

## ***London Reflections – Precious Moments of a Working Sojourn***

*(Each piece contains exactly 50 words excluding the title. Royalty-free images are selected on the internet for illustration only.)*

### **Twilight at Battersea Park**



Leaving aside Grosvenor Road's humming pre-dawn traffic, a hesitant stillness waits at the Park entrance. Against the receding darkness, the running track and tennis courts are yearning for their first customers. The birds remain silent as the moist verdure, with its first sign of autumn foliage, lays quiet for dawn.

### **In praise of sunshine**



The morning sun accentuates the white windows and cornices, peeping through the swaying leaves in a kaleidoscope of olive-coloured translucence. Under a cloudless sky, along the river aglow with dazzling reflections, a lone young mother is roller-skating with her baby in a pram and her spaniel in a leash.

### **The morning shower**



At the start of a cold morning, there is nothing like walking into a steaming curtain of evenly-spread and vigorous jets. The warmth and caress are enveloping. The body is quickly cleansed. The spirit is lifted. Chill and fatigue are washed away for readiness and hope for a new day.

### **The snack wagon**



Perched at the entrance of the Chelsea Bridge half-completed, chic riverside development, the makeshift matchbox opens the day for the neighbourhood workmen. Against the whirr of light morning traffic, the gentle sizzle of frying hamburgers and the whiff of coffee aroma provide solace and sustenance in the chilly autumn wind.

## Vauxhall Park Tennis Court



With gaping fence holes and a working-class neighbourhood, this is no Wimbledon. Nevertheless, in a haven of green tranquillity within walking distance of Pimlico, the free facility offers the enjoyment of a quiet game, occasionally shared by visitors basking in the morning breeze or frolicking pet dogs on a walk.

## A lady fellow bus passenger



Complaining about her wait with some spiritedness befitting a not-too-wrinkled face, she launched into ‘joie de vivre’ and bygone days when her A in GCSE Literature was already the talk of the town. I had to leave and bid her farewell, just when she asked if I trusted Tony Blair.



## Sainsbury shopping



A veritable institution, it offers welcome solace and relief to the city's hectic life. Escaping from the bustle and the elements, the housewife enthuses in choosing the best amongst the virtually identical, the young couple discovers their shared domestic fun, and the dark-suited executive fulfils his list of creature comforts.

## The IKEA store



Opening until mid-night, its popularity is unquestionable. With spacious parking, delightful design, appealing functionality and incredible value, it is a take-away wonderland for the space-challenged London home. The value philosophy carries through its family-friendly restaurant, where a Pound could buy a snack plate of Swedish meat-balls or unlimited machine-made coffee.

## Intermission at the Royal Opera House



Through the crowded Amphitheatre Bar, ROH's gilded crimson splendour gives way to a refreshing view from the exterior balcony of Covent Garden's nocturnal merry-making. The subdued up-lighting melts into the gentle illuminations outside. A curtain of evening drizzle provides an air of quiet expectancy of what the night will unfold.

## Harvey Nicks



Although the pundits are heaping their praise more on Selfridges, Harvey Nichols is still retaining her confident charm. With a prime location, unique merchandising, and smart Fifth floor bar and restaurant, hers is a venue to shop for the unexpected, to be associated with and to enjoy leisurely people watching.

## **The fleece**



With the temperature dropping, the lightweight pullover is regaining its popularity, especially when casual mix-and-match is beginning to outdo branded chic. Its loose, care-free comfort and its functional flexibility are a refreshing departure from jacketed stuffiness. It keeps surprisingly warm, even with only a thin inner layer of indoor clothing.

## **Westminster Cathedral**



With its unusual redbrick-and-white-stripe Byzantine exterior and its tall and narrow clock tower soaring above Victoria Street, the Cathedral is a beacon of Catholic worship and tourist attraction. Its Solemn Sunday Mass is a pageantry of Latin psalms and religious choreography with a sizeable contingent of priests and altar celebrants.



### **The Pimlico Library**



Perched outside the Underground Station, this small facility with its ungenerous provision of books, computers and CDs is nevertheless a haven where the neighbourhood reader could enjoy his favourite newspapers or to check his email and the time-conscious housewife could seize a moment of quiet respite from her daily routine.

### **The Joyous Painter**



Along Grosvenor Road, the exterior wall of the Crown Estate is a canvas of beige patches. Under the morning sun, alone on a ladder in his well-worn white overall, the painter is smiling at his handiwork as he applied sand-cloth to a windowsill, knowing all will be completed by Christmas.

## The Underground saxophonist



The hectic working-day pedestrian traffic passes him by, oblivious to his worn-out clothes and a face which has seen better days. The empty corner magnifies his hesitant rendition of The Godfather, the only popular tune he knows, competing for people's attention more focussed on the arrival of the next train.

