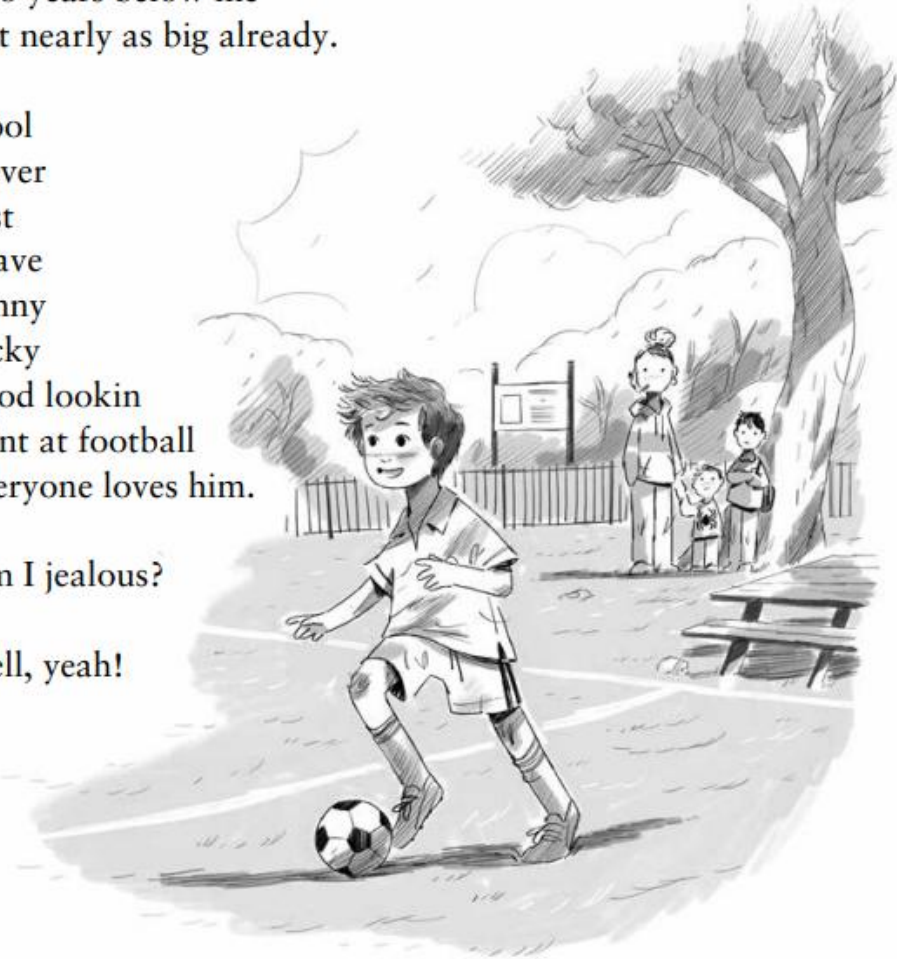
Jaxon

Jax
my little bro
two years below me
but nearly as big already.

Cool
clever
fast
brave
funny
lucky
good lookin
mint at football
everyone loves him.

Am I jealous?

Hell, yeah!



Dylan

my littlest bro
calls me Natey

we call him
Turbo Terror

always movin
always sweatin
even in his sleep

thinks he's 'Spideyman'.

I feel sorry for Jax
havin to share a room with him.

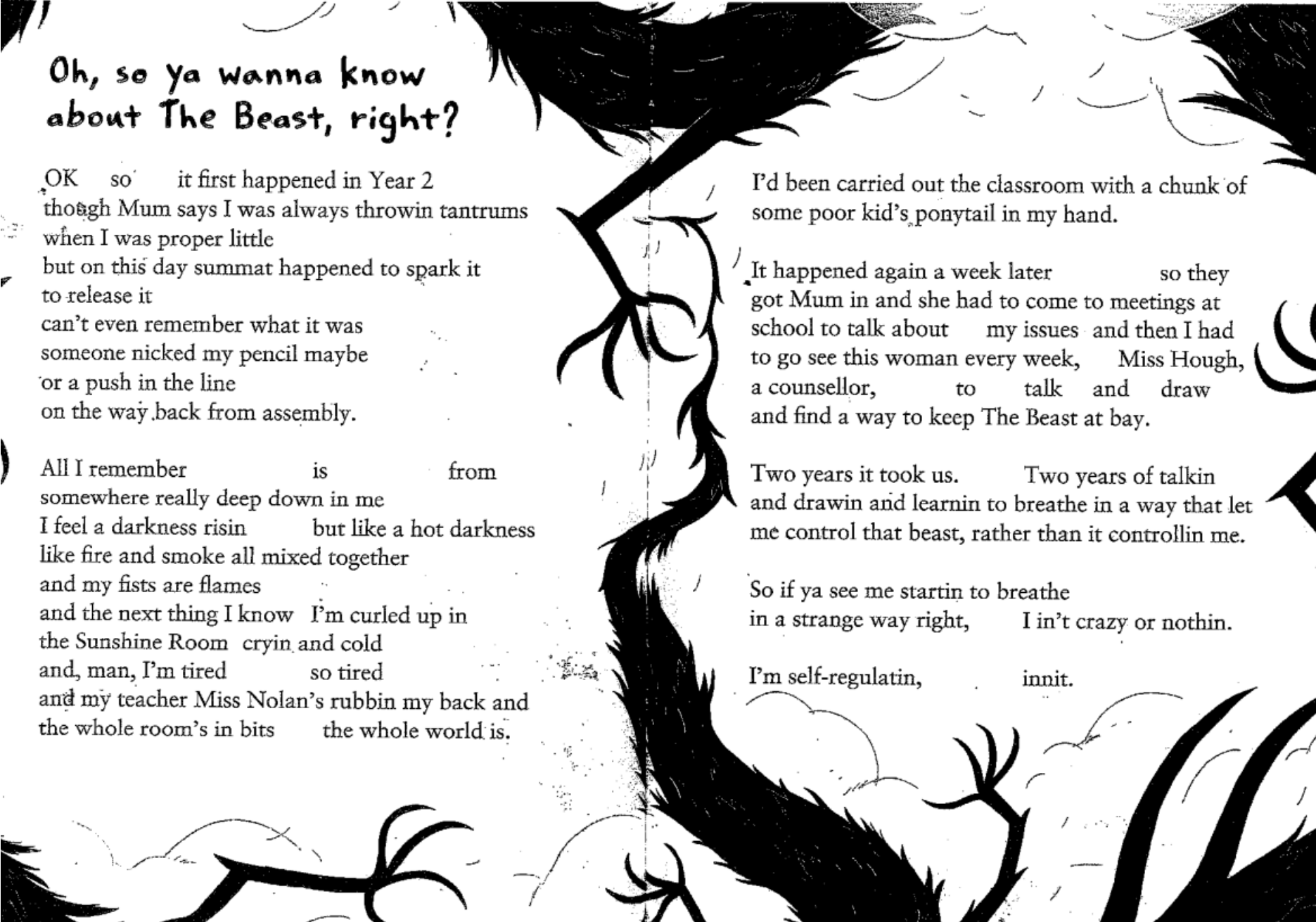
Red cheeks
red hair
(big clue for the ticket-holder there)

makes Mum turn the air
blue

joinin the crew at Poppy Field
in September.

Reception won't know what's hit 'em.

We still don't.



Oh, so ya wanna know
about The Beast, right?

OK so it first happened in Year 2
though Mum says I was always throwin tantrums
when I was proper little
but on this day summat happened to spark it
to release it
can't even remember what it was
someone nicked my pencil maybe
or a push in the line
on the way back from assembly.

All I remember is from
somewhere really deep down in me
I feel a darkness risin but like a hot darkness
like fire and smoke all mixed together
and my fists are flames
and the next thing I know I'm curled up in
the Sunshine Room cryin and cold
and, man, I'm tired so tired
and my teacher Miss Nolan's rubbin my back and
the whole room's in bits the whole world is.

I'd been carried out the classroom with a chunk of
some poor kid's ponytail in my hand.

It happened again a week later so they
got Mum in and she had to come to meetings at
school to talk about my issues and then I had
to go see this woman every week, Miss Hough,
a counsellor, to talk and draw
and find a way to keep The Beast at bay.

Two years it took us. Two years of talkin
and drawin and learnin to breathe in a way that let
me control that beast, rather than it controllin me.

So if ya see me startin to breathe
in a strange way right, I in't crazy or nothin.

I'm self-regulatin, innit.

