



Working Landscapes

Photographs Karl Hurst Mary Musselwhite

Poems Matthew Clegg Andrew Hirst Fay Musselwhite

Essays Emma Bolland Andrew Hirst Brian Lewis Fay Musselwhite

Longbarrow Press



From *Recovered Landscapes: Reclamation of the South Yorkshire Coalfields* by Karl Hurst.

The very notion of 'landscape' seems to induce an effect of smoothing. The very fact of visual continuity implies a kind of present reconciliation. In this guise it resonates with that notion of space as a simple surface. We travel across landscape; we travel across space.

'Landscape/space/politics', Doreen Massey

Working Landscapes is the first in a series of themed digital supplements published by Longbarrow Press, each of which will focus on an aspect of *place*. This selection of poems, photographs, and essays explores the relationship between labour and land, reflecting on the changes of use (and appearance) of the English landscape since the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. It examines the contested spaces of the modern city, and revisits the fields and commons lost to enclosure. It considers the forces at work in the aestheticisation of certain post-industrial sites, and the erasure of others. It also looks at how the role of labour – and the withdrawal of labour – is frequently written out of the narratives of place.

Brian Lewis
Sheffield, May 2020

On Cities, Solidarity, Loss, and Hope

Emma Bolland

I used to dream of a university. I used to look at the older men queuing in the bus shelter in Mersey Square Stockport in the 1950s and see each one as a lecturer and imagine a subject for them: that one's Chemistry, that one's History, etc. They were middle-aged workers going home. I had to ignore their clothes but their faces offered no resistance to this exercise. Now I dream of there not being a university. — Peter Riley ¹



On 25 November 2019, members of the University and College Union (UCU) at sixty universities across the UK began an eight-day strike. In Sheffield, we stood in the cold and rain, and talked of what the reality of ‘university’ had become, and of the possibilities of what ‘university’ could be. Several weeks before, I had booked an upstairs room at The Rutland Arms (a pub long frequented by students and staff of the art school) for the second launch of a

book I had edited: the Dostoyevsky Wannabe Cities *Sheffield* anthology.² In putting the book together, I had thought of ‘city’ as a concept to be contested, complicated, as an idea to be kept in flux, not least in the idea of city as anthology. In the introduction to the *Sheffield* anthology I wrote: ‘How do you write a city? How do you read it? What is the space of it inside the boundaries of the page? [...] The texts produced are not the sum of it. Nor are they all of its parts.’³

On 26 November 2019, the contributors performing at The Rutland were Linda Kemp, Rachel Smith, Brian Lewis, Pete Green, and Sharon Kivland. The evening was charged. Some of us—both readers and audience—had been on the picket line that day (at both of the cities’ universities), and a battered, soggy placard, eroded by relentless rain, had been pinned to the wall. Some of us were mourning the loss of the poet and activist Sean Bonney, who had died earlier that month.⁴ The readings were all extraordinary. Linda Kemp—dedicating their reading to Sean’s memory—read their

long poem ‘...ideas become dangerous again...’ in which ‘Politics is writing / and there is no *like* about it,’ and there is ‘the desire to construct a passionate everyday life’.⁵

That day, on the picket line, I had become aware of the conceptual space of ‘university’ as *contested* as if for the first time. Or rather, aware not just in an intellectual, neutral way, but in a visceral, passionate way. Aged 57, I had only a few weeks before taken possession of my first ever staff card, first ever staff email (both temporary, fragile, conditional). After an adult life spent on the fringes of academia—a lifetime of unpredictable and recurrent madness had kept a younger me in and out of different kinds of institutions, unable to get ‘proper work’—I had previously been ‘reduced’ to visiting, speaking, appearing, ‘passing’ as an academic. People were often surprised to find I was not a proper one, making assumptions based on—what? A stern face? An intellectual turn? The night before the strike I was terrified, crying. Just two weeks after starting some proper, longed-for teaching I would be on the picket line, a visible ingrate. But to not be—to cross that line—would be inconceivable. To stand on the picket line, to experience the disappointment of having (some) colleagues, managers, students walk into the building—some without a backwards glance, some with discomfort and shame written on their faces—was to consider the stripping away of passion, the wearing down of hope experienced by the tenured, long-term staff who now stood firm on the line, to consider that the decision that they took to strike was a much harder one than mine. The university that they had joined had changed. The space for enquiry, for thoughtful, discursive, reciprocal pedagogy, had been engineered into a space where workloads crushed them, took them away from their students, and where the students were seen by management merely as units by which income was accrued. At my university the dispute was about just this: working conditions that were destroying any meaningful manifestation of teaching and learning, coupled with the Sisyphean toil of REF, TEF, and other punitive acronyms. What was the space we now stood outside of? What was it we were fighting for? What was the space of our protest? In his contribution to the *Sheffield* anthology, an account of the rescuing of the contents of a library, Brian Lewis writes that

The spaces of the city are always coming into use, or falling out of use. [I think of] the new work made possible by and in those spaces, what did we do without them, what will we do when they’re gone. The links are broken, the histories wiped. It must be acknowledged, there must be a record. The spaces of the city did not appear or disappear by themselves, they did not find or lose their mark on the map without a fight. It was not for nothing.⁶

The picket line, cold and wet as it was, was also a space for hope, for noting not just those colleagues and students who crossed it, but also those who stood strong, all across the university. It was a space for friendship: I met not just academics from my department to whom I had not before spoken, but also those from other departments and disciplines: biosciences, languages, the business school. It was a space for transformative pedagogy, speaking to twenty-year-old students who had never experienced a picket line, didn't know what an industrial dispute even was, didn't know that their lecturers were paid for only twenty minutes to mark a three-thousand word essay, didn't know that lecturers often worked fifty- and sixty-hour weeks, giving up their evenings and weekends to try and stay on top of their workloads, hearing those students say they supported us, and to see some of them join us on the line. To explain to casual and zero-hours staff that yes, they could join the union, that for them membership was free, and that yes, they could strike, and be supported: to have them take the card from your hand. It was a space for celebration: to wave at the bus drivers, taxi drivers, postal workers who beeped their horns in support. To stand up to those jeering 'greedy lazy commies' from across the street, and realise how quickly one is seen as 'other' when one stands up, placard in hand, to smile with renewed determination. To thank the passers-by who, unbidden, dropped giant bags of sweets into the strike fund bucket, brought hot drinks, bacon sandwiches. To thank the café over the road who let us use their loos and warm up (big up to Hygge, who were endlessly welcoming, and who also offer a free piece of fruit with every drink purchased). It was a space where there was possibility.



All these considerations persisted into the evening, both in the performances, and into the discussions that continued until closing time. Ideas of labour, ideas of education, ideas of community, resistance, and comradeship. As the university is destroyed, where

might the spaces of meaningful pedagogy and enquiry be? Rachel Smith's performance of 'Lines that Echo'—reading and drawing into the text as she read—proposed that 'still the library remains a stopping point on any line',⁷ and Pete Green's 'Pulp' imagines a future city in which the people repurpose their communal spaces after all the public libraries have been closed, in which a pub is also a transformative space.

