

For Oluwale

To gloom suspended,
rusted to bridge railing, too cuffed to cross
stymied to wooden slats above riverbed, vertigo sick
treacle thick, afraid to hear the boards crack,
roar of river in bitter tongue, tell me to go back.

Afraid to fall from air to Aire, left petrified midway
shaken down by estuary with banks
battered by decay, left to run putrid
from Knostrop Weir to Skelton Grange,
prisoned above the twisting foam.

Witness the river pull debris
engulfing dirt, frogs, bindweed,
a systematic assault on the riverbank, a swallowing,
a need, swelling into gaping mouth
sucking along shopping trolleys and birch boughs.

Bankside, he drops like a stone.
Drawn into the swell, complete immersion,
no tumble, no trip, all fall; then resurface to be swept along
with so many coke cans, further, to be fixed
out at sea, levitating in the froth.

A body crystallised,
battered against coast to dismantle, dissolved into atoms,
swallowed by whale, sieved through baleen,

black fingers melting back into universe,
incisors and jetsam, fingernails and sea glass.

So slow, the unravelling back to nothing.
So slow, you could almost believe it.

Turn back on bridge, watch
bloated body pulled from water by white hands,
black boots stained with blood; eyes swollen with
river water and hunger, remember
this wild animal left to rot in Killingbeck.

I witness this, though they think themselves infallible,
We witness this, and inside we burn.

Nights Like These

Rise from soggy sofa, transfixed in bubble
burst epiphany, drip-bled back to earth,
waxing to the sound of the moon.

A second of clarity through smoke and slurred
shouts of westhead bouncers drunk on power,
prosaic projections spat forward as
clotted hands pull down sweaty socks.

Stumble to glass smashed in carparks,
the bluebottle, the moss-green mosaic
ricochets off rooftops as cig ends plummet onto the
passers-by below; we fall-down, tarmac crunch, chipped teeth,
blood on the brain. Sublunary ecstasy
weaving into cries of far off foxes who
howl like abandoned babies, hungry and alone.

The hazy sludge of burning wood, fugue state
for others to untangle; descend beneath the roar of Mancunian Way,
into drained swimming pools with bass to swallow all;
we spin submerged with arms ripe for pitbull's teeth
to sink into; shoes stuck to shrapnel, crumpled rizla,
broken lighters and bright pink goggles.

Illuminated by clipper, light bursts from under skin;
like Guy Fawkes, bound together by grubby kids and tossed on bonfire,
flames curl behind the eyes, burning wood licks newspaper to dust;
mouth full of cobwebs, you spray; bright red and all caps:
'ARE LUV WILL NEVER DIE,' vomit in the middle of the road
and skulk back home.

Sunken Silver

When I think of my sons, Ira,
Eli and Toussaint, my black sons who
follow the Mersey, their fisted faces drawing
its banks between their teeth, spat back at
those who dare question, with
You don't look like you're from round here,
I'll remind them to text me, don't wear a hoodie,
of stop and search, head full of worry, anxious malaise
till they come through the door;
they'll smile with crooked teeth copacetic, skin gleaming,
little Kerry James Marshall's drawing in the light.

*They'll tell me, they can hold our heads underwater,
but our hair will float to the surface like pondweed,
our screams may be muted but pearly bubbles will rise,
amongst Milfoil, Hydrillia and Coontail you will trace the bubbles
see them burst and sparkle, echoes of our curses seeping into air.
Some future mudlark will pick our fingernails out of the muck,
mistake an eroded femur for old china, find our way from private collection
to museum pedestal, 'black boy's finger – 2044.'*

I still worry; don't want to end up like the woman who
counts rosaries roadside, stooping low to cradle
framed picture of young man, sepia soft,
English reserve permitting one tear to leak through
reticence of remembered warnings, little baby fingers and
mischievous eyes, wrong place wrong time; couldn't stand
forever mourning, couldn't stay strong as Doreen.

My mother says when I was a baby, she would
sneak through the front door, tiptoeing, but the two
silver bracelets round her wrist would jingle-jangle
coaxing out baby, coaxing out little baby into her
brown leather hands, bubbling smile through
gaped teeth, reflected in brown innocent face,
before the growing pains, the revelation, the fear.

'My sons' faces may grow wilted, worn and leathered
by the movements of the world, I'll do my best to arm them,
vaccinate, slowly expose, open their eyes to bitter truths,
be sure to kiss their eyelids after.

About the Author

My name is Ruby Fatimilehin and I am twenty years old. I am originally from Manchester and currently study English Literature at the University of Leeds. I am of mixed Nigerian and English heritage and these identities, combined with my Mancunian pride, heavily influence my work. My poetry blends vivid metaphors and images of the natural world with urban landscape and resonant voice. I have enjoyed writing poetry from a young age, and I am delighted to have been shortlisted for the Martín Crawford Award for Poetry 2020.