Missin dad sketch me and Jax do:

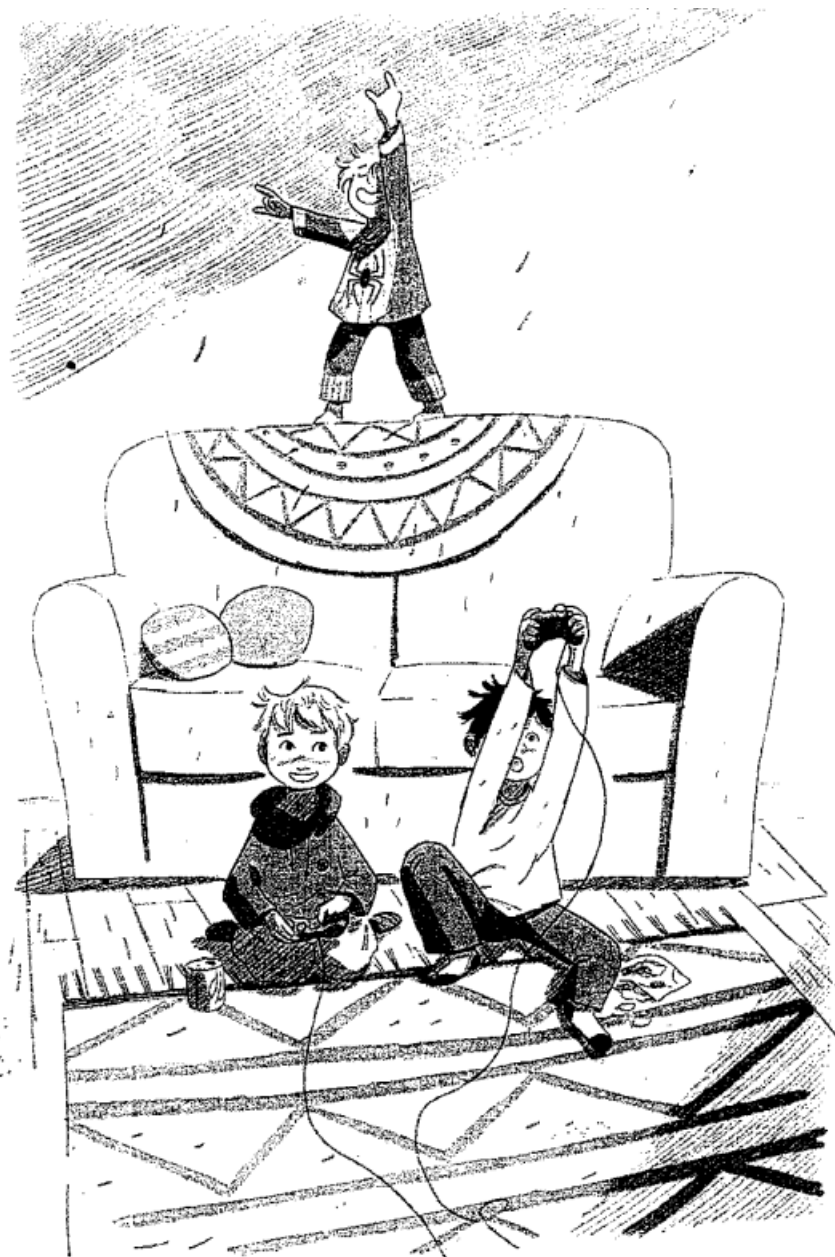
Me, pickin Real Madrid on Fifa:
How's yer dad, Jax?

Jax goes for Barcelona:
No Idea. He's a muppet. Don't need him.
How's yer dad, Nate?

Me: *No Idea. He's a muppet, Jax. Don't need him.*

Together: *We have each other, brother!*

We're hopin Dylan'll get involved
when he can talk better
and he's stopped pretendin
to cover everythin with his
'Spideywebs'.



Our house

for now

is a tiny terraced
jammed in the middle of a thousand more the same.

Landlord's a muppet
never fixes nothin
always says the rent's goin up
says he's sellin

stresses Mum out.

Gutters leak
smells damp,

back yard full of fadin plastic toys Dylan's smashed up.

Patch of grass over the road
NO BALL GAMES sign lyin on its side
covered in ball marks
upside-down shoppin trolley next to it.

Come in
through the front door into the livin room
which doubles as my bedroom

mind the buggy and bike
big TV propped up against the wall it fell from
sofa/bed – that's my duvet and pillow
stuffed behind it.
My pile of books.

Battered old kitchen at the back.

Upstairs is Mum's room
clothes everywhere
grotty little bathroom.

The boys' room
stuff everywhere, man.

If yer lookin for peace
go somewhere else.

Auntie San

lives next door
her house is even worse than ours.

Mum's best mate
no blood relation
but family, y'know?

Always round 'ere
at the kitchen table
or on the front step with Mum.

Heart of gold

front tooth of one
too.

Used to be a nurse
now she dun't do much
other than smoke
drink tea and cider
and talk rubbish with Mum

they call 'emselves

dole mates.

PS

that lad I was sayin
see ya later to
back at the start
with the bright blue eyes
that's Parker Smith,

my best mate since I nicked his biscuit
at nursery.

He's family
too.

PART 3
END OF YEAR 5

**All through Year 5 they've
been tellin us**

that next year will be tough
that we'd better be prepared for it
that it's a steppin stone to high school
that it's time to show what we can do
that it's SATS
that it's boosters and revision
that it's a fishbowl, everyone looks at the Year 6s
that it's time to knuckle down and focus
that it's all worth it in the end
that it's THE most important year of our lives so far
and we need to act like it
that it's all gonna change after this year, so we need
to enjoy it while we can
that we're gonna make ourselves proud
that it's time for us to step up and become top of the
school
that it's the final year.

Yeah, well, maybe, but

right now all I care about
is transition mornin tomorrow,

which kids I'll be with
next year,

cos we're a two-form entry
and they like to mix it up.

But me and PS have
always been lucky.

Oh

and who
the teacher'll
be.

Mum's out cold still

the mornin after Bingo
so I get the boys ready
like I've done a thousand times before.
Off-brand coco pops
the dregs of milk and juice,
Dylan bangin spillin
Jax a wordless spoon-scrapin zombie
still lookin cool though.

Add the bowls to the twisted towers
sprawled by the sink,
Give Dylan a kiss throw Jax a wink,
Sit on Mum's bed yer a good un, Natey.

I open her curtains she blinks at the son,

Love ya, Nate. Love ya, Mum.

After registers

Miss Barton reads out two separate lists of names.

One'll be the new 6G with Mrs Griffin,
who's been at Poppy Field
as long as anyone can remember
and seems like she'd rather be anywhere else,

the other'll be 6J
with a new teacher
Mr Joshua.

We go quiet
as
Miss
slowly
reads
out
each
name

asks	us
to	make
two	lines
ready	to
file	into
our	new
classrooms	for
the	mornin.

I only hear two names

Nate

Parker

the

end.

He nods at me

as his line shuffles off
to their new room.

Miss is in a rush
to get rid of us,

so she can get
her new Year 5s in.

Says she dun't wanna
talk about it,

to the kids
moanin as their

best mates go
out the door.

Says it wasn't her
decision,

she's busy
we'll get used to it.

I put my head down
and follow my line.

PS

I'll miss ya.

Mr Joshua

waits by the door to greet us.
I can hear him sayin, *Hi*, to the kids
at the front.

*Sit where you want for this morning
but make a sensible choice.*

I'm
dead
last.

Hi, he says,
I'm Mr Joshua.
Welcome.

Tall I'm guessin the same sort of age as Mum
but looks way younger
designer glasses footballer's skin fade
neat beard
big smile circles his thumbs as he talks.

I do my best impression of a smile

slide past him

slump in a seat and the smoke is risin
breathe Nate breathe

and I can feel the heat and the darkness and
The Beast withdraw return to the deep

and Mr Joshua's watchin me.

You OK fella?
Need a minute somewhere to chill?

I swallow it down.

No thanks I'm fine.



The classroom

belongs to the old Year 6

stinks of 'em

and I mean stinks.

Their fadin name-tags are peelin off, drawers

their work is all over the walls

piles of PE bags sit underneath their pegs.

They'll be back 'ere again in a couple of hours.

This place

is not mine.

He closes the door

walks to the front of the room.

*Well now, let's hope it doesn't smell as bad as this
this time next year.*

A few kids at the front laugh

I let myself look at him
from my slump.

He's fresh
for a teacher –
crisp skinny shirt
and chinos
black Air Force One

like he's just walked
off some fashion shoot
or summat.

He catches me lookin-
holds my eye

before I turn away.

Let's introduce ourselves,

he says,

*• because after this morning
I won't see you all again
until September
and I'd like to know something interesting
about you all to take away with me.*

*Something that will help me
to get to know you a little better.*

He starts

tells us he was born and raised round 'ere
went to school a mile or so away
lived in the same sort of house as me

moved to London to be a musician
spent years in bands tryna make it big.

Shows us a picture of him on some sweat-soaked
stage somewhere
he's holdin a guitar eyes closed
singin into the microphone,

but the dream died a few years back
so he came home
needed a 'proper' job so 'ere he is.

