

## Ophelia in Leeds 6

She wanted to be Ophelia  
at the wrong time, in the wrong place,  
wore Pre-Raphaelite dresses  
in the wrong decade, her red hair  
framing whitened cheeks  
as she plucked Victorian poets  
from market junk. She carried  
flowers and pastels, a castle  
in her head, a gold ring  
to protect her from the storm  
already raging. Weaving  
through clouds shaped like nothing  
but themselves, she haunted arcades,  
barely reflected in leaded glass,  
her steps a frozen bridge  
stretched fine across winter.

I think of her, but can't go back—  
my thoughts are still too green  
to fully break. I guess  
it'll be student flats now,  
or gone altogether; only grass  
and litter, a scarce foundation.  
Yet I see her as she climbs the stairs  
to an attic room with fallen walls,  
where chaste ice stretches mirrors  
across frozen vases, where she makes up  
her face, her past, and countless futures  
with pale men who call her mad  
or don't call at all; who leave her  
floating in wine and pills

until, a night like any other,  
her Gothic fancy takes her wrist,  
holds her hard, draws her fast  
through her time-speckled mirror  
to drift, at last, a pale heroine  
blessed by the silence of heaven,  
painted out of history.

*Oz Hardwick*

### **City of scars**

No place for me in your heart.  
For years I've kept to this suburb, a part  
of the city we never shared;

its buildings unremarkable, pared  
back, low. It's rare I'll go into that arcade  
where you earned your living and I made

love to you. You could argue I'm scared  
of scratching at scars, reopening wounds,  
undoing the dressings looped around youth

when we tore our days from the clocks,  
wore our passions grand as mansion blocks  
and I never believed it would stop.

Our twenties: that dense core  
always under construction, the traffic one-way (yours),  
an extravagant skyline serrated, a saw.

Two decades out, it's all verges, hedges, gentle bends  
and roundabout after roundabout, so many dead ends  
and dwindled lanes, but now and then I'm drawn

to the cicatrised streets, the Leeds we knew,  
to run my heart over the scab of you.

*Greg White*

## High Royds

The clock has stopped; sixty years  
too late for the train that left you here,  
small and shadowed on a treeless road,

your hands crabbed and aching from clutching  
the arms of your seat, the shapes of ghosts  
who spoke in reassuring tones,

the words between the words between  
the cracks in flagstones, cracks in clouds,  
the *tick* and *tock* of a clock that stopped.

Go back. You count days in windows,  
empty, uncurtained, sucking light  
to choke on stained green walls,

dark brown linoleum, cold  
under bare feet, the canary's song  
repeated through corridors, learnt by heart,

sung in sleep as you lie, scarred  
beneath tight cuffs, in a burning ballroom,  
sixty years ago. Stopped.

*Oz Hardwick*

## **Time Machine**

*(Time Ball Buildings, 1865)*

Out of time, like the Regency lime on his buildings,  
their marzipan stucco and three-storied bay,  
two storefronts combined by confection of finials,  
pediment, corbels and balustrade:  
a jeweller's artful masquerade,  
setting the future in the seeming passé.

Out of time he trades, John Dyson, his watch  
in the pockets of the navy, on our mantels his clocks,  
and his shop is its own inspired display, dropping  
a ball down a flagpole each day in response  
to the signal from Greenwich at one,  
dragging Leeds six minutes ten seconds on  
from local time and into line with the trains.

Out of time, time remains: as their neighbours rebuild,  
the Time Ball Buildings are suspended, stilled,  
persist in their whimsy, the business within  
long closed. Two ornate clocks still fulfil their role  
of landmark for Loiners, all city folk know  
these oversized dials, so splendidly trimmed,  
though in time the story behind them is dimmed.

Out of time today, anniversary year,  
and we've dropped the ball with these buildings, I fear;  
squandered the chance to applaud their sheer ingenuity.  
So the orb doesn't rise, gone the man with his scythe,  
the clocks are stalled (showing differing times)  
and, just when we should be directing all eyes  
to this sublime and significant slice  
of history, it seems we're out of time.

*Greg White*

### **The Early train**

I came round counting sleepers,  
deep in railway dreams, stalled  
in a station where stick-thin gentlemen,  
with frost-fringed whiskers and waistcoats  
neatly braided with sugar and steel,  
crook their fingers, tap on glass  
of golden fobs on iron chains  
that bound the globe.

A million hands  
haul hard, take the strain,  
and the clockwork city rises, shines  
like owls staring down empires.  
Glass pavements prism light  
that's split by horses and hard wheels  
clattering the illustrious dead to life.