Bar staff go among the tables, set down pencils,
notepaper. The lights fall low.
Walls revolve, reveal banks of bookcases unseen
since the joint converted. Deprived
eyes fall on spines and titles, lap up possibilities.
A tenor sax fugues jazz.
Thirsting for print, the guests make for the shelves,
furtiveness half forgotten, seizing
on samizdat anthologies, a transgressive history
of needlecraft, the atlases
they only heard rumours of...⁸

We sat in the top room of The Rutland Arms, performances over, and talked of labour, of how our withdrawal thereof had suddenly made it visible (whatever the outcome of the strike) to management, to students. Sharon Kivland had travelled from London that day, and had got up at three o'clock in the morning to get the night bus to St Pancras train station. She spoke of her fellow passengers on that bus, of the labour that is hidden from us, the night workers, largely people of colour, largely immigrants, exploited, paid peanuts, without whom the daytime world could not exist. We talked of what a university might be. What if it could be free again? What if anyone could go, regardless of prior qualifications? What if students could move freely between disciplines, study for as long or as short as they wanted? What if there were no grades, no awards? What if the purpose of learning was learning and life? Sharon had ended the performances (after an earlier reading of her contribution 'Reisemalheurs' which considers, via Freud, the anxieties of travelling between cities),⁹ with a reading from Sean Bonney's recent collection *Our Death*.¹⁰ I can't now remember the poem, only the feeling with which her reading filled the room: the feeling that even though something had died, we would, somehow, carry on. Later, when we were drunk with alcohol and with comradeship, she reminded us that for centuries people had come together as we had done in cities all over the world, gathering in small rooms just like the one at The Rutland, talking about what could be, about a struggle towards.

Onwards, comrades.



The *Sheffield* anthology, edited by Emma Bolland, was published in 2019 as part of Dostoyevsky Wannabe's *Cities* series, which includes titles from Bristol, Manchester, Santiago, and Paris. The contributors to *Sheffield* are: Helen Blejerman, Angelina D'Roza, Daniel Eltringham, Tim Etchells, Louise Finney, Rachel Genn, Pete Green, Linda Kemp, Sharon Kivland, Joanne Lee, Elise Legal, Brian Lewis, A. B. G. Murray, and Rachel Smith.

¹ Peter Riley, 'Untitled', in *XIV PIECES*, Sheffield: Longbarrow Press, 2012.

² Emma Bolland (ed.), *Sheffield*, Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019. The first launch of the book was held as part of the Off the Shelf literary festival in October 2019, with readings from Helen Blejerman, Angelina D'Roza, Louise Finney, Rachel Genn, Pete Green, Joanne Lee, and Brian Lewis.

³ Emma Bolland, 'FOREWORD; or, an Incomplete A-Z of Sheffield', in *Sheffield*, Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019, pp. 9–11.

⁴ Sean Bonney (1969–2019) was a poet and activist who performed his work at protests, in occupations, in seminar rooms, on picket lines, in the back rooms of pubs and at international poetry festivals. His poetry has been translated into several languages.

⁵ Linda Kemp, '...ideas become dangerous again...', in *Sheffield*, pp. 131–40.

⁶ Brian Lewis, 'Local Distribution', in *Sheffield*, pp. 185–95.

⁷ Rachel Smith, 'Lines that Echo', in *Sheffield*, pp. 223–33.

⁸ Pete Green, 'Pulp', in *Sheffield*, pp. 113–28.

⁹ Sharon Kivland 'Reisemalheurs', in *Sheffield*, pp. 143–157.

¹⁰ Sean Bonney, *Our Death*, Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2019.

Photographs by Emma Bolland. First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 3 January 2020.

Frome II

When all you could hear in the city cafes
was talk of the expected yield,
I sat impervious, counting small grain
like this in my mind.

At one particular time (the markets
were also buoyant then) I occupied one city
whilst my brother lived in another.
I managed, scraping by
on the smallest income, by keeping
my expenditure low and walking the thinnest line.
My brother's performance was outstripping
mine annually three or four fold
and often he would call with the offer of a meal
which I seldom accepted because
it was difficult for me to reciprocate.

Then came a time for clipping back
(a time for the gathering of roots) and my brother
could again see the benefit of beginnings
(of information broadcast hand to mouth)
– during that time we lived in the same city.

Because my brother didn't forget
that hunger in a time of plenty, today
whenever talk surfaces and questions
on expected yields flourish and the two cities
again begin to emerge, you will find him
sitting in the city cafes, neither chiding now
nor honouring, but sitting in silence, rolling
the small grain of that time under his tongue.

Andrew Hirst

From *Frome XII* (2007)

There is No Wealth but Life
Fay Musselwhite



The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way... To see clearly is poetry, prophesy and religion, all in one.
— John Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*

Nature, art and work define the prism through which John Ruskin examined man's place in the world, and he combined them with mathematical elegance. Art and work require nature as raw material, and through study and further engagement, art and nature will ask of the mind what work takes from the body, while nature and work, for Ruskin, provide the perfect subjects for art.

The last of these equations is demonstrated by the critical interest Ruskin took in the Pre-Raphaelites, and in J M W Turner. Born and raised at the poor end of the Thames fishing trade, Turner's close observations of 'black barges, patched sails' and 'weedy roadside vegetation' were highly praised by Ruskin, who saw no other painter able to depict 'the natural way things have of lying about.'¹ This sensitivity, and the rallying cry of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to paint from nature and to reject classical and artificial notions of composition and beauty, chime with Ruskin's revelation, aged twenty one, which overturned much of the nine years' schooling he'd had in 'the mannerisms and tricks' of making a painting. One afternoon, 'with no prospect whatever but a small aspen tree against the blue sky', he saw the charm of 'composition' in the existing world, and the holistic learning journey of capturing it. 'At last the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere.'²

The poets and visual artists featured and discussed in this essay embrace this clarity of sight in their spark and rigour. Seamus Heaney's sonnet "The Forge"³ begins: 'All I know is a door into the dark.' Through the doorway, all we see and hear,

such as ‘The unpredictable fantail of sparks / Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water’, make the nearby ‘traffic flashing in rows’ sound tinny and ineffectual; while the juxtaposition of the modern road, where the blacksmith ‘recalls a clatter / Of hoofs’, provides a surface under which we seem to peer, as if through time, or perhaps not through time at all, but through our own surface layers, into what we are still made of.

“Coming Close”⁴ by Philip Levine invites more direct contact, with a woman working the night shift at a buffer wheel. The work is dirty, hard and heavy, and has taken its toll on her body. She’s three hours, and many years in, her work is steady and conscientious, yet she’d resist it in a moment, should the chance come. Just before the end of the poem, we’re asked to imagine this:

... if by some luck the power were cut,
the wheel slowed to a stop so that you
suddenly saw it was not a solid object
but so many separate bristles forming
in motion a perfect circle ...

Then she laughs and touches ‘the arm of your white shirt to mark / you for your own, now and forever.’

