

A Love Letter to Hull

– for my hometown

Jay Mitra

my memory of you starts with a baby.
aged 3, i gazed upon him lovingly –
his face filled with wrinkled possibility.
in Hull Royal infirmary, pale fingers
both strong and small grip tight
around my thumb, like hungry worms
seek the brown earth i have to offer.
you, my dear city, watch us both,
how this towering hospital holds us,
his mother and land and a part of me
can't stand that he will never feel
the same immigrant loneliness.

rising like the uncut grass in the meadows
you are made of, he grew.
into a farmer's field we'd sneak in to feel
our intoxicating youth drip like wet mud
on our shoes bought in Bransholme.
we track your body into the kitchen
and mum screams bloody murder.
you exist in the anti-vandal grease
that butters our backs with black.
we are four-foot expeditioners high on crack,
flailing on the fence at the bottom of our street.
we plead our mums for a couple of quid,
and eat those 99p flakes with our mates.
we don't worry about our weight.
we decide to dig and slip under like snakes;
too small to scale it.
enveloped in victory, we are happy.
you watch us silently. i brush
the dust off his t-shirt and we go back in for tea.
next day we hear neighbourhood kids
knock hard on our door:
come on what you waitin' for?
through the window we hear
the boy from number four shout:
you lot larkin' out?
we go out.

we get older. reroute. i disappear into books,
barricade myself between shelves.
my mum bribes me with trips to Ings library.
ten books a week. i read them easily.
my brother doesn't speak.
we collect conkers in primary school
they are swollen rubies, precious jewels.
we fight over them like fools
but these are playground
bargaining tools. wrapped up in the things
little kids do, i don't really notice you

until i inhale your breath: a mixture
of petrichor and second-hand smoke.
suddenly sixteen, i choke
on baccy, rolled badly. you cling
to the walls of the Adelphi, your voice
a melody of boots tapping the pavement
outside FRÜIT as music melts into the Marina air.
i watch you wave from the dancing water that soaks
children in Victoria Square. i feel you cushion
my feet when walking Old Town's cobbled streets.

my brother no longer a baby –
too cool to spend time with me.
but you spend time with me.
you make a home in the humour i feel
watching men walking with two bikes at once,
of emos in Queens trying to smoke blunts.
Orchard Park to the Avenues, you are full
of people who entertain and amuse,
yet history tells me strong enough to refuse
the likes of fascism or an authoritarian king.
you mothered William Wilberforce
who led an abolitionist win.

hair made of shallow, brown rivers, lips lined
with loyalty, nurturing the friendly
from bald bouncer to bee lady.
you are made of kids who've learnt to be happy
by setting fire to bins and sharing Turner baccy.
you bring the Arctic to the corner of Spring Bank,
trap a Polar Bear in the Maritime glass tank.
you are the laughter of racing boys zipping
through ten-foots and girls that Make Noise.

birthplace of Amy Johnson, you watched her fly,
encouraging other female pilots to take to the sky.
you are the steady heartbeat of strangers
unafraid to say 'hi'.

i turn 18. we drown our troubles
with two-pound Welly Thursday
vodka lemonade doubles. we bid adieu
via M62 and move away for university;
the bigger cities swallow me whole
and vomit me back out.
i crave the comfort of your closeness.
the newness is nauseating.

Christmas comes and students return by train,
capture on their phones the Humber Bridge –
they are home again. drizzle falls steadily,
wipes clean bad memory. people have tried
to whitewash your beauty, but it only takes one
window cleaner to scrub clean the dirt off this city.
you are the excitement of kids moving hasty
to get in on that warm, crumbling Coopland's pastry.

you are the fabric worn by blue jacket volunteers,
you are the haze i feel drinking cheap pub beers –
there's empathy here, a smile for those we don't know.
though you never gave us riches, we still grow.
a seed sown into concrete, we are stubborn green shoots.
into the grey of you, we dig deep our roots.

you are the wrinkles in the faces of the elderly
giving life advice at a bus stop.
you are the vibrations of a Stagecoach window
against a weary forehead. you are the saliva
exchanged between lovers in the Interchange.
you are the beautiful burn on my chapped lips
when i devour chip-spiced chips. you slip
into the startle when a man in town starts yelling
'TWO POUND STRAWBERRIES',
you are the glue sticking metal moths to walls.
when the youth feel overrun,
you are the warmth of The Warren
breaking their fall, softening
impact with a comforting shawl.

both teacher and ruler, a prince
produced from pecking a toad of a city.
a King even – with a crown of gold –
stolen, borrowed, squandered, doled.
you do things your own way, all these years
and your cream telephone boxes still stay.
you are the colours in art we cannot hide,
the painted eyes on the walls of Bankside.
you are the courage of children preoccupied
with staring down sea beasts bathed in blue,
the ghost of their warm hands melting
through the glass shark tank. thank you

adoptive mother, beloved city,
you welcomed me into a courageous committee.
like the glow of fairy lights on Humber Street bars,
you exude the radiance of brilliant white stars,
stretching across the sky of my memories
just like Spiders visiting From Mars.