## Nightfall at Southbank



Across the River the Parliament Building is illuminated in its Gothic splendour. An assortment of street performers – a human statue in antique gold, a pavement artist with her Last Supper under a portable lamp, a South American musician – welcomes a leisurely flow of visitors enjoying this cool and balmy night.



## **Dawn on a Sunday**



The wind-swept road awaits its morning traffic as young twigs in the lining trees bend lazily in the breeze. Under a greyish sky, a cold stillness condenses in the River's reflection of Grosvenor Bridge with a few sleepy barges. The snug comfort beckons of breakfast-in-bed or home-made coffee with toast-and-marmalade.

## **Irate coffee drinker at Harrods**



Weaving through other customers an accented gentleman struts up to the supervisor and fumes about the delay. The young waitresses in white apron and black pin-striped trousers look nonplussed as there is only one coffee machine. The small bar is not used to such long queues on a sales day.

## Jogger in morning drizzle



Wind turning the drizzle into rain. Though hesitant, he ventures into battle. The pavement dimly reflects the headlights of passing traffic as he gains distance. Soon the drizzle abates, the wind grows soft, and the roller-skating young mother appears in protective outfit, with baby in pram and spaniel in leash.

## The pre-dawn new moon



Like a painted eyebrow, the golden-silver curve protects a lone twinkling star underneath. The shy new moon is half hidden by small clouds drifting across a fading dark-blue sky. In the distance are shadows of some early birds. The city asleep, a hush is in the air as dawn waits.

## **Take heart in Trafalgar Square**



It is difficult to be depressed in Trafalgar Square. The mingling of cosmopolitan tourists. Children frolicking by the fountains. The occasional festival marquees. The drumbeats of exotic performers. The passionate yells of political demonstrators. All is well in the world as Lord Nelson, undaunted by his disabilities, looks down smilingly.

## **The poodles at Sloane Avenue**



Leased together to street-side railings, the bevy of two black and one white poodles are attracting sideward glances from mid-day shoppers. Their manicured curls and calm deportment suggest good breeding. The colour contrast serves to arouse imagination as to where their master is and how he or she may look.



## Mad over property



The subject features daily in the broadsheets. It is a regular TV feature and a compulsive conversational piece. My twenty-six-year-old son spends his precious leisure hours in looking over properties. Even in the small Pimlico Library, a young lady arms herself with a copy of 'How to Profit From Property'.

## Cold., wet, and grey



They sum up the shivering and rainy autumn days and remind us that life is not all sunshine. We have to keep company with the umbrella and give up picnicking or tennis outdoors. Instead, we find solace in a hot cup of tea or an engrossing book by the fire.

## The coarse-cut marmalade



The chewy seasoned orange peel slices give the tongue a tangy sensation, mellowed by the smoothness of the dark-brown vintage confection. The taste is sharpened by thinly-spread salted butter melted on fresh toast. The heavenly treat is complete with a mug of steaming freshly-ground coffee and one's favourite Sunday papers.

## Autumn leaves on Tate



Opposite Millbank Gardens, a riot of colours on the entire wall of a Tate annex contrasts sharply with the fallen leaves on the street. Gradations of olive green merge into dark brown, yellow, orange and red. The flourish of creepers at the edges proclaims Nature's signature to her impressionist creation.

## The fireplace



Beneath the shelf of Chinese blue porcelain antiques, the fire is on. The soft orange flames dance through the black charcoal, now aglow with subdued incandescence, creating a zone of re-assuring warmth and cosiness. Time to enjoy a book, a cup of tea, and to talk to the loved ones.

## The American family tourists



With sandy hair and fair complexion, she has a restrained manner more suggestive of experience than youth. She let her white-haired mother occupy the upper-deck window-seat while her father sat immediately behind. She explains carefully their day's itinerary, pointing out various landmarks as the bus winds its way through Piccadilly.



### The chapel of Our Lady



Guarding the right corner of the Cathedral, the Lady's statue in Her traditional light-blue and burgundy shawl smiles peacefully upon the small congregation, protected under a high vault of saints in shiny gold and dark-green mosaic. The altar candle flames glow in still harmony, attending quietly to the Saturday Mass.

### The lunch hour at Pellicci



Suffused with the aroma of steaming ground-coffee and Pollo Peperonata, the small and crowded Bethnal eatery hums with animated conversation amongst a predominantly working-class clientele. Two dark-suited customers share a small laminated table with tradesmen in dirty jeans while a white-haired lady in pink overcoat departs after a hearty meal.

## The 1937 Barros Colheita



Though initially doubted by the host, it has not lost its charm. Emblazoned in white on a black bottle, its respectable age manifests in a light-brown hue, gentle fragrance, and subdued strength. Its silky and lingering taste stimulates comments on its survival through the years to realise an enjoyable encounter.