Philip Levine was born to a middle class family in Detroit in 1928.⁵ When his father died, twelve years later, the insurance company found an excuse to deny the major part of the claim, and Levine saw his mother worn out by the effort of keeping the family fed, clothed and sheltered. When they were fourteen, he and his twin brother vowed never to ‘participate in the corporate business of this country, a business that appalled us by the brutality of its exploitation of the people we most loved.’⁶ Poetry had taken hold of Levine a year or so earlier, when his burgeoning lust for words fused with feelings of deep resonance that arose from delving into backyard soil to make things grow, and nights spent in woodland. So nature and work were implicated from the start, and “Innocence”, a poem from his 1991 collection *What Work Is*, sets them in bitter opposition to each other. A team of workers have prepared an oak wood for a road to come through it, foliage and branches have been removed, then:

earthmovers gripped the chained and stripped trunks,
hunched down and roared their engines, the earth
held and trembled before it gave, and the stumps
howled as they turned their black, prized groins
skyward for the first times in their lives

Soon after the vow with his twin, Levine began working part-time in a soap factory, and for many years supported his higher education by road building, factory and delivery work, until writing and teaching at last provided a living. His poetry remains fascinated by the streets and people of Detroit. In *What Work Is*, we journey with ‘the faces on the bus ... each sealed in its hunger / for ... a lost life’,⁷ to places where someone must put on ‘wide rubber hip boots, / gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet / like a knight’s but with a little glass window’,⁸ or yearn to ‘climb the shaking ladder to the roof / of the Nitro plant and tear off / my respirator and breathe the yellow air’,⁹ then to school, where the monoculture sets in:

These are the children of Flint, their fathers
work at the spark plug factory or truck
bottled water in 5 gallon sea-blue jugs
to the widows of the suburbs. You can see
already how their backs have thickened ¹⁰



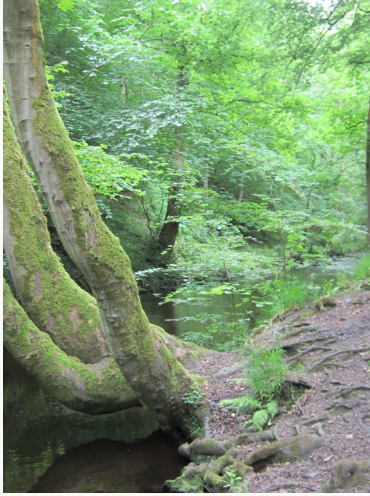
In his youth, Levine believed that manual labour would leave his ‘mind and imagination free for writing’.¹¹ This mirrors Ruskin’s desire for St George’s Museum in Sheffield to inspire tired workers with ‘what is lovely in the life of Nature, and heroic in the life of Men.’ Situated on Walkley’s north-facing hillside, where the furthest view looks northwest over the Peak District, ‘the mountain home of the museum’, as Ruskin described it, was chosen to draw local grinders up from the toxic air of Rivelin, Loxley and Neepsend valleys.¹² However, some knew a more sustained escape was needed.

By his mid-twenties, Levine had his share of residual minor injury, was disgusted by the divisive practises that drove industry, and the prospect of a life there, unassuaged by his dream to make poetry pay, would have been intolerable. Instead, for many decades until he died in 2015, writing and teaching gave him:

... some work
to do, something useful
and hard, and that they might please
their own need to be doing.¹³

A hundred years before Levine worked in factories, Sheffield grinders suffered severe damage to their respiration, digestion and posture; many were physical wrecks with terminal illnesses by the age of nineteen.¹⁴ Rivelin knife grinder Benjamin Creswick was impeded by the symptoms of his trade while his family grew.¹⁵ When St George's Museum opened, in 1875, he was twenty-two, and its exhibits spurred him to try his hand; he discovered a talent for sculpture and invested in lessons. Before long he drew the attention of John Ruskin, who tutored him, helped find commissions, and paid him, weekly, for as long as necessary. Creswick became a sculptor of great national renown. He played a leading role in the Arts and Crafts movement, and held a senior position in Birmingham Art School for decades. Completing many public and private commissions, he made art from terracotta, marble and bronze, often portraying characters at tasks he'd performed and observed during his early working life.

It's a credit to the zeal for authenticity Ruskin passed on in his training, that, with at least six children to support, Creswick initially turned down a major commission to illustrate the manufacture of hats, saying he knew nothing of the process. He was persuaded, after being allowed several weeks of study in the hat factory; and the friezes he made for the high street shop front, and factory entrance behind, have been called 'a magnificent piece of Socialist realism, modelled without sentimentality but with great dignity.'¹⁶ The hatters' building no longer exists, but the scenes depicted on the Cutler's Hall Frieze in London show the same strength and dignity. Creswick's great-granddaughter, visual artist Annie Creswick-Dawson, has said that the visual impact of the men's stances, within sections and from one frame to another, remind her of the flow of the Rivelin.



I find this comparison thrilling for the way it taps into the parallels between man and nature that I strive to illuminate in poetry. From the realisations voiced by the teenage couple in “Star”, to the potency of how Sheffield’s fast rivers brought its famous industry to town, the connections flow. Poems of mine such as “Here I spill” and “Memoir of a Working River” imagine a river’s life in terms of a person’s, tracking attitudes and behaviour as they mature, suggesting also the harnessed power of a workforce. In poems like “Impasse” and “Contra Flow” the river stands in for the mind’s ability to break through and move on.

“Flood Triptych: The Loxley” brings these notions together: as the harness breaks, human ingenuity turns against human, and devastation wrought by the river echoes a body’s internal struggle.

John Clare’s poetry pulls you into the midst of nature, where the work of flora, fauna and river seems never to be done. People are often peripheral: a cowboy on a gate, a distant seed-man sowing grain, or where ‘the cottage roof’s-thatch brown / Did add its beauty to the budding green’.¹⁷ Clare observes from pathless land, inside a thicket, or by ‘little brooks that hum a simple lay / In green unnoticed spots’.¹⁸ Removed from human lore, his poetry reveals the long rhythms of nature, while melding the immediacy of life, for its creatures and vegetation, with the breathless joy of the recorder. In “Sudden Shower”, a bee is one of the ‘little things around, like you and I’, who hurry for shelter, and his allegiance is palpable in this stanza from “Autumn”.

While from the rustling scythe the haunted hare
Scampers circuitous with startled ears
Pricked up, then squat, as by
She brushes to the woods
Where seeded grass breast-high and undisturbed
Form pleasant clumps through which the suthering winds
Softens her rigid fears
And lulls to calm repose.