Tells us it's his first year as a teacher
then laughs:
but I don't think I'm supposed to tell you that!

Tells us he can't wait to get started.

Tells us he still loves music,
words,
football.

Tells us next year will be
fun
exciting
new
fresh
challenging

that we'll find
our way

together.

What he dun't say:

that next year will be tough
that we'd better be prepared for it
that it's a steppin stone to high school
that it's time to show what we can do
that it's SATS
that it's boosters and revision
that it's a fishbowl, everyone looks at the Year 6s
that it's time to knuckle down and focus
that it's all worth it in the end
that it's THE most important year of our lives so
far and we need to act like it
that it's all gonna change after this year, so we need
to enjoy it while we can
that we're gonna make ourselves proud
that it's time for us to step up and become top of
the school
that it's the final year.

And he seems OK

he really does.
But all I can think of is:

PS
I miss ya.

We do our intros

I tell him about me
but keep my guard up.

Tell him I like football too
and words and books.

He nods and smiles,

*Thanks, Nate
that's great.*

I sit back down,

listen to the others,

take in the new view.

As we're finishin up

he plays us a song,

Three Little Birds

by Bob Marley.

He's singin as we go back to our old class

'Cause every little thing gonna be alright!

Whatever.

He stops me as I leave

and goes, Nate I want you to know
that I'm here to help you this year,

I've spoken to Miss Barton and she's told me a bit
about everyone from her class.

I know things have been tough in the past
and I also know how well you've been doing
to keep things under control.

I saw you doing your breathing before

and I want you to know
that even though I don't know you yet
and you don't know me

I'm already proud of you.

And this time the heat in't from The Beast,
it's from my cheeks.

Cheers, Sir.

At lunch

PS says:

Nate
mate
stop worryin.

Every break and lunch
we'll meet up, man,
no problem.
Least you've not got Griffin.
Man, what a dragon!

And then he's off
leggin it to the top pitch
where the sports coach
is tryna sort
a game of dodgeball.

Come on, Nate!

Let's go!

A poem for PS (Don't be
daft, course I've not shown
him — it's still on the
crumpled pile I keep under
the sofa, well away from
Jax... and especially Turbo
Terror)

We'll always be bros
so tight so close
spirallin through every day.

We banter and laugh,
hang around at yer gaff,
don't care what the world has to say.

The knocks and the scrapes
might keep others awake
cos they've never had what we've got.

Brothers in arms
soundin warnin alarms
the friendship that never can stop.

PS's house

is the same as mine
but
different.

He's the only kid
for a start
so he's got his own room

own space

and his mum
and dad actually go out to work
and do the things parents are normally s'posed to do.

It's calm
and I can breathe.

Spend loadsa time chillin 'ere
after school

always food in the fridge
proper nice stuff
Hula Hoops and KitKats
instead of whatever's goin cheap
in the reduced section.

After school at PS's we get Fifa goin

like we always do,

• Ajax for me
• Chelsea for PS.

In between goals and throw-ins
and misses and offsides

I say: *Shame you'll be with Turner and his crew
next year.*

He says: *I'll just ignore 'em, Nate.*

They're muppets!

GOOOOOAAAAALLLLL!!!! HAAAAAA!!!

*Nate, man. Ya need to stop yappin
an start playin, lad!!!*

His mum gets home,
comes upstairs in her Boots uniform,
gives him a kiss which stays on his cheek
for a nano-second
before it's wiped off.

Out the way, Mum, he's gonna score!

Ya stayin for tea, Nate?

Nah, not tonight, thanks, Mrs S.

Turner

is, like PS says,
a muppet.

An absolutely
massive muppet.

The youngest of 4 brothers,

all of 'em like they've been carved out
of granite
like Stonehenge or summat
but bigger.

The 3 older ones got kicked out of high school
pretty much the minute they stepped through the door
and spend most of their time on bikes or mopeds
ridin the streets doin wheelies
wearin man-bags and scowls
waitin for dates with a judge, innit.

Turner'll end up the same.

Mrs Jones was once talkin about careers
in assembly – Aspirations Week or summat –
asked what jobs we'd like to do.

Turner's hand goes up: *I wanna be a robber, Miss.*
Cue dirty looks from Mrs Jones
and all the teachers round the side
and a playtime in the Head's office
discussin Poppy Field's values
and the need for aspirations.

Until now,
me and PS have always managed to avoid
bein lumped in his class.

He's always got a crew of **yes kids** round him
the **no kids** are the ones that get smacked.

Once got scouted by a Premier League team
scored two in his first game
got sent off
gave the coaches and the ref a mouthful
got dropped.

I trod on the back of his heel one day
playin footy on the top playground
last summer.

Told me he'd
break my nose
if I did it again.

He wasn't jokin.

Turner poem I wrote in
maths after he'd been
mouthin off about summat
at breaktime— (I was
s'posed to be countin faces
and vertices of useless 3d
shapes, but y'know when it
flows ya gotta grab it)

Turner's no learner
he'll fight and he'll burn ya
he's done things that can't be forgiven.

Turner, man, Turner
those fists gonna earn ya
a stay in triangular prison.

When I get in

there's a text waitin on my phone
from PS:

Yo, wot woz new teacher like btw?

Seems OK. Wot bout da Dragon of Griffinroar?

Mean, man! Proper mean!

On the last day of Year 5

we go and watch the Year 6 Leavers' Assembly.

They do a few poems about memories,
show us photos of their residential –
lifejackets and PJs,
rope-slides and stuff –
do a little play about the school and teachers,
everyone laughs.

A few kids that have been learnin the ukulele
do summat they say is a song
but really sounds more like,
God, I don't even know.

We clap
Turner boos
has to go sit by a teacher.

When it's over
we all sing the leavers' song
that gets sung every year.

It's always the signal for tears
loadsa tears
this year's no different.

Out come the tissues
the parents cry
the teachers cry
the teachin assistants cry
some muppets in Year 3 cry
Mrs Jones, the head, cries
the Year 6 teacher, who's off to be a Deputy,
cries into her droopy flowers.

Then they get presented with a book
by some old guy that does it every year
looks like he should be dead by now
a governor or summat.

I reckon he's Father Christmas too.

Then they all go off to the dinin hall
for biscuits and juice and photos

and we head back to waste the day
watchin films we've seen ten times before
eatin cheap crisps and popcorn

and me and PS sit next to each other

all day.

PART 4

SUMMER HOLIDAYS

I love the smell

of six sweet weeks of freedom
stretchin out in front of me.

We never go away anywhere.

Mum says we'll go somewhere fancy like Las Vegas
when she wins big at Bingo.

Yeah, right.

So summer is:

footy

bike rides

avoidin Turner and that lot

chillin at PS's, playin Fifa

wrestlin with Jax (and beatin him at Fifa)

tryna shake the littlest bro who's always on our case.

When I need to chill

I head to the library

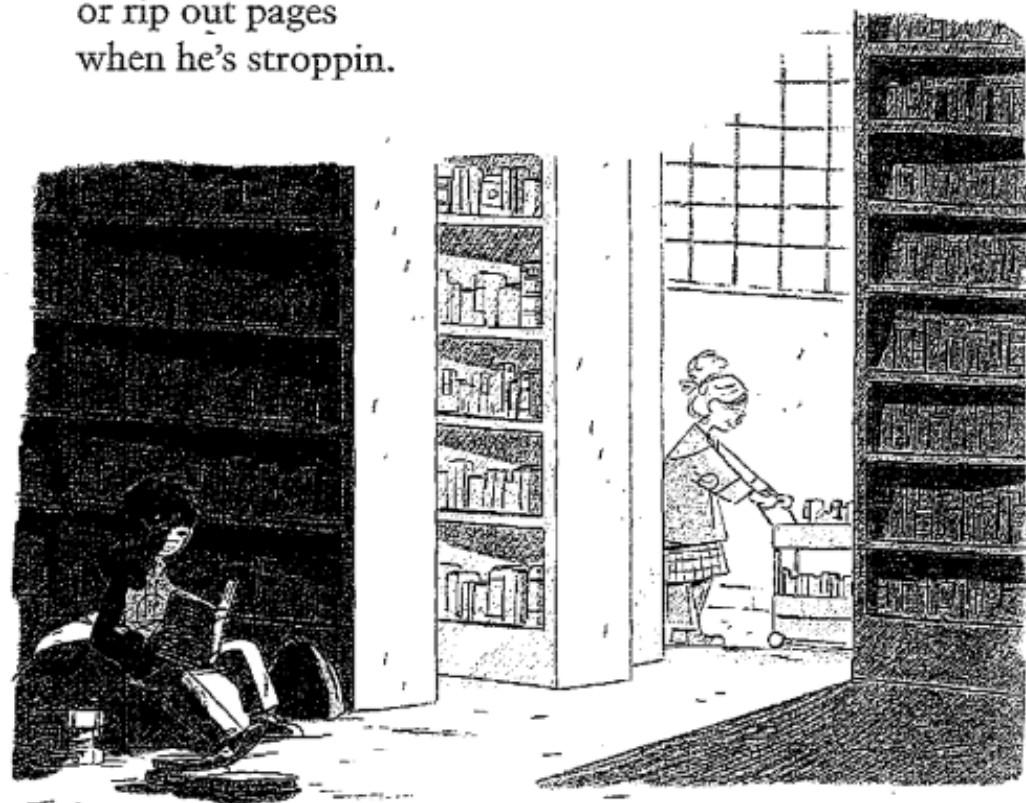
and wait for PS to get back from some Spanish beach
with a tan and a rude key-ring for me.