## The overcast Yorkshire dales



The gloomy shroud of dark clouds and thick drizzle fail to hide the exhilarating Constable scenery, with the church ruins by the river meandering past the rolling hills stretching into the distance. It does not dishearten the dales' ardent walkers, braving the elements in mountain boots, mackintosh and high spirits.

## The old tree at St James' Park



Its robust girdle and rugged branches are covered with numerous knobs blackened with age. Its imposing structure and vast canopy of verdure register a perennial strength that has weathered centuries of changing seasons and unforgiving elements. Overlooking its shorter neighbours, it maintains an erect stillness against the howling autumn wind.

## Sunday breakfast at Bettys



The queue of smartly dressed clientele testifies to the popularity of this up-market Harrogate tearoom. Overlooked by framed antique photographs of its Swiss heritage, uniformed waitresses attend at immaculately prepared tables amidst the aroma of exotic coffee and bacon-with-gruyere, against a backdrop through wide latticed windows of a sun-lit lawn.



### A warm bed in a cold autumn night



Escaping from the seeping cold of a long and hard day, the body aches and shivers in tired weakness. The urge for a hot bath is followed by retreat to the enveloping softness and warmth of a freshly-made bed. The mind rests and sleep descends to bring a well-deserved repose.

### The young lady cyclist



Besides heavily-clad motor-cyclists and pedestrians at the traffic light, the young lady cyclist in short-sleeve T-shirt with a woollen pullover tied to her waist stops in cheerful attention. Her face shines with the morning sun, her hair is streaming beneath the helmet and her youth oblivious to the autumn cold.

### The veteran street-sweeper



His grey head bent in studied concentration and his dextrous hands moving with practised rhythm, he is gathering the fallen leaves along the tree-lined, picturesque river-bank into convenient heaps for the motorised sweeper, unmindful of how many roads he has swept or how many more he still has to do.

### The Labrador on the upper-deck



The black dog sits docile on the narrow aisle beside his master, hanging out his tongue and surveying the almost empty upper-deck, its head reaching the top of the bus seats. When the lady sitting behind alights, it raises its forelegs onto her seat to have a better look outside.

### **Silence broken in the pre-dawn sky**



The roar of the first pre-dawn flight shatters the tranquillity of lit street-lamps guarding this sleepy neighbourhood. The blinking tail-lights are receding into the distance, the noise fading away, the vapour trail invisible against the dim sky, in the knowledge that the city below will soon spring to life.

### **The squirrel at St James' Park**



Effortlessly it descends from a tree towards a group of young tourists walking along the lake. With practised skill it freezes into a praying position standing on its hind legs, curling up its bushy tail looking bigger than its body. The youngsters are captivated, taking aim with their digital cameras.



## Halloween



The door bell rings past dinner time. No visitor expected but of course it is 'Trick or Treat'. I grab a bag of sweeties. The young Italian mother next door presents her two tiny kids masked and draped in designer costumes, with as much pride as her loved ones' excitement.

## The lip



If the eye is the window to the soul, the lip is the book to the heart. Beyond its beguiling shapes and sizes, it seldom fails to reveal the heart and to speak the mind. It is admired and read by the observer but cherished and guarded by its owner.

### **Rainy rush hour at Oxford Street**



In the gathering darkness and almost tropical rain, the pavements overflow with a microcosm of shoppers, tourists, businessmen, office workers, tradesmen, and people of apparent leisure. The thickening traffic of buses, vans and private cars of all sizes and descriptions completes this picture of buzzing life in a dreary afternoon.

### **Tennis coach at Battersea Park**



Undeterred by the dawn drizzle, the coaching is the only human activity in the quiet park. Amidst the subdued colours of autumn trees and golden fallen leaves, the white-haired and bespectacled coach in shorts concentrates on his young charge, long forgotten are the competitive matches of his past tennis career.

## The scooter



---

There is something modest and practical about the scooter for the daily challenges of city traffic. It is easier to park in the streets or at home. It is fuel efficient. It comes in a variety of cute colours and shapes. It is an ideal companion for the urban singleton.

## Twilight reflections



In the windless twilight, the river is a log mirror of reflections. The four tall chimneys of Battersea Power Station. The street lamps along the riverbank. The white rib-like support arches underneath Grosvenor Bridge. All are finely imprinted on the glossy water. There is no sound but peace and tranquillity.



## The morning coffee



There is nothing better than a steaming cup of ground coffee, fresh from the machine, strong and aromatic. With cream and brown sugar, the smooth texture and stimulating taste at once invigorate the body, sharpen the mind, and lift the spirit. Come what may, you are set for another day.

