

Butterwell

Nightdriving. Going to pick dad up from work.
Singing *Dance To Your Daddy* as the road unwinds,
a cine-film pitted with potholes. Catseyes.
An allotment flae-craa sucking its fangs
by the stob where they hanged the last Ranter.
Where Jesus met the woman with five husbands.
Where the tigers turn to butter. Where they bury
men alive, black torchlight on the livid faces,
Netherton to Widdrington,
Widdrington to Seaton Burn.
Sedimental generations eking & hawking,
cavilling in Jolson monochrome. Butterwell.
A double scoop of Peroni's ice cream, the finest in Ashington
and the world. And the recipe gone: snow melt
from the hills of Butterwell. 'Somebody wants
to make the guy an offer really: patent it, they'll make a mint.'
A housing estate rechristened by council officials
in the wake of a scathing ITV documentary.
Our childhood word for cabbage whites: *butterlowie*.
Butterwell. Asking mam to tell us again
how the road was sinking because it was built
over the mine where granddad was buried alive
so often they nicknamed him *Jonah*. Driving on
past the watchtower in St Mary's churchyard, built
in 1830 to deter body snatchers from Makemland;
where I saw Aidan & Cuthbert knock the dirt off their boots;
where I saw slag heaps rise like smouldering hills of buttermilk;
where I saw Barabbas scabs
and selected representatives of the Tory party
in smurf-blue boiler suits & white hard hats
with red tape surveyors creep at night
to snatch our milk and poison every well. Butterwell.
The warning sign on the gate to the site.
The whistle at lowse, the wire fence, the floodlit watchtower.
The full moon poaching itself in the clouds.
Mam changing sides, winding the seat with a sheet,
while we press our noses to the glass & squeak
a cross in the mist to ward off the vampire
who is sliding up to the car on silent Nosferatu-rails;
who is climbing into the car, his donkey jacket heavy
with the odour of the mine (old earth freshly turned:
a smell that sticks to you, dogged as a lesson,
dogged as a lesson you wish you'd never learned);
who plants a kiss on mam's cheek & leaves a bruise.
And my brother & I nodding our pumpkin heads
and grinning our pumpkin grins. And him reaching behind his seat
and grabbing our knees, his hand swinging like a shovel.