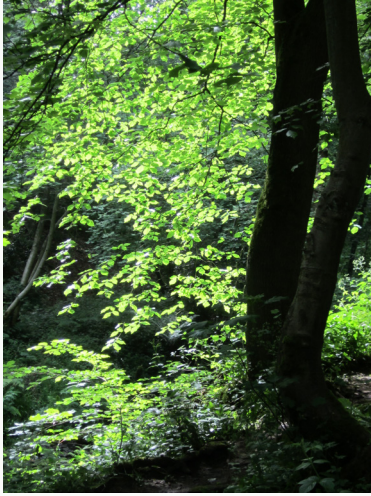
Born in 1793, to a peasant family in the Northamptonshire village of Helpston, Clare grew up in similar poverty to Turner, with the same kind of exposure to his future material.¹⁹ He went to school until he was eleven or twelve, after which money and location left no possibility for further education; yet Clare was a voracious scholar. He borrowed, or saved to buy, books on history, music, botany, maths; everything, that is, except Latin and grammar, which he disdained. Already in the thrall of reading, writing and story, when he read *The Seasons* by James Thompson in his early teens, he was seized by the urgent desire to record his world as poetry, and did so obsessively from then on. His early inner life also has parallels with Levine's, and the poetry of both are underpinned by deep-rooted threads of human equality and nature's supremacy. They also share the endearing strategy of telling you their tale as though you were stood beside them. Here are some lines from Clare's "The Nightingale's Nest":

Hark! there she is as usual – let's be hush –
For in this blackthorn-clump, if rightly guessed,
Her curious house is hidden. Part aside
These hazel branches in a gentle way
And stoop right cautious 'neath the rustling boughs

The fields and gardens where Clare worked weren't the factories of Creswick or Levine, yet in "The Lament of Swordy Well" he bears witness to the appetites of the revolution already underway in cities:

And me, they turned me inside out
For sand and grit and stones
And turned my old green hills about
And picked my very bones.

In poems like this, dedicated to the horror of land ownership which Enclosure ushered in, Clare rails at length against its fences, stop signs, 'Grubbed up trees, banks and bushes'.²⁰ The packaging of land came to Helpston in 1806, Clare's thirteenth year, and in "The Moors" there's the sense of him having caught the last moments of 'one eternal green / That never felt the rage of blundering plough', whose 'only bondage was the circling sky', where boys picked mulberries, and shepherds found lost sheep. Intact forever, until 'Enclosure came and trampled on the grave /



Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave'. This and a similar line in "The Village Minstrel", where he 'Marks the stopped brook and mourns oppression's power' – a line that could have been written somewhere in the world any year since – typifies his fluidity between a lost detail and the irrevocable hijacking of resources. His way of speaking for and as the landscape and its creatures makes his politics always personal, yet he is usually shedding light on an ugly facet of his nemesis. When "The Fallen Elm", which always grew comfortably close to his home, and 'murmured in our chimney top / The sweetest anthem autumn ever made', was felled

without any warning, he notes the dangerous rhetoric of those who 'Bawl freedom loud and then oppress the free'. He goes on:

And labour's only cow was drove away.
No matter – wrong was right and right was wrong
And freedom's bawl was sanction to the song.
– Such was thy ruin, music-making elm

Like Levine, Clare grew up at the brunt of great national hardship and severe class division. In Helpston, he struggled to make a living, nearly enlisted, even put up fences for the local squire – which always made him drink more and hardly write at all; then at twenty-four, his family almost destitute, he travelled a few miles for work burning lime, which went to make mortar and fertiliser. It was during this employment that he resolved to change course: he approached a local bookseller and his twelve year journey to publication began.

This is no rags-to-riches tale. Clare held out for the best deal, and after his first collection was published in 1820, he enjoyed several years of acclaim as the Peasant Poet. During visits to London, though noticeably gauche, he made friends, some generous and loyal, of writers, artists, etc. There were more collections of his work, but inexperience and bad advice lost him money, and it's likely that his wit and

politics eluded much of his contemporary readership. When delays and charlatans had squandered his most accessible assets, his popularity waned. Meanwhile, the severity of his mental frailty, and homesickness when away, went unrecognised or misunderstood for too long. Conversely, he missed London friends and city life when he only connected with them by letter.

Three years after the publication of his first collection, Clare suffered his first bout of depression. This coincided with the death of a rural labouring class poet from Suffolk, a few decades his senior. Robert Bloomfield's work had been immensely popular for a while, but the man had died penniless and losing his sanity. Fourteen years later, aged forty-four, John Clare was first certified insane. Failing mental health, manifesting in depression and erratic behaviour, had for a long time prevented him from making the best of his earnings, and made home life difficult. Now, it seems, his wife was concerned he would become violent. In his last few years at home, he could often only be calmed by one of his children talking gently with him about the countryside. He remained in mental health care and continued to write until his death in 1864. Here's his sonnet, published in 1835, "To the Memory of Bloomfield":

Sweet unassuming minstrel, not to thee
The dazzling fashions of the day belong;
Nature's wild pictures, field and cloud and tree
And quiet brooks far distant from the throng
In murmurs tender as the toiling bee
Make the sweet music of thy gentle song.
Well, nature owns thee: let the crowd pass by,
The tide of fashion is a stream too strong
For pastoral brooks that gently flow and sing,
But nature is their source, and earth and sky
Their annual offering to her current bring.
Thy gentle muse and memory need no sigh,
For thine shall murmur on to many a spring
When their proud streams are summer-burnt and dry.

As is so often the case, in the 1870s much concern was expressed in Britain about the national debt. This didn't, however, refer to the debt owed to the working urban and



rural poor by the individuals making a fortune from the sweat on their thickening backs. Ruskin's response was to call for a National Store, and St George's Museum in Walkley was conceived to exhibit this collection of artefacts.²¹ He deplored mass production and its attendant poverty of the human mind and body, and founded the Guild of St George to

explore alternatives to industrial capitalism, encourage art and craft, and work toward greater class equality throughout the country. The museum in Walkley was one of its earliest projects. Unfortunately, several episodes of serious mental illness left John Ruskin unable to fully realise his hopes.

Recently, the Guild funded a nine-year programme at Sheffield's Millennium Gallery, which culminated in 2015. Ceramicist Emilie Taylor was commissioned to produce work for *Force of Nature: Picturing Ruskin's Landscape*, its 2012 exhibition. Taylor has led a number of projects that encourage members of a community to make art from what binds them.²² Several years ago, for instance, in *Brown & White*, recovering heroin and cocaine users employed a nostalgic framing to juxtapose their own images of addiction and safety. For *Force of Nature*, she drew on childhood memories of her father's involvement in pigeon racing around their Rivelin Valley home, and the piece she made, "So High I Almost Touched the Sky", is a pair of metre-tall vases decorated with tender images of Skye Edge pigeon fanciers, their birds and surroundings. She fired them in an outdoor smokeless wood-fuelled kiln, built by the artists' community at Manor Top, while pigeons flew high above. The impressive stature of these items, along with their capacity and fragility, are perfect for the men they depict. Indeed, for the whole workforce who keep everyone fed and sheltered without anyone's name being known – because none of them are called Tesco or Adidas – and for the poets and artists spoken of here, who have seen something and wished to tell it.

A few years ago, Taylor was guest visual artist on a poetry walk led by Mark Doyle, and I was lucky enough to be on it. We left Upperthorpe Library to stand where Kelvin flats had been, and look out over Pitsmoor and Parkwood Springs. She gave

out materials, talked to us about looking, not looking, and negative space, showed us methods to capture our version of the view. Then I was amazed to be led along Neepsend Valley to where derelict pigeon lofts are barely hidden by a thin stand of trees beside Penistone Road. “Flight from Cuthbert Bank” is the poem I wrote about the walk; here are its last two stanzas:

Ten years since the last
kept pigeon homed to here. Back five more decades
to before they razed Parkwood Spring and sucked
Neepsend dry: the valley not this fleck of factory,
a filament between car galleries
and abandoned hillside,

but like a Lowry vision: a flock
of men released by work clocks, to rise above
day’s end, the valley’s din, legacies of grind,
to hold the small bulk, feel its heat
pulse through feathers in cupped hands,
and send those tiny hearts and lungs
to claim their reach of sky.