The first two weeks of this summer

are spent in the library
under the wing of Karen who's worked there for years.

This year, PS has gone Benidorm or summat.
So I stay 'ere and read

There's no point takin books home
Dylan'd just draw in 'em
or rip out pages
when he's stroppin.



Jax and Dylan

have to stay with Mum
cos they're too young
to go cyclin round the library
but she lets 'em play out
on the grass verge at the front
near the road
while she gabs in the kitchen
to Auntie San and knocks back cider.

Bonkers, I told ya!

Jax spends most of the time
keepin Turbo Terror
from leggin it off somewhere
like straight into the road
cos his little legs move him
at hyper-speed
ginger hair bobbin up and down
firin invisible webs.

By the time I'm home
they're sick of the sight of each other
so some days I take Dylan to the park
next to school

and let Jax play Fifa on his own for a bit.

When he's on a swing

it's like Dylan's in a trance
or summat.

Eyes wide open
totally quiet
for the first few swings

and

then

*Higher, Natey, Higher!!!!!! LOOOOK
NAAAAATTTTTEEEEEYYYYY
I'M FLYYYYYYYING!*

*I can touch the
SKYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!*

*I'm SPIIIIIIIIIIIIDDDDEEEEEYYYYYYYYY
MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!*

We always end up there for ages, man.

I read everythin I can find

by David Almond.

Last year
Miss Jones read us
The Boy Who Swam With Piranhas

and there was summat about it that hooked me.

His style

like music

like poetry.

What I read:

Kit's Wilderness,
The Fire Eaters,
Clay.

But my favourite is The Colour of the Sun

it just got me, man.

We alwa,

What I think:

Brilliant, man.
This guy's a genius.

He writes about people like me,

people from my background,

and the words just flow like
summat else, y'know?

The stories take me
to sea
and sand
and big open skies,

to places I've never been.

Gets me thinkin maybe I could do the same
about this place.

This life.

As I'm leavin' the library

Karen smiles at me
You like David Almond, Nate?

Yeah, he's mint.

I knew you would. He fits you, you know?
You ever read Skellig?
She shows me the book,
orange and gold,
angel's wings on a kid's back.

She puts her hand on the front cover –
I just love it you must read it.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

I gotta go, Karen but I'll read it I will.

Text from Spain:

You'll never guess who's here as well??????

Go on...

Turner... and his brothers...

HA!!!!!! ENJOY!!!!

Jax, Jax cool as ya like

spins through summer on a second-hand bike.

Needs no mum no dad no me
till he stiffs that jump and scuffs his knee.

Tears his trackies style disaster
Natey's 'ere to soothe and plaster.

High five fist bump back in the game
knockout smile that masks all pain.

Jax, Jax cool as ya like
spins through summer on a second-hand bike.

Sometimes, some of the
local teenagers have a
water-fight on the verge
outside our house — and
of course they all love Jax
so let us join in

Me, Dyl and Jax tearin round with 'em
balloons are bombs burstin over our heads
Dylan firin webs
Jax's skin glistenin in the sun, directin the battle
and they're howlin and whoopin, the big kids,
until someone's vape gets soaked and it's all over.

And Mum and Auntie San sit in battered deckchairs
by the front step
rackin up empties
howlin with laughter
heads back,

*My boys my boys
get yerselves 'ere for a hug.*

The three of us breathless water and sweat,
I love ya so much don't ya ever forget.

I'm tellin ya, Nate,

his brothers are lunatics

but he was sound

while we were there,

PS says,

handin me this year's rude key-ring with a smirk

(ya don't wanna know, trust me.)

I reckon he's turned a corner or summat.

He was just I dunno

cool.

I slide the keep-away-from-parent present in my pocket,

Yeah, right,

and hope he can't feel

the heat of the risin Beast

breathe

breathe

breathe.

Ya still comin to Dylan's party next week, P?

Course, man!

Dylan's 4th birthday party

There's a bouncy castle

on the grass verge out front

where all the little local girls

are jumpin with Jax.

An old boyfriend of Auntie San's

who she's spinnin along

is dressed in the worst Spiderman costume

I've ever seen.

But littlest bro is proper convinced,

dun't notice the blue football socks

'Spiderman's' wearin

or the fact he stinks of fags and beer,

goes totally shy and quiet

when he sees him.

And when 'Spiderman' fires
a can of silly string he's got hidden up his
Spidey sleeve,

I swear Dylan's face goes redder
than I've ever seen it before

and he screams:

SPIDEYWEBS

SPIDEYWEBS

SPIDEYWEBS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

After Dylan blows out the candles

and Mum and Auntie San have stopped spillin cider
while they dance to proper rascal old tunes

PS gets a message
on his phone
and says,
*Nate, I gotta go man,
Mum needs me.
Top party
save me some cake.*

Waves at Mum and Auntie San.
High-fives Jax, who's still surrounded by girls,
ruffles Dylan's hair,

jumps on his bike,
raises one hand to wave
as he pedals away.

Later's, he shouts.

Yeah, later's, P.

Dylan says:

Natey, will ya read me a story tonight?

Pleeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaasssssssssssseeeeeeee

Natey!

He's shattered,

partied out.

Mum's staggered off to Bingo

tryna win back

the bouncy castle money she borrowed

from someone

ya don't wanna break promises to.

After readin the same story
three times

Littlest Bro says:

Natey?

Yes, Dylan?

Was it really Spideyman?

Course it was, Dyl.

Natey?

Yes, Dylan?

Love ya.

Love ya, Turbo Terror.

I kiss his hot cheek

tuck him in

head downstairs

to smash Jax

at Fifa.

Bingoin mad

If she's been at Bingo
with Auntie San
they'll both stumble
through the front door.

Mum always trips
over the bikes,
swears,
giggles.

Auntie San always goes:
Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!! Ya'll wake Nate up
Ohhhhhhh! Hiya Nate, sorry, mate!

Then they both come over all huggy and kissy
breathin smoky cider-breath all over me
lipstick everywhere.

To be honest
I don't mind cos they're always
dead nice.

Off they go into the kitchen
openin a bottle of summat or other.
I drift off to sleep-listenin
to the same stories
about lost loves and bad luck,
missed opportunities,
near misses,

the ghost of Jesus.

Just one more number, San
that was all I needed...

Every now and then

before Jax and Dylan are up,

Mum'll come downstairs

make us a brew,

get under my covers

and chat about stuff.

And after a while

she always, always, always,

looks right into my eyes,

moves my fringe across

and says: *Jesus, Nate*

ya do look like him,

y'know?

I know, Mum.

She'll look away,

not wantin me to notice

the tears in her eyes,

I try my best, Nate

I really do.

I know, Mum.

Things'll be different one day, you'll see

I know ya do so much to help us, Nate -

my little general, in't ya?

Love ya, Mum.

Love ya, Nate.

I wish ya could've met him

before he...

Me too, Mum.

Me too.

Summat I worry about
over the last few weeks of
summer

Sometimes PS dun't answer his phone
when I call him,
which is summat he's never done before.

When I ask him about it
he gets proper twitchy,
says he's been at his uncle's
lookin after his little cousin.

But I can always tell
when he's lyin,
cos he can't look at me.

Just get on with the game, Nate
he hisses,
starin at the screen
wavin his controller at me.
Get off my case, man!

And in the last week

He just seems to
d i s a p p e a r.

Text from me to PS the
night before the start
of Year 6

We meetin in mornin?

Text from PS to me

Can do

PART 5
THE FINAL YEAR

The first day back

I get out the house
as quick as I can,
cos Mum's actually up and about
tryna wrestle Dylan into his uniform
and he's havin none of it.

I pour some cereal out for Jax,
who's not even bothered
about startin a new school year.