## Pre-dawn lights at the Spread Eagle



In the lingering darkness, the lit interior looks deserted. The bar, the billiard table, the sofas and chairs, are missing their neighbourhood clientele. A lone figure is barely visible, sitting with his back against the window, holding a newspaper. The proprietor probably, about to close the pub for the day.

## Champagne



The froth rushes to the surface of the long, thin glass with dramatic effervescence, rising streams of tiny bubbles underlining the appeal of the chilled golden liquid. The zippy taste and lingering fragrance titillate the senses, dissolving away life's little worries as the appetite is whetted for a hearty meal.

## The lady in the wine-appreciation class



A lady in her late twenties, she is bubbling with life. As she holds out her hands for the bread-basket being passed around, a stub of a missing right hand shows without any consciousness. This unexpected revelation of an indomitable spirit has since found a special place in my heart.

### **The manicured courtyard garden**



Behind gilded iron gates, the courtyard boasts of immaculate gardening. Greenery is arranged and trimmed to perfection. Seasonal flowers add a dash of colour. Stone artworks placed discreetly for a touch of class. Yet devoid of visitors, the lifeless garden is there more to be viewed than to be enjoyed.

### **The riverside highrise**



Alongside with the housing boom, there has been a growing interest in riverside high-rise developments. With wood flooring, well-equipped kitchens, some with comfort cooling and gym, their premium prices do not fail to attract the expatriates, the young and mobile professionals, even established Londoners wanting an upmarket *pied de terre*.



## Drizzle



How much I dislike intermittent drizzle, not wet enough for a constant umbrella, not dry enough to do without. Yet my heart lightens when I see the moist blades of grass, the glittering fallen leaves, the bright pavements washed clean with nature's spray, and the vibrant city shrouded in haze.

## Cocktail reception



Be-suited men and power-dressed ladies eye familiar faces. Drink in hand and smile on the face. They catch up on the latest happenings. Their ears tune to the gossips nearby. Conversations come to a polite end as strangers without common interests find other targets. All in the name of networking.

## Hungarian tasting



The appetite is whetted by Hungarian foie gras, soft and smooth, enhanced with chutney on toast. The stomach is warmed by steaming goulash in a cauldron, thick, red, and spicy with paprika. To round it off, the taste buds are soothed by chilled 6-puttonyus Tokai, golden, rich, sweet and fragrant.

## A sunny autumn morning



Under a cloudless sky, the morning sun bathes everything in a warm glow, the townhouses lined with trees, the quiet gardens and parks, the shimmering river. Without any wind there is a stillness in the air and a temptation to wear less. Not a time to bash the London weather!

## Fulham Road playground



The children are neatly turned out in dark-green jackets and grey skirts or trousers, running around with gay abandon, their laughter drowned out by the neighbourhood traffic. From a vantage point, they resemble a regimen of Lilliputians engaged in some collective activity. There is blissful purpose and absence of worry.

## Burning the pre-dawn oil



The streetlamp light outside the window guards the sleepy silence of the neighbourhood. The sitting room is not yet warmed up. I arm myself with a cup of hot coffee and start the computer. The outside world is soon totally forgotten. Before daybreak, I am on top of the matter.



## The lady in black



Walking along the riverbank, the young brunette is dressed in black overcoat over black pullover and black long skirt, her black poodle at the leash. The colour is accentuated by her red lipstick, her ruby brooch, and the red ribbon around her poodle's neck. A walking picture of colour contrast.

## Bond Street Christmas Lights



The lights are turned on by media celebrities on a small podium, watched by well-dressed shoppers eager to explore the delights of the city's shopping Mecca. Exclusive jewellery shops, brand boutique stores, art galleries, antique shops, and chocolatiers serve champagne and canapés to welcome the arrival of another shopping season.

## Christmas market at Covent Garden



A huge Christmas tree conceals a souvenir shop. Festive balloons and red and green decorations abound. Friends and lovers laugh and smile as they shop around the stalls, looking at silver bracelets, imitation jewellery, belts and fun stationery. The place is so crowded it is sometimes difficult to get through.

## Belgravia clinic



The receptionist points to the room upstairs. Immaculately business-suited and with gold-rimmed spectacles, the doctor smiles comfortably behind a neat desk, his bright consultation room overlooking the heart of Belgravia. Glancing at the computer screen, he articulates his confident observation with the air of studied professionalism of a Coutts banker.

## Carol service at Chapel of King's College London



Only candles light up below the stained-glass windows and spotlights illuminate the altar and the painted organ windpipes. Complete silence listens to the choir's measured incantations. Solemn Bible readings. Exalting hymns with the congregation. The altar candles lit one by one. Rejoice in the light that shines in the darkness.