¹ Ruskin, “The Two Boyhoods”, in Wilmer, p.146.

² Ruskin quoted in Dearden, pp.17-8.

³ From *Door into the Dark*, 1969.

⁴ Levine, *What Work Is*.

⁵ Details of Philip Levine’s life are from Levine, *The Bread of Time*.

⁶ Levine, *Bread*, p.113.

⁷ “Every Blessed Day”, *Work*.

⁸ “Fear and Fame”, *Work*.

⁹ “Burned”, *Work*.

¹⁰ “Among Children”, *Work*.

¹¹ Levine, *Bread*, p.114.

¹² Price, p.71.

¹³ “Possession”, *Not This Pig*.

¹⁴ Engels.

¹⁵ Details of Benjamin Creswick’s life are from <http://benjaminreswick.org.uk>.

- ¹⁶ Creswick and Ruskin scholar Simon Ogden, quoted by Annie Creswick-Dawson on <http://benjaminreswick.org.uk>
- ¹⁷ Clare, “The Village Minstrel”.
- ¹⁸ Clare, “The Eternity of Nature”.
- ¹⁹ Details of John Clare’s life are from Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*.
- ²⁰ Clare, “The Lament of Swordy Well”.
- ²¹ Notes about the Guild and the Museum are from the Guild’s website.
- ²² Details of Emilie Taylor’s work are from her website.

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- Guild of St George: <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk>
- Emilie Taylor: <https://emilietaylor.co.uk>

All photographs by Mary Musselwhite (taken in the Rivelin Valley, Sheffield, June 2015). ‘Flight from Cuthbert Bank’, ‘Memoir of a Working River’, and other poems referenced in this essay appear in Fay Musselwhite’s debut collection *Contraflow* (Longbarrow Press, 2016).

First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 31 August 2015.

Factory

When you scabble over mangled girder,
ruptured brickwork, giant bones of timber
– to clamber into somewhere money's made its own
hunkered in, tamed the ground, occupied the sky,
traded its mutations then moved on,
leaving what remains to blister through its rubble phase –
birds announce your trespass with egg-nest urgency,
a pigeon bolts the cover of a sagging slated rafter,
squawks as into a patrol transmitter.

The party's clearly over:
underfoot the silted scuffle of industry unravelled.
Kick a nozzle-can, it scuttles like the husk of a vivid fruit –
its lettering's the late florescence of this settlement.
In ragged sunlight buddleia casts shadows on mosaics
of landed masonry – softer than the angles etched
by unleashed metal, dead and fraying leaded cable –
grasses knit their root-mats in crevices,
a bee-queen prospects for an opening.

Fay Musselwhite

'Factory' is the second poem in 'Flood Triptych: The Loxley', in *Contraflow* (2016).

In Praise of the Ordinary

Karl Hurst



I recently received a rejection from a respected publisher that has resonated much more deeply than I had envisaged. The knockback didn't bother me so much as the reasoning behind it. The body of work was a series of photographs then titled *Recovered Landscapes: Reclamation of the South Yorkshire Coalfields*. The publishers basically said that there is no or little commercial interest in these landscapes, that they are invalid, obsolete, without a criterion that fits the current publishing climate. Friends suggested that I drop the specific locational moniker and resubmit them as a more generalised way of treating landscape. But to do this would risk losing the essential value of what I was trying to achieve – namely, that something deep within the regional psyche was being lost through the treatment of post-industrial sites and the value system that surrounds them.

Having work rejected because the work isn't of an industry standard is one thing, but the dissemination of its values through the market is another. Part of the problem is that of exoticism; displacement chic. If you replace South Yorkshire with the Russian or South American coalfields, interest increases, and value increases. I think of John

Clare, who suddenly and irrevocably became absent through his absolute insistence on describing what he knew and his fateful attachment to his own microclimate. I guess, in deep introspection, Clare wanted to preserve what he felt to be already over, though few wanted to hear it, as it hardly fitted prevailing sensibilities. However, I think it goes much deeper than this and into our expectations of what cultural values are and what purpose they serve. I will return to this as the essay progresses.



Too often in today's climate, cultural hegemony is cultivated through a seemingly ad hoc mixture of arts festivals, commercial galleries, managerial processes and academic interventions into spatial politics. What has become harder, and to some extent impossible, is to work outside of these frameworks. *A priori* positivist assumptions about 'community' often head up these processes and their adherents. Empirical knowledge of social or event planning bypasses more deep-seated resentments of and dissatisfaction with cultural 're-presentation'. Added to this is an accelerated reliance on digital topographies (through sat-nav, gaming terrains, Google Earth, etc). The end effect is often a geopolitical dysmorphia, a fantasy world. The ordinary, caught as it is between the sublime and the banal, is often erased and replaced with heritage green space, business or retail parks, faux-archaeological aesthetics, or is simply fenced off and marked as an absence, reflecting the value of keeping sites empty as fiscal or cultural currencies. Rarely in the former coalfields has land been

left to naturalise as a post-industrial site. The management of landscape through extraneous principles is nothing new; however, when photographing the region, my criteria have increasingly been informed by the questions 'by whom' and 'for whom'. Photographing the former site of Denaby Main colliery, and its subsequent use, highlighted the failure of consultancy and multi-agency bodies to understand the deeper needs of the site. The deliberate depoliticisation of the region is also evident in its restructuring. For example, the site of Orgreave coking plant (scene of the worst mass brutality conducted during the bloody 1984-85 miners' strike) has now been re-named as the softer-sounding and benign 'Waverley'. To date, no official acknowledgment or representation of the conflict has been made on the site. What seems clear is that the region has a diverse set of meanings and histories and its future value must attempt to try to accommodate this range in a meaningful way.



Before continuing with a discussion of the points raised above, I want to describe what I mean by the ordinary. To create work *en plein air* in a contemporary setting is deeply unfashionable and is often seen as anachronistic. Counter to this are a plethora of site-specific works that seemingly reveal personal and geopolitical histories, or documentary works aiming to capture event-specific 'decisive moments'. I have used 'ordinary' in this context to mean work that neither reveals a particular important event, nor uncovers a familial or archival particularity. Some of these sites

might even be described as ‘non-sites’, places where nothing happens very slowly. Absence of meaning and the ordinary seem perfectly syntagmatic of a region that has had its major resources continually disputed and exploited until little remains but traces: scars and residues. It is the condition of these remains at this particular time that interests me. The future and the past are other photographs, other representations; any meaning here should be through what is visible as a surface.