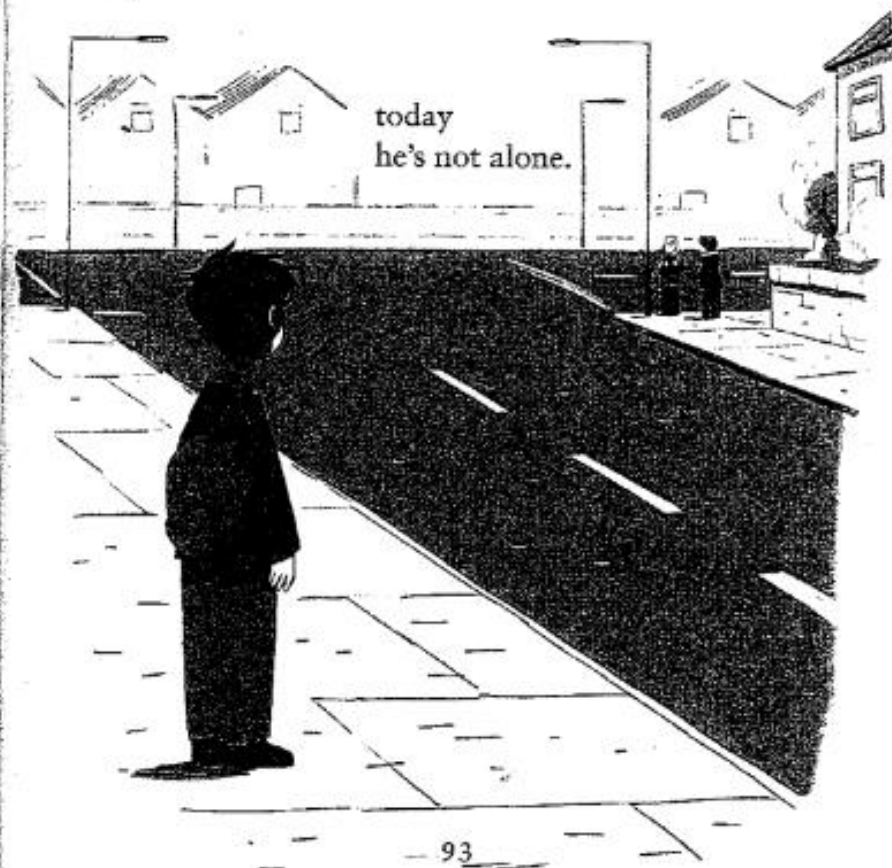
Grab my bag
and bust a groove,
to see what's goin on
with PS.

I meet him

at the end of his road
like always.

Only today
is different;

today
he's not alone.



Alright, Natey lad?

Says Turner slidin me the side eye
as PS nods at me
kinda lookin embarrassed
but also kinda
not.

Alright, Turner?

As we walk
they-talk
about Benidorm
and the pool
and how cool the entertainment team were
how great the chocolate ice-creams were
how fast the waterslide was
and what Griffin will be like this year.

And all I can think about is when he threatened to
break my nose.

And there's no room for all of us on the pavement
so I have to walk behind.
and PS barely even looks back at me.

And I begin
to understand
that sometimes

three's a crowd.

Three Little Birds

we ain't.

On the playground

Loadsa kids are there already,
lookin shiny-bright
in too-big jumpers and coats,
carryin pristine lunch-packs.

Turner and PS
go up the top pitch
and start passin a ball about,
like me and PS have done
since we went into the juniors.

But I hang back
on the main playground.

Through my new classroom window,
I watch Mr Joshua
as he darts about
puttin Post-it notes on each desk.

Mrs Jones pokes her head
into the room,
says summat to him as he circles his thumbs.

He nods
and gives her a big
smile.

He catches sight of me
lookin at him,

salutes me
like a soldier or summat.

I do an
I'm-not-at-all-embarrassed-to-be-doin-this smile
and salute back.

NAAAAATTTTTEEEEEYYYYY, look!

Dylan's tearin across the playground
ahead of Jax and Mum who's wearin pjs
and last night's 5-pint eyes.

Look! Spideyman goes to school!!!!

And he fires a web at me.

Ya look smart, littlest bro! Behave yaself!!!

But he's beyond me already,
chargin headlong towards the climbin frame,
through the web-coated crowds.

Mum kisses me on the cheek
as Mr Joshua opens the classroom door.

Mum spots him
stops dead flicks her faded highlights
Is that ya new teacher, Nate?

Yeah, that's Mr Joshua.

He smiles and waves at Mum.

She waves back
does the smile she does
when the landlord comes lookin for rent
and she's not got it.

Turns to me and just says

WOW!

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

Year 6J

The room smells of aftershave and new books,
all the boards backed.

*Put your coats on, any peg you want,
Mr Joshua says as we filter in.
Find your name on your desk and
have a go at the activity on the board.*

I'm on a table next to Caleb,
who's good at art and always pretty quiet,
lost in thought.
He's starin at the one display board
that's already filled.
I follow his eyes to the big laminated letters:
DAVID ALMOND.
And then underneath that –
a picture of the same book Karen talked about
at the library that kid with wings

Skellig.

On the whiteboard

in handwritin so neat it must have taken him ages,
Mr Joshua's put:

Welcome to Year 6 – what a ride it's going to be!

Find your Morning Activity Book from the pile on
your table –
write me a sentence that sums up how you're
feeling today:

I'm feeling nervous and excited all at once –
like there's a firework in my belly waiting to go off!

I write:

I'm gutted my best mate is in the other class.

As he's scootin round the class greetin people,
he looks over my shoulder at what I've written.

Don't worry, he says. Remember...

And then sings:

'Cause every little thing gonna be alright!

He points at a big banner on the back wall
that reads

Y6J: Every Little Thing Gonna Be Alright!

I breathe and breathe and breathe.

When the bell goes

Mr Joshua sends us home
a table at a time
from his position at the door
which opens out
onto the playground.

As I pass him, he fist bumps me,
Good day?

Not bad, I say.

Nice one, Nate.

Sir, ya like David Almond, eh?

*Yeah, of course! He's incredible –
you read much of his stuff?*

Yeah, all summer at the library.

*Excellent, Nate. He points at the display.
You read Skellig?*

Not yet but I keep hearin how mint it is.

*Ah, just you wait, Nate. Just you wait...
It'll change your life.*

And I walk out
into a crowd of mums,
includin mine
(proper made up in her goin out make-up)
who all smile and do silly giggles
when Mr Joshua says, *Hello!*

Word gets around, innit.

I catch a flash of PS's bag

as him and Turner
go out through the gates
and onto the park.

Ya not goin with PS?
Jax says.

Apparently not.

The Beast begins to stir

but Jax can see the signs a mile off
like he can smell the smoke
feel the heat or summat
and he always has enough coolness
to dampen the flames.

Hey bro *chill, man,*
do ya breathin thing, innit.

Puts his arm round me.

Let's roll.



What the next few weeks teach me about Mr Joshua

He's got a wife
a high school English teacher
he dun't ever stop singin
only gets cross when he needs to.

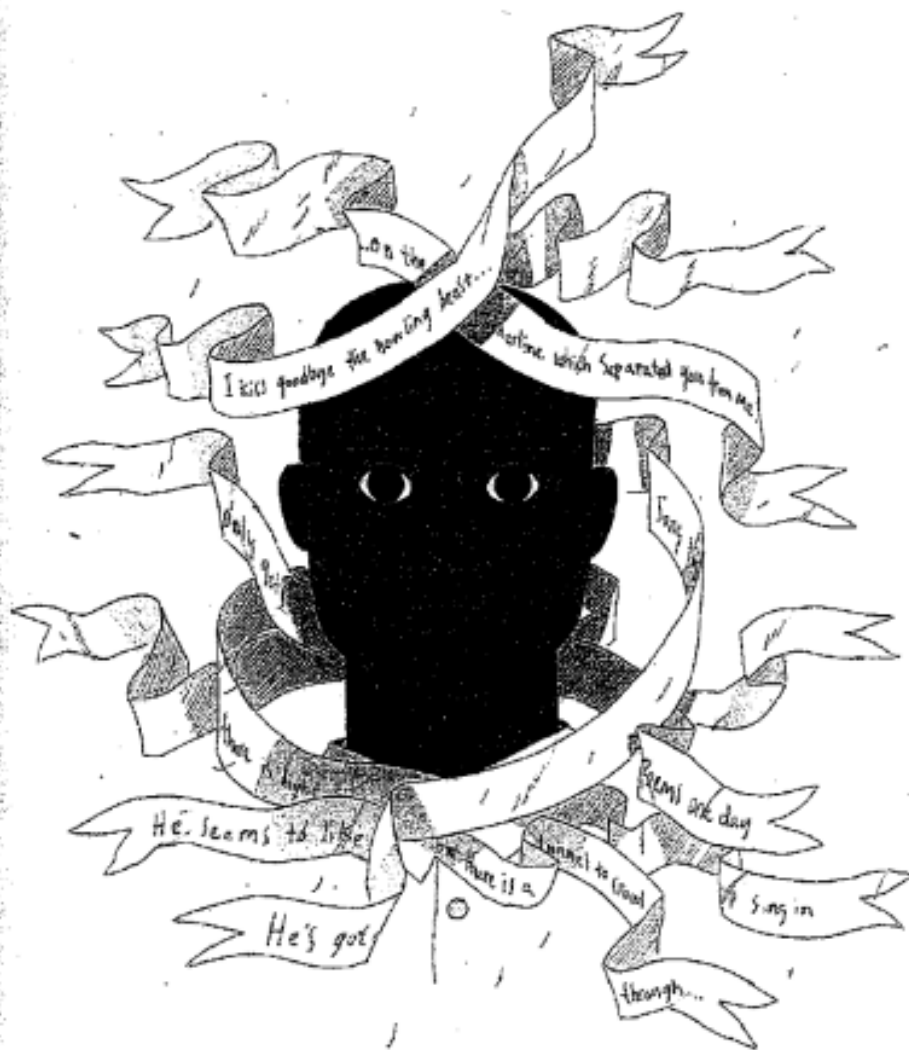
And he seems to like me.