## Pre-dawn mist over Battersea Power Station



The four tall chimneys disappear, leaving a hazy outline of a monolithic Lenin-style industrial building. The dark contours of two arms of a crane stretch out in silent protest, surrounded by low-rise apparitions in dissolving Impressionist hues of light grey. Daybreak waits to clear Nature's canvas for a new scene.



## Annual Dinner at Lincoln's Inn



The high vaulted ceiling of the Great Hall boasts intricate dark-wood architecture, the oblong hall profuse with coats of arms and overhanging paintings of distinguished founders. The great and the good gather with their guests in jovial black-tie festivity, enjoying a 5-course dinner with bountiful wine from their renowned cellar.

## Basement-price supermarket



Tucked away from high-streets, this small chain-store with an unpronounceable name is a Mecca for the price-challenged, its fare stacked rather than shelved, with standard labels in a host of Continental languages. Not for the class-conscious, there is still plenty of choice in the constrained space for basic household comforts.



### Designer Chinese restaurant



Dark simple hues, clever mix of glass, stone and bricks. Profusion of lit candles in geometric hollows. Tiny spot-lights for atmosphere. Huge pink flowers in long glass vases above two blood-red plastic panels are the only Chinese signature. The food is excellent in taste and presentation, with prices to match.

### Afternoon savoury at Tate Restaurant



The perennially lunch crowd of local and international clientele is thinning. Afternoon visitors begin to settle for favourite refreshments. Perhaps West Country pie with soft-boiled egg and pickles? Rex Whistler's panoramic mural lends an air of leisureliness, depicting hunting adventures through the imaginary land of *Epicurania* to far flung Cathay.

## Winter leaves



They stick to the ground, brown, beige and pale-green, forlorn and listless, some rolling reluctantly with the wind. They cling to branches and twigs, a token vestige before withering away. A row of bald trees stand in stoic defiance, hollow canopies reminiscent of former exuberance, while evergreens watch in encouragement.

## Pre-Christmas reception for private clients



The newly restored Mayfair palladium venue speaks for itself. Its brightly coloured-painted vaulted ceiling and gilded cornices evoke former splendour as a private club. A generous flow of champagne and canapies lubricates the conversation. However there are more staff than clients as most of them are too busy too attend.

## Hamlet



Under the theatre's white gilded cupola gathers a fully packed cosmopolitan audience, the support not waning even as the season is drawing to a close. A passionate and totally immersed Hamlet struts on a black-wooded stage, from 'To be or not to be' to blood-stained deaths in a Greek tragedy.

## The corner barber shop



At a street corner in an inexpensive neighbourhood, the sign '£5 for Boys & Seniors' says it all. Not a place to visit for pampering. No fancy stylists and hairdos. Just the basic job by immigrant barbers. Yet the place is bright and clean, The service is efficient yet cheerful.



## **Bus 188**



On the upper deck, the view is a continuous community of social housing as the bus meanders to the South East. Rows of uniform high-rise with communal verandas spawn low-priced utility shops, grocery stores, cheap eateries, street markets and a soulless shopping-mall. Relief comes as the bus turns into Greenwich.

## **The rubbish wheel-barrow**



It's early on a quiet Saturday morning. At the private courtyard, a whistling workman is loading plastic bags into a barrow. It looks brand-new, painted black with red lining, festooned with a golden strip. The pavements are immaculately swept, devoid of fallen leaves. The neighbourhood is getting ready for Christmas.



## The illuminated pavilion



The night has not yet woken. Early joggers have to be careful to avoid intruding twigs. The exhibition pavilion suddenly appears a bright apparition in a science fiction, its cone-shaped canopies fluorescent in purple, its structure in glaring blue, shattering the park's tranquillity with a glowing proclamation of festive readiness.

## Comic relief



His hair has an improbable roof protruding over both ears. His moustache moves as he speaks Italian-English. White stockings emphasize his comic gait. Singing 'I can get away, with anything, because I have, no.....' lingering for nearly a minute before uttering 'shame', he brings the house down with laughing applause.

## **Warmth in a frosty morning**



The frosted water in the courtyard fountain is beginning to melt. The morning sky is summer-blue, adorned with soft purple clouds. Bright sun-rays dance on the river as a family of ducks glides along the bank. My heart still glows after making a detour to deposit some clothes for charity.

## **Winter has arrived**



A grey and frosty coldness has replaced the morning sunshine. The chilly air seeps into the bones. The streets look usually tidy without fallen leaves. Late-autumn withering foliage is conspicuous by its absence. Bare twigs and branches stare at a drab sky, quietly waiting for another turn of the seasons.

## **Chelsea Bridge at dusk**



The sky has turned completely black with dusk receding into a tinge of deep purple in the distance. All is quiet as Chelsea Bridge dazzles in bright lights outlining her contour and their reflections on the river, like a young lady turning out for the promises of an exciting evening.