It is important in this context to distinguish between the *normal* and the *ordinary*. Normative values have a systematic relationship to the production and dissemination of agreement criteria, of validating work through its ‘usefulness’. On the other hand, ‘ordinary’, in best usage, might include the disregarding of official (and often arbitrary) boundaries, the use of land as playful, or as an absence of distinctions between urban and rural, ruin and foundation. Here the categorical dichotomy between the sublime and banal also begins to loosen. If sites are only validated through their context (crime scenes, accident sites, historical human activity etc) then the suggestion (and presupposition) is that all other criteria are supplementary. However, the ordinary falls short of these criteria; for example, in *plein air* photography, conditionality plays a major part in the methodology of production values. The weather or time of day isn’t secondary here, but essential. This ‘it was as it is’ attitude isn’t quite as benign as it first appears, though. I will go on to discuss how I completed the series

of photographs, and what such close scrutiny of the value systems and dissemination of landscape might imply within a broader context.

On reflection, I think the series has a couple of things going against it in the prevailing climate. Firstly, as I have suggested, the series is primarily focused on absence. The human element in the photographs is secondary and often invoked as a negative principle. To create work that isn't human-centric and doesn't show the species as benevolent or flexible doesn't fit with utopian or community values. Secondly, the medium itself becomes problematic inasmuch as the series aims to create its meaning, not through the singular 'important' definitive image but through a series of non-specific variants. The ordinariness of landscape not being shot at its most beautiful angle or at the poles of dawn or dusk aims to suggest a non-partitioned, plain version of the world and not a locus we head toward as a point of interest. When I discussed this series at a gallery opening, someone suggested to me that the reason that many of these sites are screened from the casual passer-by is because people don't want to see them. This seems reason enough to show them.

As the series developed and extended, I began to focus less on the coalfield sites themselves and more on their peripheries. The idea of momentarily catching a landscape without any presupposition began to appeal to me deeply. As the focus shifted from the specific to the commonality of waste ground or scrub, I realised that although all landscape isn't treated equally that doesn't mean all landscape isn't equal in and of itself. So eventually I dropped the original title and began to divest the images of any bias of particularity I could. By refusing meaning, landscape itself can be disruptive. Photography as a lacuna is doubly bound to re-present the point of interest as facile, as of no great significance: whether you choose to look or not, it's there. The series attempts to put a strain on our presence as passive viewers of landscape by pushing its absence onto our own, refusing along the way such overworked terms as 'banal' or 'sublime'. The non-identification with landscape as picturesque or sublime searches for its imagined communities elsewhere. The process of being in the landscape itself finds its exegesis in the limits of identification and not in co-opting its value as a regulatory system of materialism. It is this 'tramping', wandering quality that the series aims to acknowledge. How much 'use' this quality can be put to remains to be seen.

All photographs by Karl Hurst. First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 30 April 2016.

Ground Work

Brian Lewis

North of the railway line that links the East Leeds suburb of Crossgates to the commuter village of Garforth, a ripple of flags and fixtures, spotless signs, developers' colours, staked in rolls of turf: the joined-up housing, tipping from the west, leaking into the low-rise, light industrial district of Barnbow. To each gap, each leftover lot, a phased release, an orderly settlement. New homes, new streets, a woman's name in every lane and avenue, Ethel Jackson, Amelia Stewart, Olive Yeates, neat lawns and driveways, no roads east of Maggie Barker. Screened from The Limes, parallel to the railway, a thin, grey park: in the park, a grey shed, its vaulted frame stretching to one-third of a mile, the bulk receding, then vanishing.



It was said of the factory at Barnbow that the parts would go in at one end and come out the other as tanks. Between 1983 and 1990, the Challenger 1 was built here, then, from 1993, the Challenger 2, after the site was acquired by Vickers Defence Systems in 1986, who designed and constructed a new plant

for its production. For nearly fifty years before its privatisation and sale to Vickers, the Barnbow complex was operated as a Royal Ordnance Factory, one of a number of state-owned ROFs established as part of the late 1930s rearmament programme. ROF Leeds wasn't the first munitions factory in Barnbow, though; the government had built one at the outset of the first world war. Officially known as National Filling Factory No. 1, it absorbed 313 acres of the Gascoigne estate, an area criss-crossed by defunct coal pits, the main site lying north and east of the railway sidings that, decades later, would make way for ROF Leeds. Within a few months of becoming operational, Barnbow's output had increased to 6000 shells per day, making it the most productive British shell factory of the war. This was achieved with a 24-hour, three-shift system and, by October 1916, a workforce of 16,000, 93% of whom were women and girls. Conditions at Barnbow were difficult and dangerous, especially for those who handled explosives, the workers sheathed in smocks and

caps, their skin yellowing from exposure to cordite. At 10pm on 5 December 1916, several hundred women had just started their shift, including 170 working in one of the fusing rooms. At 10.27pm, an explosion levelled the room, leaving 35 women dead, and many more injured and maimed. The details of the accident were withheld from the public until 1924, when the land was returned to Colonel Gascoigne, who sought, and received, compensation for the requisitioning of his estate. By now, most of the filling factory had been demolished; a new, short-lived colliery was constructed, reusing some of the factory buildings, and several parcels of land, described as 'waste', were later put up for auction by the colonel. Over time, the railway spurs, the filling sheds, and the pit workings were dismantled or abandoned, spikes and shafts now dents and hollows, rough ground softening to the gaze, plantation and grass, arable lots, the works effaced by landscape.



The word *landscape* arrived in England with the Anglo-Saxons (as *landscipe* or *landscaef*), and, in its earliest sense, referred to a system of manmade spaces, or the 'shaping' of land to which people belonged. From the late sixteenth century, it is increasingly identified with the usage borrowed from Dutch

painters, *landschap*, a term descriptive of 'natural' scenery, and suggestive of framed pastorals. The idea of the *picturesque* begins to inform the making of the landscape itself, and is a significant factor in the rise of the 'English garden' a hundred years later; planned idylls, commissioned by wealthy patrons, laid out in the grounds of private estates. While the excesses of the Romantic period have largely fallen away – the grottos, rotundas and mock ruins that proliferated in eighteenth-century parks and gardens – our attachment to an idealised, 'painterly' view persists. The eye is drawn to a simple arrangement of lake, grove, and gentle slope. It is nature, it is 'naturalistic', and the labour that made and maintains it is absent or discreet. We overlook (or, perhaps, applaud) the settled artifice: without it, there is no 'view'. Conversely, the working landscape – in its industrialised, technologized, contemporary form – is seldom recognised as landscape, but, rather, as a disturbance of soil, a distortion of perspective, each visible modification and intervention an act *against* landscape. Environmental objections to new 'works' are often linked to

aesthetic concerns; occasionally, the latter predominate, as can be observed in public opposition to the siting of pylons and wind turbines (with an emphasis on *visual impact* apparent in many campaigns). Sightlines are interrupted by wires and blades. The 'idyll', if it exists, is endangered by infrastructure projects. And yet, for all our discord and unease, the working landscape belongs to us, and we to it; its history is part of our history. The narrative of a single site, its changes of use, is recounted through generations, passing into folk memory, local lore. What happens to these sites, and their stories, when the labour and the landscape have exhausted each other?

