

Extracts from *The Exile's House* by Ian Parks

The Wheel

for Helen Mort

The pithead used to dominate the town.
My dead forefathers came and went,
Were buried in the shadow cast by it.
Passing on my way to school,
I heard its revolutions in the night.
If the pit head was the place's heart
the great wheel was its soul.
And then there was the slow dismantling.
The slag heap was grassed over: it became
an innocent green mound where cattle graze.
They hauled the winding gear away
and sold the chain for scrap
then took the giant wheel and clamped it down.
They did this to remind us where we came from,
what we did and who we were —
a monument of rusting metal spokes
that radiate from hub to rim
for kids to climb on, point at questioning.
Some day we'll come with picks and dynamite,
dislodge it from its concrete plinth.
We'll drag it from the valley floor,
aim it at the cities of the south,
set the wheel in motion, watch it roll.

Mosaic

I scrape away the soil and find her face.
It takes a toothbrush to reveal
black eyebrows curved above her cobalt eyes,
lips as red as they were when
the roof collapsed and laid a layer of ash
between her and my gaze;

the cold flat surface where her soul exists.
She holds the darkness to herself —
no goddess but the lady of the house
who lights a lamp and goes from room to room
barefoot, to let her presence seep
into the fabric of the place

for us to find, uncover, lay to rest;
except uncovering disturbs
more questions than it satisfies.
Think how I take her image through my days:
a dolphin arched behind her head,
gold snakes coiled round her wrists.

Lilith

for Rachael Oliver

Before Eve there was Lilith.
She walked the tangled garden,
made no sound. The birds
were all entranced by her,
the serpent quit the tree
and coiled itself around
her naked feet. Adam knew
it did no good to call her
from her sleep. Ignored,
he named the ibex
and the ox. She drank deep
from the purest stream,
enticed the angels
from their emerald thrones,
refused to learn the dance
and disobeyed. She lived
among the shadows, hid from light
and smeared her breasts
with juices from the trees.
Made equal with the man
she wouldn't lie with him. Only later
making love to a soft
and unresisting Eve
did he regret her banishment.
He feared her though he saw her
In among the grappling vines
and missed the coldness
of her distant smile;
the calm avoidance of her eyes.

Elegy

I watched him clamber from the twisted wreck
unhurt, uninjured, still alive.

I watched him brush his clothes down,
turn his back and walk away —
his body unaffected by the flames.
There on the highway near the exit sign

a purple oil stain where he took that fatal turn.
He strolled towards me as he always did
forever in his twenties, always out of reach,
alert and smiling, holding out his hand
and mouthing something that I couldn't hear
above the traffic and the driving rain

but leaving no doubt in my mind
as to what he intended to say:
*And if you think the time has come
to let my image fade you'd better think again.
I love you. Don't forget me. Remember me like this.*
The white lines blind me and my eyes still burn.

The Vicinity

I knew I was in the vicinity
when I heard the lost girl sing.
I knew I was getting closer
when I started noticing
the hour hand had grown shorter
and the daylight thickening.
The sort of place you find yourself
after the bars have closed:
a short-cut, a false start, an interim.
Of course the footsteps were my own

but when I stopped
they kept on echoing
down avenues I didn't recognise.
There were faces at the windows,
white plaster on the walls
and fountains at each corner
clogged with leaves.
Not that I went reluctantly
into those dead-end streets —
a district intimated once

and now made almost real.
I knew I was drawing nearer
when my hand began to feel
another hand reach out for it and cling.
I paused under the last lamp
and waited for a while.
Undimmed and at the end
an unfenced common, a frozen lake
where trees bend back
although there is no wind.

The Incident

You ask me how I lost my tooth.

I'll tell you. It was the coldest morning

of the strike. Me, my father and his mates
had formed a sort of makeshift picket line

outside the main gates of the pit.

The year's first snow had fallen and not cleared.

It smeared the slag heap, clogged the roads,
ended as a brownish wash

around our booted feet.

Each morning as we waited for the scabs

to run the gauntlet of our shouts
behind the safe-grilled windows of their bus

we'd huddle round the braziers, deep in talk.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't qualify.

The nearest I'd been to the coal face
was going to the pit head to pick up

my father's sick pay when he did his leg.

I'd learned it all from books

which somehow made me suspect,
set apart. Jim, who'd seen it all before,

pinched out his fag and bent to scoop the snow.

Soon everyone was joining in,

rolling it round and piling up
a snowman in the street. Wives watched

from windows, children shouted out.

We stood back smiling, satisfied.

Just then a growling cavalcade
rounded the corner, made for our group.

We scattered as the leading car
drove down our snowman, smashed him to the ground.

Children pointed, pitmen jeered,
a woman on her way to work

took time to curse the officers
that Thatcher drafted from the south.

So it went on: at dawn we'd build the snowman
then stand back. At first light

they'd drive up and knock him down
as if he was some symbol of the strike.

My father said *I've had enough of this*.
Next day we made the man again

but bigger than before —
drew up a mound of snow around a bollard,

stuck bits of brittle coal into his eyes
and stood back. I won't forget

the aftershock, the look of pure surprise
that stiffened on the driver's face

as he went crashing in; the way the van
recoiled then came to rest,

the way the men came tumbling out
like clowns from one of those old circus cars.

I couldn't move for laughing
which is why I was the first

to catch a gloved fist in my face.
And as the scuffle faded off

across the pit yard and the joining farms
I went down on all fours,

spat out a shattered molar on the ground,
felt all the world revolving as I stared

into the blank space under me,
blood smattering the snow.