## **Rowers on a Sunday morning**



The wind is still as the chilly water glows with the morning sun. A family of ducklings ventures out from the bank as a white swan sails in the middle of the river. The quiet is broken by a rowing boat speeding by, shadowed closely by a small motor vessel.



### **The happy mouse catcher**



The man has been at it for 20 years. He relishes how he can smell the presence of mice. He knows precisely where to look for signs and lay baits. He keeps a hamster at home to study rodent habits. To many, an unpleasant occupation, to him a constant fascination.

### **Sleek flats by the dozen**



Success stories in an unending game of musical chairs have sprouted mushrooms of modern flats demanding extraordinary prices. Each new development tries to outdo the other with post-stamp sized rooms presented with sleek designer furniture and packaged financial sweeteners. The gods decree that any bubble is only in the mind.



### Sunday roast in a modern Soho pub



Flat screen TVs supply endless silent news and sports as loud music promises an exciting evening scene under a ‘mirror ball’. Hot food takes a long time to arrive as drinks are the obvious priority. Don’t expect Michelin Star cuisine but the two-for-one Sunday roast at £6.29 is a steal.

### Dorchester banquet



Its location and prestige never fail to attract business bookings and a clientele of so-called ‘beautiful people’. Immaculately black-tie suited gentlemen throng around with jewel-bedecked and designer-clad ladies in champagne-filled networking. They proceed to pre-assigned tables for speeches, award presentations, and set dinner courses, all according to plan and protocol.

## The Turks exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts



Under the influence of ancient China along the Silk Road, the Turkic peoples did not have their own empire until the very dawn of the second millennium. Successive dynasties were founded with continental exploits, reaching a zenith with the Ottoman Empire. History is instructive on how empires come and go.

## Free Sunday morning first-run movies



A promotional ploy, requiring a newspaper coupon and disclosure of some personal details, they attract an audience of expenses-conscious movie goers prepared to leave home even on a cold Sunday morning. Starting usually at 11 o'clock, the hour is not ungodly and it is a perfect time for lunch afterwards.

## **Dame Ellen MacArthur**



Computer-guided and email-accessible all the way, the sturdy trimaran is specially designed with half of the weight of the vessel used by the French world record holder. Yet few would query the will power, stamina and focussed passion of a lone woman to win by staking all against impossible odds.

## **The student violinist at the Commemoration Oration**



His violin nestling against his chin, his mouth half-opened in an apparent trance, he swings his lean torso gently in tune with the music flowing from his fingers. He is lost in his music. A contrast from the self-conscious performance of his three fellow violinists at an important College event.

## **The perennial holiday-maker**



The silver-haired gentleman in the Italian language-class is missing lessons again, this time for a good month. He is spending a travelling holiday in Costa Rica. He takes dozens of holidays in Spain and came back from Marrakech a little while ago. He is enjoying his fruits of his retirement.

## **A business Valentine dinner**



Some come in couples but many arrive alone. The House of Lord marquee function room hardly adds romance to this black-tie dinner event sponsored by a leading business organisation. Nevertheless the evening is saved from becoming too business-like by the social sparkle and continuous humour of the polished guest speaker.



## The dog at the tennis court



Basking in the morning sun, the lone sheep-dog sits at a corner of the park's tennis court. Almost smiling, he watches the boy practising with the coach. He has a contented air of conscious responsibility, oblivious of my jogging past, seemingly lost in amusement with his young master's feeble efforts.

## The China Fever



Year-of-the-Rooster message from the Prime Minister. Celebration dinner at the House of Common. Foreign Secretary's reception. Gordon Brown's visit to China. The Time's editorial commentary and obituary on a Chinese legal expert. A Feng Shui Academy website. The adoption of Chinese cinematic choreography in TV commercials. The China fever rages.

## Wisdom



It is doing and saying the right thing at the right time to the right people. Asking the right question or keeping quiet at the right moment. Seizing the initiative or taking matters in their stride. It is understanding and acting accordingly to human nature and the laws of Nature.

## Hesitant snow



The wind is chilling to the bone. The temperature remains above zero. Suddenly the soft rhythm of falling pellets against the window heralds a light hail. This is followed by a hesitant shower of small snow flakes disappearing as soon as they hit the ground. Spring is not yet come.

## Snow icings



Hardly any snow in the streets. But most car tops are covered with thin sugar icings. So are the fence shrubs outside the houses. A single file of footsteps marks a patch of wafer-thin snow around the entrance courtyard. An occasional shower of small flakes adds an almost Christmas atmosphere.

## Who Wants to be a Millionaire



He says at the beginning he will respect the question. He will be content with £32,000, which will transform his life. He maintains his course and surprisingly reaches the option of walking away with £125,000. He then gambles away £93,000 on an unsure answer. A perfect expose of human greed.



