

Helen Mort

there & back

Helen Mort was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Northern to write a sequence of poems inspired by the journey along the Manchester to Hebden Bridge line. The poem was performed on a special poetry train event on Sunday 13th May 2018.

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there & back

Helen Mort

i. there

Victoria

At ten, my globe
was this tiled atlas,
crimson-black veins
the neural pathways
of Yorkshire,
Lancashire. Here,
it's always evening

and I'm holding
my dad's hand, asking
what's Huddersfield?
but now we're moving,
travelling backwards
till we're out of sight,
now I can't see
the curve
of his face.

*

Moston

*Dear Cottonopolis, dear town
of moss and bog. I like your empty
benches and your bramble-twine. I like
your leaves of peeling paint. You look
like the teacher I never had -
flint eyes, cloud-coloured hair.
Stay with me, Moston. Tell me
something I don't know.*

- Hasty, 9.27 to Leeds

*

Mills Hill

It's LOVE backwards in the window
of a terraced house: magenta capitals.
It's the frayed ribbon of Oldham Road
and the gate that reads STRICKLY
NO DOG WALKERS. It's grandad
on the platform, waving, jogging
on the spot, pretending
to keep up with us.

*

Castleton

Two black dogs on leads
drag a man the length
of a hedgerow. The day
is a caught scent.
My heart fills slowly
like the level of a lock.

*

Rochdale

*You were George-Clooney-grey this morning
and you had your neat industrial tattoos on show.
You were holding an oil-bright magpie
and a single newspaper. I tried
to read over your shoulder
then the sky took all the words away.*

- Speechless, 9.47 to Leeds

*

Smithy Bridge

An old man unseats himself
says *give my regards to Ilkley*
and his friend answers *I will*
but Ilkley doesn't exist here
only a stately home
where the slim windows
seem to multiply
like frogspawn

and wind turbines
horizon-close
turn the day over
and over, making
more of it
each time.

*

Littleborough

Your small name
and your big ridges
planted with pylons.

How the horses all turn
to face Manchester
as they graze.

The tinder of felled birches
and the match of 10am
unused, unstruck
this store of
sunlessness.

*

Walsden

*I was flying from a tunnel.
You were edged by vivid rocks,
wrapped in a woodland shawl. You
had rooks in your hair. I was
moving too fast. Meet me
next time at the junction
with your flashy redbrick jewellery on.*

- Speedy, 10.01 to Leeds

*

Todmorden

Everything is painted *sage*
or *landrover*, or *brand new wellingtons* -
a deeper colour than the lichen
of the church. The hillside
turns away, shaded with jealousy.

A weathervane. The cool, black tracks.
The unsmudged lipstick of the station doors.
The breath of passengers
outside the waiting room
translucent, rising, mingling.

*

Hebden Bridge

Come with me, Dee from Bradford
with your tiny silver nose stud,
walk with me from the bridge.
We'll laugh at ourselves in the windows
of vegetarian cafés, our faces
tasteful bric-a-brac. There's time

and we'll run off with it,
find the hills you used to long for

from the carriage window as a child
the bleached, frost coloured flanks
above Heptonstall, like snow hares
patient, tentative, pausing
to test new air.

*

ii. & back

Todmorden

*Small bullet slicing the afternoon
seeks expansive market square,
proud chimney tops and spires
for long journeys into summer,
mud and cuckoos, leaf-canopies
Must have own Post Office.*

- Ambitious, 14.24 to Manchester

*

Walsden

The poster pinned to the fencepost
says *talk to us*, so I do.

I describe the low and high places
of the land, the rabbit-coloured
undergrowth, the leaning
improbable sheds. I say what I mean

by *stranger* and by *homecoming*
and rooks settle in the branches
and nothing contradicts me,
nothing murmurs its assent.

*

Littleborough

Little lover, stealing
the duvet of the sky
and curling into it
switching off
the valley moon
and reading alone
by the light
of the silver canal.

*

Rochdale

As if I could step down from
the train, walk blinking through
the birth and boom of wool,
the clamour of the Rochdale Pioneers,
as if I could touch baize,
kerseys and flannels

my body whirring
spun like cotton
on the river's spindle.

*

Castleton

*You say 'mind the step'
and I think of you climbing down
from heaven, treading gingerly.
I know your secrets,
Blue Pits Village, know your given name,
your ancient boundaries.
Oh, build new walls
around me, Castleton. I promise
to tread carefully.*

- Cautious, 14.45 to Manchester

*

Mills Hill

I'm still a kid
on the sandpapery platform
with my Reebok Classics on,
waiting for the arc of track
to sharpen with sound,
waiting for the rails to sing,
waiting for the train to show itself,
smelling the vinegar
and hops of home.

*

Moston

Orange flowers
and autumn leaves
the size of dawn
on the Welcome mural.

*

Victoria

I used to dream of flying
above Accrington and Burnley
Bury, Radcliffe, Pendleton,
fast over Skipton, Gisburn,
Nelson, Colne and touching down
somewhere this map could only

gesture to - black margins,
daubed white with Zeebrugge
Antwerp, Ghent, all the
the world after Oldham

and now, all I want
is to ghost the tracks at night
go unnoticed
to the boundary
of the place I was born
and the place my name's from
throw stones
at the terrace window
where my grandad's pianos
still keep their music
land just one right
and hit the keys
with a noise
that might be
joy.