

1991

Poems

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Poems

Abstract

SNOW FROM THE NORTH, UNEMPLOYED AT TRANMERE: 1991.

Graham Mort

SNOW FROM THE NORTH

Tonight, snow comes squalling from the north:
It curfews streets to silence,
Smothers footsteps, car tyres, voices
From the golden doorways of pubs.

Driving into flickering ice-flames,
Rooftops are preened with cold's plumage;
Headlights glance on white wings
That beat in steady sweeps of snow.

The road dips and turns, brakes slew the car
Into invisible bends, tyres lurch
As it climbs in an agonizing gear
Onto a hilltop where drifts bury the moor.

Below, lines of yellow lights waft out,
Wind spins its flakes over Burnley;
The town falls asleep, house by house,
Surrendering to the white bird's dreams.

Dead trees lean out from the dark:
Headlights amaze their eyeless staring,
Their lost souls clamour in the wiper blades,
Hiss under the tyres' treachery.

Only my hands between this and me:
They poke out from the grey cuffs of my coat,
Wrenching the car away where it swerves
Towards oblivion.

I'm home, those wings still kissing my face:
Up behind that window she's sleeping, not knowing
I'm here at last – still breathing, still holding
My breath – as snow lets that first star through.

UNEMPLOYED AT TRANMERE: 1991.

Their white hands flutter,
Curling cigarette smoke
That quiet speech punches away;
Their knuckle-points maroon softly
Clenched fists beating to 'sixties singles
Spun from the juke-box.

Beyond this bar the shipyard clangs,
Tolling a far away busyness
Of labour and sweat and pay-days
Evaporating, vessel by vessel.
The river steals past, shifting
Its poisoned cargoes to the sea.

These men are waiting for a new scheme,
A new order, another half pint:
Trades have fallen from their hands
Like money they could not save
Fell from their pockets,
Like days fall from the calender,
Or ash from a trembling cigarette.

A door opens and swings shut,
Shocking the blue air with cold.
The men look up, greet him, look down;
All the old scores are forgotten
Or have died.

Through half-frosted windows
Telegraph lines are scrawled across
Sky's blank order-sheet, delaying
Pigeons who bear no other message
But their shit.

Another war would do the trick:
That incandescent vision of plenty,
Its ribbons of steel rolling from the forge
To plate another frigate.
But the new wars are far away,
And the dying is foreign and far away
Like an unaffordable holiday.

On the television, squaddies lug water
 From landrovers to the blinding sand.
 A helicopter lets out a general
 Who holds his hat and salutes the dunes.
 At New Brighton a trash of plastic
 Lolls at the tide's edge.

In the corner the men glance up:
 Someone swears, the barman laughs,
 The dominoes go over, one by one.

Stephen Gray

SEASON OF VIOLENCE

has not ended; was due to close;
 termination was fully announced –
 prayer-day now throughout the nations –

the air is cluttered with silent words –
 can't breathe for ascending petitions;
 not over yet; only begun

a derailment at Mariannahill;
 Sunday is another killer in South Africa;
 take a philosophical view:

'O Lord afford me detachment
 from those who want to but don't know how;
 bullets through flesh fly easily'

As Archbishop Tutu said Martin Luther
 King said: 'those who live an eye
 for an eye end up blind people'

will not end; for ever and ever;
 help out now; Amen.