

Queen of the North. *

Oh my God Sheffield why
do you always leave your coat at home?
bare shouldered
and hard, you'd wear your heart on sleeves
if you had them, though you'd rather swagger
in your Santa hat
and leopard skin top, shivering on corners
with a fag. Your dreams are not in tatters

but lacquered into your big hair,
your mascara however much it's run,
you're all bluff and front,
as you sail on, invincible,
truculent and pissed,
insist your chips
are in vinegar
not on your shoulder, you snigger
at the nesh southerner on the bus wrapped

in four layers, a cardy and a scarf.
Sheffield you old tart, either shouting the odds
or a mardy bum
sulking into a shot glass, late home down ginnels
brushing away tears you carry on regardless,
even your canal
tinkles with a brittle, forced laugh,
burdened by your jewellery, the metallic glint

and wink of cars. You never let anyone into
your steely heart, you spew up your guts
from pubs and bars,
your glitter eye shadow is street lights
smudging into puddles, your neon nails
punctuating the darkness, weaving drunkenly
through a prickle of stars, your bravado
stilettos staccato on pavements.

*Queen of the North previously published in Butcher's Dog Magazine 2015.

The Handkerchief

Rain smacks the windows so hard it ought to leave scars
like welts on the underside of the sky,
but inside's a cheery glow. We're snuggled into coats
with the Hillsborough lads who'll be
Wednesday 'til they die, whatever the score.
My kids smile, bug-eyed, clutching in tight fingers
blank tickets the conductor gave with a wink.
Spare hands grasp mine; tacit reminders I'm not alone.
"Love you too" a man snaps off his phone, rolls his eyes
"soft as a sofa that one" he grins. We have pulled away
from Perseverance Terrace towards home,
and the girl I was, one wasted night,
wearing pain like a neon dress, slips into the dark.

I couldn't have known, that the stranger
who insisted I kept
a crisp white square
with her initial embroidered in blue,
who held my hand through all London's bleak stops
would be more memorable now
than the man I'd loved
whose name might as well be Judas.
There's always a time to choose;
like the girl (who is no longer me)
left Battersea, moved north.
Now the rain quietens
as the sky clears,
closer here to Sunnyside,
the distance travelled is eighteen years.

In hope,

number 73 have put deckchairs out on South Street,
surveying the Rainbow Car Wash, Akbar's, the sewage works.

Piles of fly tipping are strewn on the verge
like the rummage of a dress-up box.

The sky is soggy, a balled tissue damp with tears;
there are slug trails in the children's shoes.

I don't want them to be like me,
in needle cord flares, laughed at in the playground.

The forecast announces summer
will be back tomorrow; it may not be enough.

The accordion player on the corner in Sharrow,
is discordant with persistence not talent,

wafts of yeast and olives toss seeds of aspiration
from the windows of the Seven Hills Bakery.

In Weston Park, the ducklings have hatched,
furiously paddling to keep up.

A child's ball drops, floats to the middle of the pond.
She wills the wind to bring it back,

waits resolute against her mum's impatience
refusing to budge until it comes.

The way home is unremarked,
deckchairs flapping beneath a cold sun.

Knife*

This knife is Sheffield born
out of the streams, stones
and tors of the Peaks,
the girth and heft of Stannage Edge,
shank with the sever sharp cut
of the grass on Blacka Moor.

Take a knife like this,
crafted gently from Sheffield steel,
handle of giraffe shin or mammoth tusk
that asks respect.

A knife that's proud,
cutler's signature exactly rendered
by hand and file
that won't be cowed,
descended from Vikings,
Damascus pattern welded
knowing strength is in the join;
hardness at the edge,
resistance in the blade
whorls that carry pain.

So if you should say goodbye
to these seven hills,
take this knife as leaving gift
pay for it with a penny,
taking no risks,
grip decision in your hands
curl your fingers around the haft.

Because the heart is no match for a knife,
and this was no second chance
just another false start
when what's torn cannot be stitched
without leaving a seam,
ruptures can not always be healed;
if you scrape or shave these doubts,
be sure the wound is clean.

Lacerate all ties,
breathe this high clarity of air
above the coughed up city
the steel that weighs you down
mundane and too solid,
go without turning
in one fell stab, shock and thrust,
ignore the ache you cradle,
jagged edged and raw,
as you walk away from the town

that was never yours.

Made in Sheffield *

Apprentices steered clear
of those buffer girls.
Darken their doors
and they'd have the trousers off them
rubbed down with sand and oil,
their ghosts here still,
singing, wrapped in brown paper,
mucky mouths and blacker faces,
their beauty flowered in the cutlery's shine.