## A cold snap



The chilling cold in the streets is unforgiving. It seeps into every nook and corner and exerts its presence with windy rigour. Infrequent showers of dry snow pallets belie the icy discomfort. First my son comes down with flu. It soon passes to me, then my daughter and my wife.

## Turner, Whistler and Monet



Could it be Providence that Monet was forced to use pastels as his supply of oil colours was delayed? At a time when he was ripe for the influence of Turner's water-colour techniques on canvas; Whistler's 'Nocturnal' obsession; and both artists' interest in the hazy effects of light and shade.

## A Light relief



The leading authority on Chemistry opens his talk with a ‘bang’, a small experimental explosion. With closed circuit demonstration, fluorescent test-tubes, transparent models and endless humour, there is not a dull moment in the Tizard Lecture on the effect of light on living cells in the Westminster School Great Hall.

## Call My Bluff



Gone out of fashion twenty years ago, it provides a social evening’s intellectual entertainment for a political club’s ward members. The guests are mainly elderly ladies in the neighbourhood. The two competing teams, including two MPs, enjoy themselves in the polished lying game at least as much as the audience.

## Baked scallops



The smart City restaurant has the appearance of a warehouse with high ceilings, neatly packed boxes stacked on tall shelves. My scallops arrive in a baked crust. The waiter prises the shells open to reveal the succulent morsels steaming in a light sauce. A perfect hors-d'oeuvre for a business lunch.

## Angel



Perhaps unknown to some, the Underground station exemplifies the heart of Islington. Its clean and crisp image befits the neighbourhood. Along Upper Street, an air of middle-class City is evoked by an interesting mix of cafes, specialty restaurants, antique arcades, retail shops and malls, with period town-houses interspersed with greenery.



### Three Chinese girls on an Underground train



Dressed in City chic, one is carrying a designer shopping bag, another, gift-wrapped flowers, and the third, a large cake-box with ribbons. All are in cut-glass Mandarin animation, at ease and proud of themselves. Like the latest TV and Underground poster commercials, they are part of the new China brand.

### Foliage



The one-Michelin-star restaurant in the Mandarin Oriental is often full. With view across Hyde Park, the innovative 3-course menu is a steal at £25. £7 more will buy two glasses of wine chosen from a selection, plus champagne aperitif during Christmas. These extras are no longer offered on Mother's Day.

## Brunello di Montalcino



Originating near Naples, the wine benefits from volcanic enrichment and the hot climate. Matured for 7 years, she wears a deep, dark ruby complexion, slightly brownish round the edge, a subtle fragrance, with fairly long legs and a wild mellow fruitfulness. The sketch brunette on the label says it all.

## The lady at the Patisserie Valeri



She looks to be in her late forties. A black flannel hat and a black fur scarf emphasize a soft, white complexion. Her brown woollen gown reveals a slim body contour with perfectly shaped calves curving into long high-heel boots. A uniformed attendant eagerly helps with her choice of cakes.

## Edouard Cortes



His streets buzzle with pedestrians and vehicles against buildings in landmarks like the Place de la Concorde. Shop lights glow like fireplace charcoals, their reflections on pavements glistening in the rain. You could hear the cacophonous celebration of Paris life in this antique fair in the heart of Sloane Square.

## Smoking break



Under a porch at the Underground entrance, a few suited men are puffing hard in the windy mid-morning chill. The cluster of nearby office buildings remind them of the day's work lying ahead. But they cannot resist the urge to snatch a moment's respite for both smoking and fresh air.



## **Greenwich Market**



Under a modern steel-and-glass canopy, the stalls are abuzz in the sunny early afternoon. Italian pickles, silver bracelets, floating scented candles, mock suede cushions, avante-garde stone table frames, original oils and water-colours, attract an equally eclectic mix of Sunday leisure shoppers. Part of a gentrified oasis in the working-class South-East.

## **Pregnant with Spring**



The chill has gradually receded. There is more sunshine and the day is visibly longer. There are lingering pastel hues in the evening sky. The trees are pregnant with Spring, tiny green buds struggling to emerge from their bare branches. The clocks will be put on summer time before long.

## Goddard's Pie House



Stewed eels and chicken and mushroom pies. These home-made favourites have sustained this small classic Greenwich eatery since Victorian times. The pies come hot with gravy, to be enjoyed with freshly-brewed English tea in a mug, in the midst of an essentially English clientele. There are queues even on weekdays.

## First day of Spring at Greenwich Park



At the Royal Observatory vantage point, a scene of tranquil haziness unfolds. The park's open green and sparse trees are shrouded in mystery. Distant landscape of the 'Gerkin' and Canary Wharf in no more than grey and blurred silhouettes reminiscent of Whistler or Monet. Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness.

