

Queen's Square

That strange lull between Christmas
and the start of the New Year
when nothing ever happens except rain.

Head down I cut across the square –
the Black Prince pointing from his horse,
his torso awkward, swivelling

with water streaming from his armoured back.
On the platform, counting down
my last train stood, about to leave.

Coloured lights strung the periphery
or hung suspended from the massive tree.
I felt a tugging at my sleeve

and saw a ragged half-familiar face
under the lights, pressed close, the sack
of some grey hood around his neck

but fading quickly back into the crowd
like someone sinking in the sea
wide-eyed and looking up to find some hope

but finding none and letting go,
holding on just long enough
to say *Don't you remember me?*

Ian Parks

Vampire of the big screen

(after Leeds Light Night)

Nosferatu, with his parsnip fingers,
that cootish head, his boxes –
coffins filled with soil from his homeland –
has come to Leeds.

He does not attract the attention
of the community support officers
when he moves in across the street
and the locals start to twitch their curtains,
pin up signs saying 'This is a neighbourhood watch area'.

Instead, in the town hall, his movements
are accompanied by live organ music,
an original score.

Trembling hands bring tea to lips, and they stare
at his creeping shadow stretching up the walls
and doorways of the back-to-backs.

He's free to holiday at will,
but his travel visa is in fact a blue plaque
screwed to the bricks by the canal,
his sponsor, Louis le Prince,
who mysteriously vanished 125 years ago,
at night perhaps, the gas light casting
a familiar shape up the brickwork of the ginnels.

Tom Kelly

Chantry Bridge

We sit together in the window seat
to watch the swollen river slide
over the sharp edge of the weir.

A week of rain has drained the upland farms,
depositing its random debris here –
a huge black tyre, a barbed-wire fence,

the branches of a splintered tree
banked up against the man-made island where
grey grass blows back and willows bend,

a tuft of land the waters inundate.
The traffic slows and stops to hide
the ornamental chantry on the bridge

where Clifford struck young Rutland down
despite his pleas for mercy or his age.
His hot blood swirls and eddies at our feet.

When I reach out to take you in my arms
there is no present, past, or future tense –
only the moment and the river poised

forever on the endless brink
before it dips and takes itself away
to flow and flow and end in turbulence.

Ian Parks

Underneath

Not like the house with the hot roof
where the snow won't settle,
where the plants grow, vigorous, in an attic –
forbidden to live.

I mean like the wall where the bluetits nest.
They nest there every year,
but can't be the same bluetits
as when I first found them.

And one day the wall will tumble,
be rebuilt,
and there will be bluetits in that wall –
but different wall, different birds.

The underneath can be seen easiest by leaving.
I wasn't sure I wanted to go,
and if I were living in a myth
I would have caught the bus to Leeds Market
and gorged on pomegranates until the pips
were pinging out of my ears.

On days when we leave a place
we age two days instead of one
and we are only repaid the second
on our return.

But the shock of that return!
The underneath evident as an unfamiliarity,
how everything has shifted slightly
right beneath your feet.

Tom Kelly

Returning to the Hollies

Yes, of course, I know the place.
Or should I say I knew it once –
that summer that I spent in Leeds
when pollen swelled the dried-out air
and I had nothing on my hands but time?

A friend said she would take me so we went
under the tangled braches, over roots,
the sunlight dipping in above us as we trod.
The city disappeared. All I could think of
was the rich soil shaded red,

the clapper bridge that spanned the meagre stream.
I lost her for a moment, found her then
stooped at the foot of some huge twisted tree,
scraping at the earth with bitten nails,
uncovering the ashes of her mother, buried there.

Ian Parks

The Hollies

The Hollies is a park dedicated to the memory of Major Harold Brown DSO MC, who died in WW1. It was given to the City of Leeds in 1921 by his father.

February and the sun is visible
so I'm out with my new old camera –
found in the back of a cupboard, a *Penguin* 'made in Leeds'
(we were given it by a British Rail man).

I've been photographing beech roots –
their decorative celtic knots –
and I hesitate because I'm not used to
all the 1920s mechanics,
and have probably just re-exposed
the same frame of the negative,
laying knot on twisting knot
until there is no way that they will
ever be snipped.

I'm frugal and won't finish the film
for weeks, will have to wait
to discover if I can follow
the bends of the beech's scrawling hand,
caught in the clutch of my *Penguin's* beak.

The sandstone claws at the roots' underside,
forcing them upwards, to grow tough outer bark,
and they are at once letters home,
mud covered arms, fingers in trench water –
they never did find his body,
and though if we'd met in the street
I doubt we would have had much in common,
I know that if I had been wealthy
I would have made a place like this.

We keep going back to the trauma of it –
the extraordinary trauma repeated every day
in people's front rooms.
It is February, short and cold,
and the sun is tipping it down.

Tom Kelly

The Tightrope Walker

I was born to walk the highest wire.
Those who watched me tread that fine, fine line
would ask me if it ran inside my blood.
Did someone, somewhere, in my family

pass on to me the skill? I tell them no,
I found it in a book: a photograph
of an Edwardian girl in bloomers
with a tiny parasol who stood

absurdly high above the streets of Leeds.
The thought of it – the deep desire –
filled all my daydreams and I had to go,
to take that one step on the tensile thread

and from that dangerous height observe it all:
the crowds agog and gaping,
the park a shimmer and a blur,
the emptied shops and marketplace

perceived from a safe distance
with no net beneath my feet.
The secret is not caring if your curled toes
lose their grip, to let one foot dictate

the movement of the next, the measured tread.
Be there to watch me balance
between certainty and risk.
Be there to catch me when I fall.

Ian Parks

Horse walking a tight rope

After Leeds Gallery

How does he place those saucer feet?
Eyes either side of his head,
designed to watch for danger,
trying not to look down.
All those years of training,
he must have fallen, as a beginner,
or perhaps he is the proverbial diamond
in the proverbial rough –
born to be found, to do this, to be drawn
in the proverbial rough –
or perhaps he is the proverbial diamond.
He must have fallen, as a beginner,
all those years of training,
trying not to look down.
Designed to watch for danger,
eyes either side of his head.
How does he place those saucer feet?

Tom Kelly