We're lookin at poems one day
and talkin about how poetry and song lyrics
kinda blend into one.

*See, the best songwriters do what poets do, he says:
they talk about their life, in their own voice.*

Then we watch some videos of different poets
talkin about poetry,
why they do it and all that sorta stuff
and one of 'em says,
I write poems because I have to.

But he's talkin in **my** voice.



Mr Joshua asks us to write a poem about our family

And when I read mine out
he watches me really closely

and when I finish
he lets out a deep breath,

Nate you're just like me.

At the end of the day

Mr Joshua calls me over to his desk,

Hey, Nate

I just wanted to say .

that poem you wrote was beautiful

there was something about it that just grabbed me
made me feel something, you know?

And that's what the best writing does, Nate
it's the feels you're looking for.

He opens his drawer, you got a notebook
or anything that you keep ideas in?

I shake my head,
just a pile of old paper, Sir.

He passes me a notebook
a proper posh little
hardbacked black one.

Here he says *have this*
I keep one around like I used to in the bands,
you've got to grab those ideas when they come
or else they're gone forever
you know?

And he waves his hand above his head
tryna grab summat that in't there.

No one used to tell me to write my ideas down
Nate but they were just there knocking on the
inside of my head until I did –
just like the poet in the video
and you I think you have the flow
you have to grab that pen, Nate
let it all go.

He spins round in his chair
and types summat into Google,

Now look at this
these are David Almond's notebooks
they're on display up in the North East
see all those mad swirls of words and pictures?

And he spins back round to look at me
proper kind look in his eyes,

It helps you process the world, you know?
All that heavy stuff we have to carry.
Then he glances at his watch,
Oooooops " *staff meeting*
I've got to go Nate see you tomorrow.

What the next few weeks also teach me about PS

He's under Turner's spell

proper style

he's not bein mean or nothin

he's just

not there

not in the street mornin or night

not online.

The only time I see him on the playground

he's with Turner

two shadows blandin into one

he in't 'ere

he's gone.

I start spendin lunchtimes in the school library

Explorin poetry

well

the battered few 'old poetry books they've got.

I like the way poets can just do

whatever they want, man,

write about anythin anyhow,

I like the ones that write like ya can tell where
they're from, y'know?

Ya kinda get closer to 'em or summat.

Mr Joshua lets me borrow

some of his books as well

says he knows he can trust me,

Best keep them away from Dylan though, eh Nate?

A poem I write in my ideas
book about PS but would
never EVER show anyone in
the world let alone him

It's funny how ya move in the same way
kick the ball the same
the way ya tie yer laces and laugh
the way yer bag moves as ya run
all still the same.

The only thing that's different
is everything's changed.

One mornin

Caleb's doodlin
in his activity book
as Mr Joshua talks us
through the timetable for the day,
and I'm watchin how his pen moves
and it amazes me how what's in his brain
flows down his arm so easily.

What ya drawin, man?
Ah this? This is just stuff
the stuff inside my head.

Man, yer an artist dude
that stuff inside yer head is art.
He gives a little giggle like he's proper embarrassed.

Man, the things people can do with a pen.

You've not been chillin with PS, Nate?

Caleb says lookin up from his page,

What's up with that?

He's always with Turner

and that load of idiots now.

Yeah, well times change, bro times change.

The SATs talk

So when any other teacher talks to us about SATs
they go all tight-lipped
and talk about revision and hard work,
but Mr Joshua is proper chill.

It's Monday mornin after assembly
and he says he wants a SATs chat –
cue plenty of eye rolls and groanin
and he goes,

No, no, no, not that sort of chat.

*I want you all to understand
that in life*

*there are some things you just have to do,
and tests are one of those things.*

*However, I need you to know that these things
are not the be all and end all,*

so I don't want anyone stressing out, OK?

*All you can do is make sure
you're the best you can be –
and that's more than enough for me.*

And then he glances at the door
and goes a bit quieter
rolls those thumbs,
*I shouldn't really be telling you all this
because I know how important
some people think these tests are*

*but you know my wife works in a high school
and I can tell you this –
high schools couldn't care less
about what results you get in your SATs –
they just want you to do certain things well
to add up and all that stuff
and be able to write
and tie your shoe laces
and shower every day.*

*And he says, laughin,
You all remember how stinky this classroom was
when you came to meet me for the first time?
Exactly! So let's make sure
we're taking care of the personal hygiene, guys –
I'm not having our room known as the stinky one!*

*So
we do this year together, right?
We support each other.
I promise you all this,*

*There's another joke groan
cos we know what's comin next...*

*That's right 6J
and he holds his invisible mic
throws his head back
and he's no longer in a classroom
in a city centre school...
He's on stage at Wembley...*

EVERY LITTLE THING GONNA BE ALRIGHT!

It's a Wednesday in
November when the ball
hits me in the back

I spin round and see Turner and PS laughin.

Wipe sticky mud off coat,
can't wipe redness from cheeks,
can't wipe hate from Turner's voice:
Give us the ball back then, loner!

Can't get rid of the bite in my guts
when I hear PS's sniggers.

I'd been standin on the edge
of the top pitches talkin to
Caleb

about ideas
showin each other our notebooks
and watchin the kid
who's been my best mate for years sniggerin.

Jax
who's been playin on the next pitch
comes over,
Y'alright, bro?

I'd been standin on the edge
of the top pitches talkin to
Caleb

about ideas
showin each other our notebooks
and watchin the kid
who's been my best mate for years sniggerin.

Jax
who's been playin on the next pitch
comes over,
Y'alright, bro?

Turner goes,

*Ha, look at the state of him
bringin his little muppet brother over
to help him out.*

*What's up, Nate?
Ya can't stand up for yerself, dude?
You've always been like that though, eh?
You'd rather punch walls than people, eh?
Cos they don't whack back, innit?*

*Shut it, Turner, Jax shouts
and boots the ball back over
to where the pair of 'em are walkin off laughin,
arms round each other's shoulders.*

Typical Beast, eh?

*Where d'ya go when there's muppets to roast?
Always asleep when I need ya the most.*



Caleb sees the trouble on my face

Don't worry about 'em, Nate.

They don't think like us...

*I've seen the poems ya write
seen yer ideas...*

Ya can do what I do

ya just paint pictures with yer words, bro.

Remember what ya said to me?

*All that stuff goin on in yer head,
y'know?*

Lunchtime ideas book poem

Don't hate, Nate,

yer better than that.

Yer a watcher,

a writer

keep The Beast 'neath the hatch.

A dreamer,

a learner

don't sweat about Turner.

Mud is just mud,

so wipe yerself clean.

And don't hate, Nate,

yer a dreamer

so dream.

I don't notice Mr Joshua has
walked into the library and
is readin the poem over my
shoulder

You OK, Nate? Want to talk about it?

Nah, I'm OK, sir.

Well, listen, if you ever want to, I'm here OK?

I know how tricky friendships can be at this age.

And he puts his hand on my shoulder.

Nice poem, by the way,

great to see you're in the flow.

*It's how I got started in music
with words.*

I'll let you into a secret

*I was never much good with the music
but the words...*

*Then he pulls a book from the top shelf
and drops it in front of me,*

We start this next week in class.

I look up at the book

Skellig.

**DYLANNNNNNNN! COME DOWN
FOR TEA!**

Mum's shoutin

as I tip fish fingers and chips

onto Turbo Terror's Spiderman plate.

Ah, Natey, go and find that lad will ya?

I'm already late for meetin Auntie San

and I'm gaspin for a pint.

Ah, brilliant, now I've smudged me nails.

Dylan comes down pale

No spidey bouncin
no webs.

Y'OK, *dude*?

No answer, just a grumpy look.

Mum ruffles his hair as she passes in a blurfume,
He's been quiet all week,
his teacher phoned yesterday
to say he's not been himself for a bit,
just knackered...