Karl Hurst's photographs of the former collieries of South Yorkshire (and other parts of the county shaped by its heavy industry) explore this state of ambivalence: the undeclared thesis of the project is that the terrain itself is caught between renunciation, remembering, and renewal. The images in the series (collectively titled *Recovered Landscapes*) are presented without locational or situational information, or, indeed, any details that might help us to understand what kind of work took place on these sites before they were deindustrialised (and, to all appearances, depopulated). This is, I think, intentional, the suspension of context an echo of the process that Hurst is documenting: the decoupling of the coalfields from the communities that the collieries made viable. Whether fenced or unguarded, disused or reclaimed, we are to infer that these places no longer belong to the people. A recent essay by Hurst offers some clues to his thinking; he visits the site of the former coking plant at Orgreave, 100 acres of which has been redeveloped as a technology park, and a further 300 acres designated as 'the Waverley Community', a mixed residential / commercial estate with lakeside views (and an annual 'service charge' of £150 per household). He searches the area, its signage and maps, for some 'official acknowledgement' of the Battle of Orgreave, a decisive moment in the 1984-85 Miners' Strike, and, arguably, the event with which the name of the parish is most closely identified. He finds nothing, no murals or monuments, and concludes that the development is a deliberate act of cultural erasure, of which the renaming, or rebranding, from Orgreave to Waverley is the most troubling symptom. The name *is* the legacy; without it, the link to the landscape is broken.

Displacement, estrangement, and the weakening of the bonds of work, class, and community have been prominent themes in Hurst's work for some years, and comprise the burden of his poem cycle *The Frome Primer* (2007). The title, suggestive



of geographical specificity, is a riddle, a bluff; while the project was initially sketched as 'a view of the south from the north', there is nothing of southern England in these poems. Like the images of *Recovered Landscapes*, the poems are untitled, the locations unidentified. Here, too, the effect is a loss of particularity, a sense of attachments (to people, places) worn thin, wearing out. The 'older world' to which the speaker (or speakers) belonged has declined, and is being dismantled, the surviving fragments ('the backs of weavers' houses', 'the abandoned giant works') suddenly out of place. The lineage of skilled manual work, of which he is part, is tapering and fraying, its blunt lessons ('it's no good knocking / even the straightest nail / into a crooked wall / with a crooked hammer') now passing, obliquely, into parable or fable. This world, its work, cannot be handed down. The world that replaces it is defined by precarity, 'scavenging', the austere resourcefulness of its new arrivals, sustaining themselves by 'tak[ing] hems up / and rak[ing] coiled leaves out / of drains', or 'smoking [...] black tobacco / and sourcing the cheapest cuts'. This precarity and rupture is not unique to the 'surrendered' city, as the seventh poem makes plain. It is one of only two poems in *The Frome Primer* to depart from the first person, and the only poem in which the focus shifts to the land itself (a 'working landscape' in South Lincolnshire, the cycle's sole concession to topographical orientation). The flat farmland is evoked in unusually lyrical terms:

In the blue bean rows near Boston
Chou Li bends to a black stork.
Low mists veil the fields, Chou Li
straightening to the horizon, caught
in transparency. Imagine Emperor Huizong
at work here, hinting at willow with delicate
calligraphy and rendering a quiet nobility
from the work, white persimmon
hanging in the cool morning.

Glance again now after this clarity,
like grief, grey fluke blooms on the beans,
the itinerant labour gang, in transit, dispersed.

In times of scarcity and uncertainty, our relationship to landscape, as a *resource*, is often reframed, impelled by the makeshift and the fugitive. Fay Musselwhite's sequence 'Adventures in Procurement' (in her 2016 collection *Contraflow*) opens with 'Firewood', in which the darkened edges of an unnamed 'southern city' are scouted and foraged by a small, shadowy group, raiding newbuild sprawl and rebuilt townhouses for scrap wood, rummaging through skips for discarded pallets and planks, gathering 'armfuls' of timber to feed their squat's hearth. This is work that subsists on the byproducts of work, sustaining itself through the surplus and waste of land and labour. The poem and the sequence are set against the backdrop of England in the late 1980s, a period in which industrial relations were deteriorating, and home ownership was increasing. 'Firewood' contrasts distant reports from the 'battlegrounds' and 'barricades' further north – the news aflame with 'licks and lashes [that] make light of a community exposed' – with eyewitness accounts of neighbourhood gentrification:

[...] streets colonised by stair shifters, roof raisers,
bay window chasers, home owners performing
their open house surgery, bedrooms waiting
in polythene wings.

The land is divided, carved up by legislators, developers and speculators, the era's combustible politics and economic imbalances leaving parts of it a no-man's-land.

Stepping into this breach are the protagonists of ‘Adventures in Procurement’: predatory slum landlords, small-time traders, itinerant musicians and crafters, each of them testing the market for its gaps, its weaknesses, exhausting the seams and cracks, then moving on. The line between legal revenue and illicit trade is repeatedly – perhaps deliberately – blurred in ‘Smokeless Zone’ and ‘Wearing the Trousers’, the ‘pulse of merchandise’ racing from ‘storefront harbour’ to ‘laid-up trailers’, before slowing at the ‘spy-holes’ of flats frequented by dealers and users, in which we find the eponymous anti-heroes of the last poems in the sequence, ‘Tales from Min’s’ and ‘Leon’; their territory shrinking to a handful of cornered rooms, raided and wrecked, in turn, by police and gangland enforcers. It’s a strain of precarity – debt and disquiet – that drags the individual ever inward, obliging a withdrawal from the street, from its contested ‘turf’, from the land itself. The recollected misadventures of ‘Leon’ are framed by two vignettes in which he appears to have escaped – or has been extracted from – the ‘splintered wreckage’ of his old life. We find him in the woods, stirring broth over an open fire, adjusting to the rhythms of a self-sufficient ‘forest settlement’, the nearest road vibrating ‘at the edge of sound’. Here, too, he is outside of the formal economy, rethinking and remaking the relationship between hand and tool, recognising it in ‘each tenderness / of muscle’, grateful for the ‘echo of toil that melds him to the land’.



This idea – that labour engenders a uniquely intimate bond with one’s environment – is realised, freely and fully, in ‘Memoir of a Working River’, the 18-page centrepiece of *Contraflow*. The poem reimagines the industrial growth, decline and eventual restoration of the Rivelin Valley, a woodland vale in north-west

Sheffield, and the fast-flowing river that carved it out, prepared it for work, and gave it its name. Its human and nonhuman elements – the mills, forges and dams that harness the water, the men who maintain the riverside industries, the valley’s ecology – are absorbed into a single, fluid narrative, the story of an ‘old man’, half-river, half-human, tracking the Rivelin’s physical and historical journey from its moorland source to the city’s edge, slipping between mortal and riverine states along the way, each shift marking a change of fortune. The landscape is undone and remade, the

young river's slow, persistent scratch first giving it form and direction; as it matures, the water is 'yoked' to the wheels that drive the expanding industries, contributing to the city's prosperity, and, in turn, depleting the health of the valley and the men who work there; then, as 'retreating trade' gives way to returning trees, the old man 'detoxes', his 'scarring' and 'choking' relieved by dredging and conservation, the residues of work – 'slathered wheel-gape, spindle, stray grindstone' – preserved and assimilated to the river path, the valley now a site of heritage and leisure. Perhaps the most salient aspect of the poem is its vision of embodied labour, the levelling of human and natural resources, the worker and the water put to the same wheel and, as a consequence, being consumed alike, losing their discrete identities, their 'nature', their *unlikeness*. Iron particulates flake from the grindstones, catching in throats, weakening lungs: downstream from a 'spark-shed', the old man encounters a grinder, 'doubled over racked in rasp-spasms', who

tells how he offers blunt steel to grit
till it's flayed by resistance to its leanest edge
how each day he enters the valley
more of it enters him.