And in the roar, Victoria grins,  
gathers her skirts like yesterday's washing,  
skips to Woodhouse Moor, laughing  
and dancing like a top whipped crazy;  
off the rails, amused as hell,  
confounding clocks and railway time,  
calling the sleepers to wake.

*Oz Hardwick*

**Something of the night**

*(John Atkinson Grimshaw)*

Even as a child I found it kitsch,  
the art on our placemats, paintings in which  
a soot-blackened city withdrew:  
buildings and people sunk in a gloom  
here or there pierced through  
by a carriage lamp or a street aglow  
with a golden blaze in every window.  
Or a mackerel sky with a moon  
would illuminate the lonely road  
where a lowering mansion's gate was closed  
on the indistinct woman sharing our view.  
Stone pavements wetly reflected the sky.  
It was dank and drab but, oddly, the eye  
was soothed by those few fires that burned  
sufficient to themselves, their cosiness spurning  
an ever-encroaching dark.

Even as a child, those stark night scenes,  
with their muted palette of browns and greens,  
seemed meaningful, somehow. I couldn't know  
this unnamed city would be my home  
one day, that I would gravitate  
to the vistas below my dinner plate,  
to this city of pitch, of brick and stone,  
where I would live twenty years alone,  
a darkness growing within me.  
At six, I relished the novelty  
of the urban setting, the uncommon hour,  
the meticulous buildings, the dour  
innovative power of his vision.  
But I think I had also an intuition  
of unease, regret, despair, of cold,  
of solitude, of a life foretold.

Now I am older, I see how slight  
was his talent for townscapes; truly how trite  
his arrangements, almost always the same  
draughtsmanlike angle of street and lane.  
And how dreadful he was with people!  
How unreal they appear, so stiffly erect,  
architectural figures in silhouette,  
fleeting, faceless, forbidding, unknown,  
blackest of all in the frame. It's only  
now I grasp that his genius lies  
in his atmospheres, in those limpid skies,

and all the works of man get in the way.  
As an adult, he speaks to me again  
about chasing light when it's winter within,  
of the need to reflect when all is grim,  
and that even Leeds can glimmer in the dusk.

And if folk keep their distance, are often brusque,  
I'll go out at night, be blind to scowls.  
I've found my place in this city of owls.

*Greg White*

## **Loidis**

Nuzzled in the nest of feathered words and soft breasts,  
awake but sleeping in the cracks beneath the sky, I  
survey the city through half-closed eyes, lulled  
by the thrum of bees in the branches of the forest,  
barges in the branches of the river, the clatter  
of the looms in the mills, wheels on the roads  
that cross all time, like a fine line from Bede in 731.

The saw-whet sun inflames my sky, blinds passers-by  
to my waiting wings, to my engine heart that beats  
street rhythms, like a gold clock, unstoppable,  
practised in sleight of spinning hands, as I dream  
centre and suburb fanned like marked cards  
clipped in my grip, slipped from my filoplume sleeve:  
believe me, trust me – I can see the future.

For I am no sparrow flapping blind in the hall,  
no insomniac poet's muse: I am fire and stone,  
steel and bone, glass and mud, flax and blood,  
the huts and halls, the quays and the Calls,  
my talons twitching to snatch tomorrow,  
wings reaching wide to ring the road  
and rise, golden, shrieking the song of my home.

*Oz Hardwick*



## The approach

So many ways to begin.  
So many roads, lanes, footpaths, carriageways in  
to this tangle of townships, our home.  
So many ways to fold or unfold  
the map, to steer my poem.

Nothing coheres.  
Draft after draft, ideas on ideas.  
How to compose a harmonious whole?  
The city appears to be out of control,  
its skyline discordant, haphazard, a zone

of back-to-back terraces, viaducts, domes,  
Italianate towers, temples in stone,  
brutalist structures, rusty old crates,  
a barge on a pavement, arcades on arcades,  
and all of it, all of it, constantly changed.

For the better, perhaps.  
But now every street's replete with traps  
for this owlish man with a backward gaze,  
who sees his best years being erased  
as haunts are one-by-one replaced.

But who gives two hoots  
for whining over pulled-up roots?  
Some will grieve for *Trinity* one day,  
when workers tear at its twisting frame,  
outlived by the nearby Corn Exchange.

For centuries the Leeds Road was framed  
by a ruined east window, as coaches made  
their way up Kirkstall's nave.  
On the plane, I press "Save"  
and close down, anticipating

a view of the town  
as we swiftly begin our descent into cloud.  
I'm hoping our fleet swoop across  
the chimneys of Horsforth might set off  
thoughts on how to end.

A shock it is then

when, midway into our plunge through grey,  
the landing gear suddenly hits runway.

Greg White