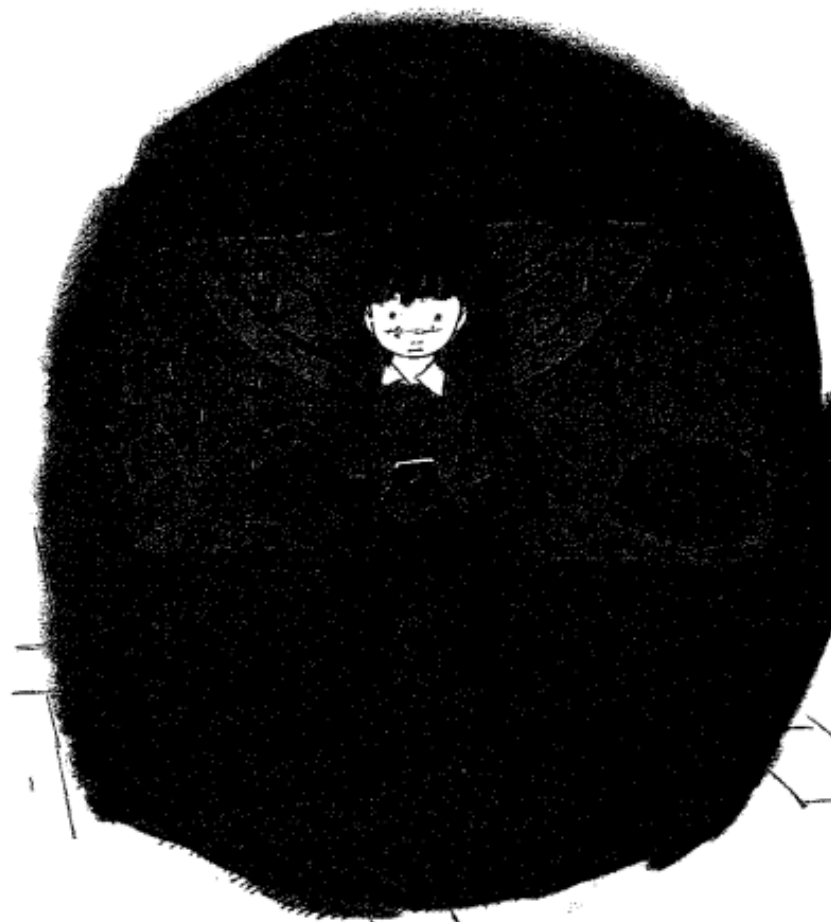
Aren't we all, eh? she says,
as she disappears back upstairs
to finish the pre-Bingo war-paint.

All that school work, innit, Dyl love?

Text to PS

Yo dude what's happenin, man?
I thought we were tight?

Message left unread.



We start Skellig

and straight away I'm hooked.
Every afternoon I settle in my chair
and get carried away to this other world.

The weird guy in the garage
all dusty and pale
eatin takeaways and drinkin beer

the wilderness
babies
owls.

And Mina,
man,
she's cool
a bitta mystery about that one
just her and her mum at home.

As Mr Joshua reads
he does different voices for each character
Dr Death like a proper creepy old dude.

I watch Caleb doodlin
just lines and lines arcing and flowin
across the back of some old maths worksheet
framin the spaces of his brain.
He draws wings.

We have these long chats
about what we think's gonna happen:
who the guy in the garage might be
what he's doin there
how Michael feels about movin house
bein away from his mates
and the baby.

And then one afternoon
Mr Joshua stops readin at the end of a chapter
puts the book under the visualiser
so we can see the words he's just read.

Mina's talkin to Michael about drawin
how it can make ya look at the world more closely,
help ya see things more clearly
and Caleb's watchin
and so am I

and Mr Joshua nods at me,

Words and pictures, eh, 6J – tell your story, guys

tell your story.

We do drama sessions in the hall in pairs

It's me and Caleb.

We're all lost in the wilderness
of Michael's garden
and have to find a way out.
Then he makes us freeze-frame
and brings over one of his old mics
and starts interviewin us
all about how we'll escape,

*Any way you want, 6J,
be as imaginative as you can.*

People say all sorts of daft stuff
knives and rope swings,
guns and helicopters,
tanks and quad bikes.

*Nate, Caleb:
How are you getting out of the wilderness, boys?*

Wings and words, sir. Wings and words.

And most of the kids in our class are gawpin at us like we've got six heads or summat

But
Mr Joshua's smilin to himself
and noddin
and almost under his breath he goes,

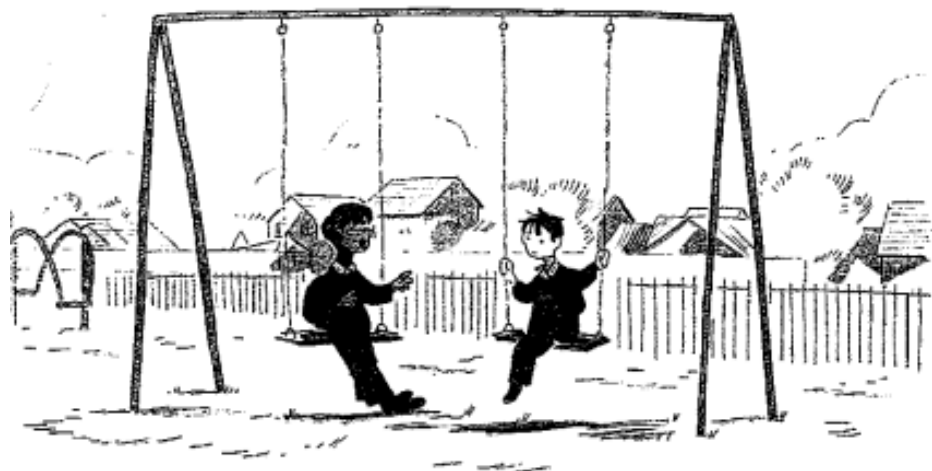
*Ideas, 6J.
Ideas guide the way.*

At the end of the day

Me and Caleb are in the park next to school.
We talk about Skellig while we're on the swings.

*Yo, Nate, ya believe in angels, bro?
Nah, man,
why, d'you?*

*I dunno, not really I s'pose
but sometimes
I think there's gotta be someone or summat
watchin us
or, what's the point, man?*



We go back to Caleb's for Pot Noodles (Bombay Bad Boy or nothin, innit?)

And man,
his house is even messier than mine
no carpets at all downstairs
white plastic garden furniture in the kitchen.

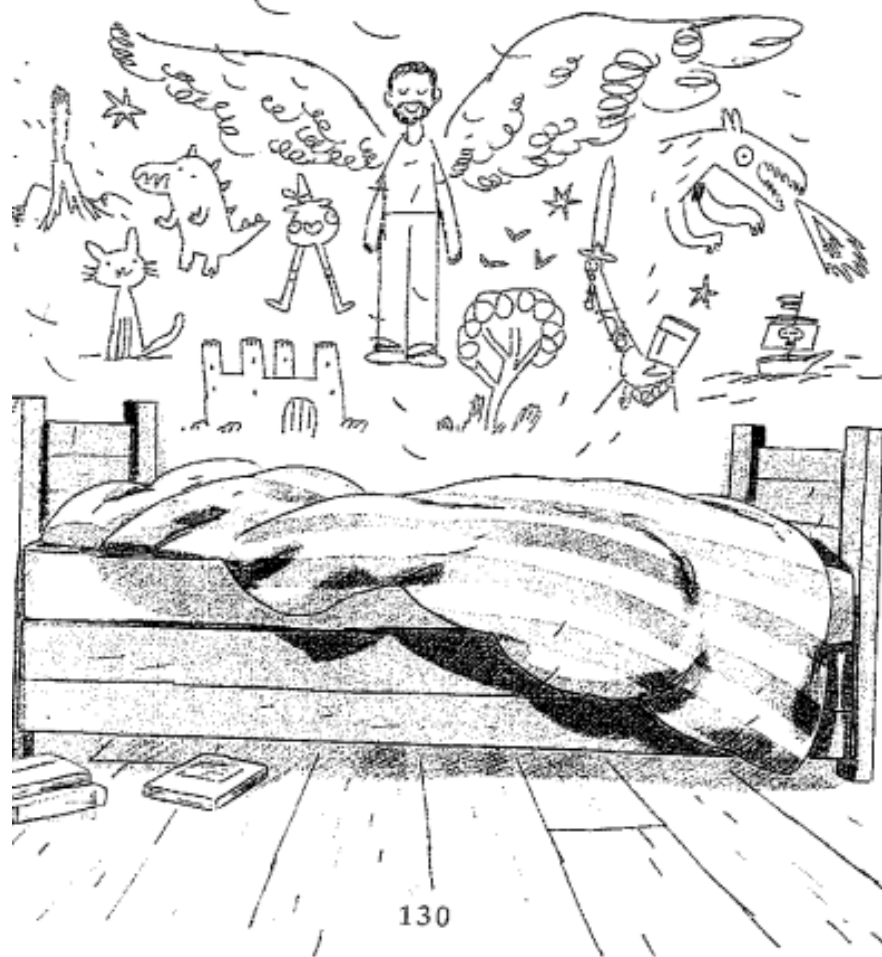
*Sorry about the state of things
y'know how it is
Dad's doin his best
but since Mum went he just...
it's like he's given up, y'know?*

*Yeah man, I get it,
no worries.*

We go up to his room

And every bit of bare plaster
is covered with drawins.