## Be thankful



We tend to have unconscious expectations, demands of not ourselves but of others and circumstances. We become despondent if things do not turn out our way. Seldom are we reminded of being thankful for having something to eat everyday, for a roof over our heads, and for simply being alive.

## Chitty Chitty Bang Bang



A celebration of love, children, fun, fancy, colour and motion. A shiny vintage limousine flies with butterfly-wings and floats with cushions. Stunning choreography and a large cast, including two sparkling pre-teen actors. The innocence and affection are mirrored by an enthusiastic audience of mainly parents and their loved ones.



## Sunday church bells



The rapid and incessant metallic sounds dominate an otherwise quiet sunny morning. There is a time-honoured sacred urgency in these bells. Churchgoers appear in their Sunday best and greet their acquaintances at the entrance. It is time to renew spirituality as a week is done and a new one awaits.

## Passing of the Pope



The whole world has been keeping anxious vigil for days. Shots of the Apostolic Chambers constantly appear on the TV screen as up-to-the-minute news of his health is recounted. Then the moment came as tributes from Heads of State pay homage to the passing of a tireless titan of humanity.

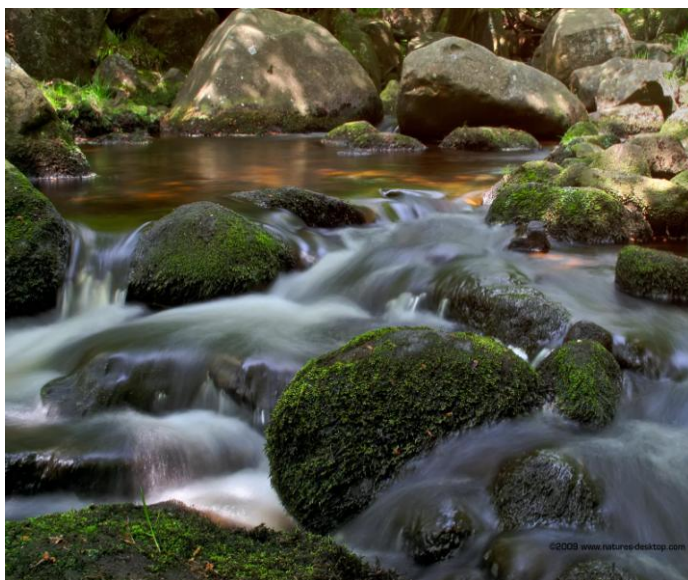


## Spring returns to Vauxhall Park



The drab park is suddenly transformed into a sun-lit garden of fresh green leaves pleasingly adorned with pink flowers on cherry trees. Unpainted newly-cut parts of benches are waiting at a corner to be assembled. One of the tennis courts has a new net and players turn up more often.

## The lesson of Water



We are prone to complain about unexpected turn of events and obstacles not to our liking. Take a look at how the simple and apparently soft water negotiates its way forward, adjusting its direction to every changing topography, taking whatever shape necessary, at once yielding and unyielding in its quest.

## Café mercato



When you need refreshment in the midst of a tiring day, but you are not particularly thirsty, there is nothing more invigorating than a steaming cup of mercato. Aromatic with a hint of cream, unlike espresso it is smooth to the taste and yet strong enough to quicken the spirits.

## May Tulips



Bright-yellow and red with long green leaves, accompanied by a mosaic of purple, pink and white flowers of other descriptions, the vibrant sun-drenched tulips in St James' Park beckon in their colourful and manicured glory. Strollers stop and more hurried footsteps are arrested to admire this joyous celebration of Spring.

### An estate agent cappuccino bar



It is almost identical with a slick, minimalist, glass-and-steel bar along a busy road. A wall mounted flat-screen TV showing the latest sports news opposite cosy modern sofas and chairs amongst young and discreetly dressed sales executives. A cheerful receptionist offers to make a cappuccino coffee as waiting customers relax.

### Early summer evening sun in Pimlico



The tall gable of St Saviour's Church is lightly gilded with evening gold, in sharp contrast with a darkening but cloudless sky. The wind is slightly chilly, checking any over-anxious desire for much lighter attire. But St George's Square is almost sprouting into its summer glory of verdure and bloom.



**Two-minute silence**



The air is unusually still. The traffic has ebbed. Under a tree at a public resting place near Sloane Square, a group of pedestrians stand motionless in the morning sun. We halt our steps in the opposite pavement and add our tribute to those innocent souls of the terrorist atrocities.

**Morning icing on the tennis court**

After a shower of snow flakes, the sun shines on a picture of icy tranquillity. The air is still. The deserted tennis courts look bright and lively amidst a sunlit tree-lined park. Save for a few dead leaves, the court surface is pristine with a wafer-thin layer of white icing.



\*\*\*\*\*