In the 1970s, the UK became the world's first post-industrial society. The transition from an economy defined by the primary and secondary sectors (agriculture, mining, manufacturing) to one increasingly reliant on the emerging tertiary (or 'service') sector was reflected in the changing appearance of the country's landscape, with fewer people employed on the land or in heavy industry, and more offices, distribution centres and retail parks appearing at the edges of towns and cities. The new sector's complex variables (both economic and cultural) meant that a flexible labour market was essential, and employment agencies became instrumental in placing people in this new space, and in new (and often short-lived) roles. For some, this offered a path out of difficult, dangerous (and now declining) work, with opportunities for career development. For others, the path seemed to lead nowhere. Matthew Clegg's *Lost Between Stations* (2000, revised 2011) chronicles ten years of displacement and indirection at the end of the millennium, 'a period of dead-end jobs, intermittent unemployment, and employment training schemes'. Structured as 'a poem in 7 fragments', we first encounter its speaker in a call centre in metropolitan Leeds, 'all at sea' in an open-plan office, floundering in telemarketing. With each 'fragment', we drift further from the centre – the supposed



promise and purpose of the city's business district – and into the social and geographical margins: the graffitied estates of Hyde Park and Burley, the gleaming villages (or exurbs) of Scholes and Barwick. One of the motors of this picaresque narrative is the influence of Homer and Derek Walcott; Clegg draws on

the energy and imagery of *The Odyssey* and *Omeros* to navigate the systems and circuits of the built environment, a landlocked voyage in which 'the kerb is a jetty / And the ship a bus, stopping and starting, / Twisting and turning across this city.' The 'matrix of buses and trains' is not so much a means of proceeding to a (known) destination as a device for chance exploration and encounters, disrupting routine and expectation, allowing 'the drift / Of conversations' and 'coincidence' to nudge the traveller 'at every change'. This is how the city's landscapes enter the poem, glimpsed in the gaps between low-status, casual jobs, between 'the University's ghetto / Of loans and potential' and the run-down 'precincts and tower blocks' of the outer suburbs, and between the 'stations' of class and community. It's the moments of dislocation that reconnect the speaker to his surroundings: a night walk along the Kirkstall Road, where a retired mariner revives his consciousness with stories and songs from the other side of the world; a summer staffing the itinerant portal of an ice-cream van, the prospect shifting from pitch to pitch; and two confrontations with the police, one damaging, the other disquieting. In each episode, the problem of work is shadowed by the problem of worklessness. The latter predicament informs Clegg's sequence *Edgelands* (2008), which shifts the focus to the varied terrain of north-west Sheffield, and slows the movement to walking pace. Whether by compulsion or choice, the protagonist finds himself making circuits of his locale, its rivers and woods, car parks and public parks, industrial estates and residential estates, his observations coloured by a recent, and painful, separation. We are to infer that 'the far edges' to which 'something is pushing him' are not only cultural and geographical, but also psychological and financial; his straitened circumstances are reflected in the neglect and impoverishment of much of the terrain that he walks, its roads 'cruelly scarred with welts / and divots', the verges littered with hubcaps, windshields, cans and bottles. The texture of the working landscape seems brittle with age, the ground exhausted and inert, the human traces fading out:

These desolate gravel roads
connecting landfills, factories,
are bleached white by midsummer.
Bin bags under sun-kilned mud
clench, obdurate as fossils.

South of the railway line that links the East Leeds suburb of Crossgates to the commuter village of Garforth, a patchwork of irregular fields, uneven pasture interrupted by sparse hedges, stands of trees, rough tracks, the shaved square of Crossgates Cricket Club marking the railway's intersection with Austhorpe Lane. Rumoured to be the site of coal mining in the 19th century, much of the area is now 'scraggy grazing land', the setting of Matthew Clegg's poem 'Because I Was Nobody', in which the teenage speaker finds respite from 'job club' and the pressures of life on the estate. To the north-east, five hundred yards above the railway line, the former National Filling Factory No. 1, its 'foundations, earthworks, and demolished and buried remains' designated as a scheduled monument in 2016, one hundred years after the explosion at Barnbow. To the north, the former Vickers tank factory – inactive since 1999, and, since then, intermittently used as a storage depot for retail goods and cars – now approved for demolition, the extraction of a 150,000 tonne seam of coal beneath the site a precondition for any subsequent redevelopment. To the north-west, the new Limes estate, most of its houses detached from their neighbours, the blank streets in memory, a handful of munitions workers, named twice over, Ethel Jackson, Amelia Stewart, Olive Yeates, Maggie Barker.

First published on the Longbarrow Blog, 30 April 2017. Photographs by Karl Hurst (from his 2016 series *Recovered Landscapes*). The former Vickers tank factory at Crossgates was demolished in late 2018; an application by developers to build more than 400 homes on the site was deferred by Leeds City Council in January 2020.

Because I Was Nobody

Mum's new bloke called me 'the blob'.
I'd no idea what I wanted to do
with my life. I'd come home from job club
and watch anything on TV. It's true,
at dusk I'd walk out of the estate
into the scraggy grazing land beyond
and light fires. On a hump of earth I'd sit
sipping *Thunderbird* and warming my hands
as lights in the distant high-rise blinked on
and off. Once, I stumbled down a mound
into a herd of cows. The heat of them
was like a drug. All I wanted was to stand
feeling their breath all night. They let me try
because they knew I had nothing. Was nobody.

Matthew Clegg

From *West North East* (2013). The short film for 'Because I was Nobody', filmed on location in East Leeds, can be viewed here: <http://vimeo.com/95552060>

Further Reading

In print

Sheffield (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019)

Emma Bolland (ed.)

Cazique (2018), *The Navigators* (2015), *West North East* (2013),
Lost Between Stations (2011)

Matthew Clegg

Sheffield Almanac (2017)

Pete Green

Hello Dolly (2012), *Frome I-XIV* (aka *The Frome Primer*, two pamphlets, 2007–2008)

Andrew Hirst

Contraflow (2016)

Fay Musselwhite

The Footing (2013)

**Angelina Ayers, James Caruth, Mark Goodwin, Rob Hindle, Andrew Hirst,
Chris Jones, Fay Musselwhite**

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Online (click titles for links)

Fugue #3: Crossgates

audio sequence recorded on location in Crossgates, East Leeds

Matthew Clegg

Recovered Landscapes: Reclamation of the South Yorkshire Coalfields

photoset comprising 82 images

Karl Hurst

'Landscape/space/politics'

essay for *The future of landscape* research project

Doreen Massey

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