It's like he's tipped out his head in there,
and right above his bed is a picture of his dad
with angel's wings.



At school Mr Joshua goes

*Right, 6J –
this morning there'll be no practice papers
no revision or spelling tests.*

And he lines us up
and takes us out into the park by school
and just lets us play.

I mean he really just lets us play,
and stands watchin us
a big smile on his face.

When we get back to class

Mr Joshua stands at the front and goes:

Right, guys,

*you know how much I've been looking forward
to next week's residential.*

The Lake District

is one of my favourite places on Earth.

It's sooooooooo beautiful.

*Now your parents have all got the kit list
for the things you need – and remember,
please don't go out and start buying new clothes –
it's not a fashion show.*

*The place we're staying has all the waterproofs
and wellies and fleeces you'll need –
and gloves and hats...*

*I've seen the weather forecast and it's due to snow!
I'm soooooo EXCITED!*

Also, don't forget that no phones are allowed.

*Me and Mrs Griffin will be posting a blog
so those of you whose parents have internet access
can keep up to date with all the fun we'll be having.
We're only there for two nights
so let's make sure to enjoy it.*

Most importantly, be here on time.

The coach leaves at 9am on Wednesday morning...

Don't be late!

He shows us a slide show of where we're goin:
a great big old house with loadsa space round it

Windermere

ropes

slides

canoes.

Man, it looks mint..

Wednesday 8.55 am

I'm at the front of the coach next to Caleb.
Mr Joshua and Mrs Griffin on the pavement
checkin everyone in.

Kids fussin about, man,
bringin so much stuff
it's like we're goin away forever.

I got nowt much to bring anyway
so packin it into a coupla JD bags was easy.

Turner and PS and the rest of the muppets
on the back row
handin out sweets and jumpin about like idiots.

Mr Joshua gets on
Okay guys, settle down, please.
Can you make sure you've got your seat belts on?

Griffinroar comes past him
and stalks down the aisle checkin and scowlin
till even the noise boys at the back
are bound by belts.

*It's going to take about two hours to get there,
so just chill out and enjoy the scenery.*
*And, please... if anyone starts feeling unwell –
shout out and we'll get something over to you.*

He holds up a plastic bag and grins:

I don't need any sick on these new kicks!

Caleb turns to me and whisper-laughes:
It's not a fashion show though, right, Mr Joshua?

As the coach pulls away

loadsa kids are strainin at their seat belts to wave
out the window to their mums or dads or aunties
or whatever.

Flailin about like babies, man.

Me and Caleb just watch 'em.

No point wavin at nobody, innit.



We leave the city behind

and red-faced kids
burnt out from bouncin around
on their mad sugar rushes
start fallin asleep
or clutchin plastic sick bags
or just sittin like zombies.

Even the back of the coach is quiet now
as we slide out onto the motorway.

The landscape changes, man.
And all these muppets miss it.
Too busy with the rumble of tarmac
or stomach gurgles or the slow flow of sleep.

Caleb's sketchin all he can see
and so am I
in my head.

Cities blend into fields
motorbikes and scooters into sheep and cows.

The boundary line of what I know
gets left way way behind.

A black rim of distant white-tipped hills
and mountains rises in my mind
ages before I see 'em.

As we get closer

the hills are whiter than they looked:

snow everywhere

like someone's laid down feathers
on the shoulders of a new world.

Mr Joshua's walkin back from handin out another sick bag

Stops at mine and Caleb's seats.

See, boys... I told you! Just look at it all out there.

Soak it in. Food for the soul.

Food for the mind.

Feel it.

Draw it.

Then he looks straight at me:

Write it.

Me and Caleb get lucky

Cos we get the only room with two beds
whilst all the rest of the cattle
get lumped into rooms of 4 and 6 and 8.

The afternoon

is spent unpackin
and then butties in the dinin room bit.
The instructors are all sound
proper red outdoorsy cheeks and hands and that
but a good laugh
the sort ya can tell proper love what they do.

The main guy, John
is barely taller than me with a little bald spot at the
back of his head and a high-pitched giggle when he
says summat daft, which is like every other word.

Dead friendly face.
He gives us a talk about all the rules and stuff.
Tells us there's machine guns in the halls
to stop boys and girls meetin in their pjs and nighties.

Says tonight we'll be doin The Night Line...

There's table football and a battered old pool table
but the you-know-who crew
take 'em both over straight away
PS avoidin eyes and Turner just starin.

So me and Caleb go scout out the rest of the place
and it's mint.

A big old house
where some posh family musta lived years ago

a massive common room
chairs all round the sides.

A dryin room fer all yer wet boots and kit
that proper kiffs like Dylan and Jax's room
if I haven't done their washin for a bit.

And the outside, man,
WOW
all fields and trees
little rivers flowin down hills

and if ya walk over to the edge
and lift yerself up onto the old stone wall
ya can see it

Windermere.

And the words just pour out of me, man

Shifting shimmer
Windermere
veiled in rising mist.

I could live
a million years
and never tire of this.

Snow starts fallin proper heavy as we head out for The Night Line

And I've got me joggers and jumper from home
and the Centre's wellies and hat and coat
and gloves on.

We troop out into the woods
where there's a rope tied between the trees.

John tells us what we gotta do
put a blindfold on
(I mean it's darker than I've ever seen anyway,
man, but y'know whatever)
and follow the rope
and help each other if we get stuck.

Mr Joshua and Griffinroar
are proper wrapped up too
tryna click pictures with gloves on.

I get in line in front of Caleb

and
then
it's

PS and Turner.

*Get on with it, Nate lad.
Ya scared or summat?*

I can't even see him but I can just tell
the sorta look Turner's got on his face.

Then he goes, *Can't believe we've got
this pair of muppets in front of us, P!
We gotta be smellin them trampy
borrowed clothes all the way round.*

Then the unmistakable sound of PS's snigger.

I feel The Beast startin to burn.

Caleb's hand on my shoulder,
*Hey, Nate, forget 'em dude
let's go.*

Breathe	breathe	breathe
walk	walk	walk
follow the rope	follow the rope	follow the rope
stumble	stumble	stumble
fall	fall	fall

*Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!
One o'them muppets just fell!!!!
Get past these, P, I can't be doin with 'em!*

I'm on the ground with my
blindfold round my neck

And there's a torch in my eyes.

And Mr Joshua. And Caleb.

And hands held out to lift.

And light on snow.

A poem I draft in my head
before bed

I have fallen inside the snow

and it's OK it's OK

to rest here a while

blanketed

because I know tomorrow

I'll rise again.

In the mornin, I hold
a handful of snow

and watch it start to melt

and it feels kinda like it's talkin to me.

Teachin me.

What's that word Mr Joshua's always on about?

Transience.

That's it.

Sometimes things are so beautiful
all ya can do is celebrate those flectin moments

and accept they'll be gone.



The lake is so beautiful

even when paddlin across it on a rickety raft
built of oil drums, planks of wood, rope
and a whole loada hope
that feels like it might fall apart any minute.

The sounds of paddles and shouts,
as we race another raft
towards the little boat in the middle
that John and Mr Joshua and Griffinroar
are wavin at us from,
disappear from my mind so quickly

that it's almost like I'm there alone.

And all around me reflects the sky
and the snow lays heavy
on the shoreline and mountains.

And, man,
I'm thinkin what David Almond
would write about this place
what flow he'd create and then

there's a sudden rumble in the distance

and flashin low over the top of a mountain
is a jet plane, man
like a proper fighter jet
blastin round the sky
like it's havin fun or summat
and Caleb touches my arm cos he's with me too
and I'm frozen in the moment
we're frozen in the moment.

The world stops.

And it's gone.

The other raft wins

and Turner and PS are holdin their paddles
up in the air at the front of it
like they've won the Champions League or summat
shoutin,

Looooooooosssssssssseerrrrrrrrsssssss!

And I swear PS is lookin right at me, man.

Round the campfire

Mr Joshua's tryna get us to sing
some daft campfire song

but all I see is fire. "

Fire and babies, man:

the only two things ya can put in front of people and guarantee they'll be fascinated.

I'm thinkin about Dyl
how when he was a baby
and Jax was still little
I'd watch him while Mum went to the shops
for fags or whatever
and his little crop of red hair, man
sweaty as anythin as he rolled around
and I just knew I'd always be there
to watch out for him
y'know
such a tiny little thing.

And I'd stroke his cheek as he finally fell asleep.

You're safe, brother

Natey's 'ere.