He set on here at fourteen
says its not what it were,
damp and heat might
have forced the paint
to slide off the walls
sludged with defeat,
despite the muck and grime,
the filth and fug of the forge
Rustnorstain holds true;
there's nothing leaves these doors
that doesn't gleam.

He's seen it all
cricket in the yard on dinner breaks,
how cutlery has given in
to guitars, distilled gin,
artists and God's own rugs.
Granted the dust
of the polisher's workshop
blows up all his radios,
at least one a month,
pigeons have taken over the chimney,
the rest of England could well implode
but this is Sheffield;
where phoenixes are birthed.

He wouldn't call it love,
the heft, the graft,
the hammer's pulsing thud,
furnaces ramped up, the roar,
snug, he likes to be warme.
There's no denying it's cost him,
here at six, some nights
another shift while two am
after lads came off tools at five.

He'll take the rough with the smooth,
embrace the heat, the blast,
the blaze, the ache, the push and shove,
he can tell a press is out of whack
from the other side of the yard,
knows a forge wants to be dark,
it's all in the colour,
a thousand degrees burns yella,
eight hundred and fifty's cherry red,
we all have our biting point.

Forty years forging steel,
cut to size, heat treat, shot blast,
powder coat, final grind.
There's nothing won't bend under his hands,
even the relentless cold hard weight of steel
can be coaxed, shaped and formed
with warmth, reet tools, and skill.
He'll adapt, has to or he'll brek.
May as well have letters
tattooed down his arm
like the hallmark in a knife blade:
'Made in Sheffield'.

*Knife and Made in Sheffield commissioned by Wordlife from a writing residency at The Portland Works, Sheffield 2016.

Where they burn books...*

"That was but a prelude; where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people also."

Heinrich Heine, 1933, Germany.

Off Ferham Rd, the terraces are
pimpled with satellite dishes, scarred
by boarded windows, broken glass
doors are open to the street laying the innards bare,
kameez and jeans lift in the breeze
on a rash of washing lines; garish flags
over unloved streets. Gangs of no one's
children, with grubby faces and wide grins
gather round the prize
of an abandoned buggy,
a discarded tyre,
the latest influx is Slovakian; kids
stopping in an outbreak of stares when we pass,
they don't ask, they know.

We also don't belong.

In America Pastor Terry Jones threatens
to burn 100 copies of the Q'uran;
the English Defence League invites him to the U.K.

December 2010 on Channel Four news,
an Imam from the Luton mosque attended
by the Stockholm bomber, in muted tones,
despairs "Could I have done more?
could I have got alongside him?
His words were of extremity, but not terrorism.
I challenged all his distorted views of Islam
and thought that was the end of it."
but on ITN and in The Sun, it's only bombs.

At home, another match is held to a box,
as the body of Laura Wilson is found
floating in the canal at Holmes,
half a mile from my daughter's primary.
Neighbours who've lived here over a generation
don't speak the language of belonging;
going to school together didn't breed trust.
An unholy marriage of Jeremy Kyle
and X Factor Saturdays with Asian hip hop
and Al Jazeera, a tension that predates Laura's murder;

if she had only stayed quiet
about the married man she slept with
who might just see her as any slag kuffar
looking for a way out, any girl
who thought a baby would make him neglect family,
culture and Allah – but she wasn't one of the chosen ones,
the few English girls in eastern dress, chubby

brown boys on their hips.

So even if his guilt was no more than lust,
he added more volumes to the blaze, more
excuses;

because the BNP will get hold of this,
will twist this ugly crime into votes,
will offer her family a plasma TV, new carpets
for upstairs; poverty, fury and grief
a heady mix; the streets electric
as emotions crackle and spit.

'Do not cross' tape hatches by the canal, outside school
I keep my head down,
silence pools between small groups
that words cannot bridge,
comments muttered behind hands clog the air,
fat white girls with prams
stub out their fags, chivvy their kids,
Pakistani men strut
from their Toyotas, Nissans.
I don't get the nuances, just
trying to find a place to fit round here.
But Urdu slang in school books gets scribbled over,
some Yorkshire lasses cover old tattoos with a veil,
swap nights on the beer for a demure piety.

At the school Nativity
more than half the school are Muslim,
reciting the Christmas story.
It seems odd to make them.
I'm grateful when Sky's mum sits next to me
until she complains that Sky,
with a tea towel round her head
is being turned into a paki.
My shocked silence must seem complicit
to the Asian mums in the row behind
as a time-honoured school tradition
becomes something more malign.

And I think I can hear the scrape of a match,
the whisper of sacred pages
as the flames begin to catch.

*previously published in Poetry Review Winter 2012.