

A City of Contradictions

by Jay Mitra (featuring lines by Elizabeth Holt, Daisy Broderick & Nicola Meekin)

Praise this city of contradictions.

A Kingstown who turned away a king.
A funeral and miracle made from the same whalebones.
Janus-faced, this city is both beginning and end of the line.
Skin the years like cod, find the red flesh of an industry,
the dried blood of an economy, the fish smell that haunts memory.
The cobbles of High Street are the scales
of a 'northern coastal town' too important to be named
when zeppelins rained shrapnel and pain.
Knocked down houses are the missing teeth of streets
still bearing a gap-toothed grin.
We take loss on the chin.

Praise this city of contradictions.

The lurch of grief of headscarf revolutionaries
that brought legislation to its knees.
Praise the hurt(ling) force of mothers and wives
who refused to do nothing when men lost their lives.
Kitten heels and long coats, silk wraps and hoarse throats
marched to Downing Street with a plea for safer boats.
A petition was signed—mostly by women it's true—
the men were not keen on wives interfering,
But there was nothing they could do.
And these women wrestled power from politicians
but did not call themselves feminists:
driven by love not semantics.

Praise this city of contradictions.

The moths who do not seek the light but hug walls
like old friends. Take your moon back—
This city glows in a way the world can't see.
This once international hub, married merchants
with hagglers, stowaways, and stragglers,
but for a while became hostile to those
not from round these parts.
Hull, you grew cold, cold like the river
that runs through us, against immigrants whose stories
mirrored our own. A strange fear of foreigners
fuelled so many of your votes.
A port city facing Europe made the Polish feel less at home.
We forget ourselves, the trades on which we built our wealth
When Banksy drew the child in us, our sword high
over our heads, it wasn't long before we found
the bridge raised, the same sword in our back. And when
the cold-hearted vandal smeared a message of unity,
it only took one window cleaner to scrub clean this city—
Jason Fanthorpe went with spirit in hand and heart,
and restored us to a thing of beauty.
"If I hadn't gone down someone else would."

So often, Hull's hate is fought with good.

Praise this city of contradictions.

How we savour The Indian and Chinese takeaways
order them as a treat, yet so many brown taxi drivers
must grit their teeth as venom sprays from their back seat.
What do we do when we don't get help from the police?
People here cling to the legacy of William Wilberforce—
a Hull MP who helped change the course of history.
But what of a black ex-paratrooper who fought for this country?
Christopher Alder died in Humberside Police custody.
Do you know the mortuary released the wrong body
for his family to bury? Alder's niece's ashes
were spread on Grace Kamara, a stranger to her soul.
The same folk who praise Wilberforce scoff
at those fighting for Alder, sneer at their efforts,
call justice for a black man murdered
in Queen's gardens police station unrealistic, implausible.
Have you forgotten? Even the end of slavery
was once perceived as impossible.

Praise this city of contradictions.

The nurses and cleaners always ready
with a cheerful "morning love" and "alright sweetheart?"
Their dulcet Yorkshire tone makes people feel less alone.
Their care is worth more than the banging of pans
and the mockery of a 1% pay rise while inflation is sky high,
yet there's this condescension that lingers like rot
in the *why should they get what I haven't got*
rhetoric woven into the Daily Mail.
We are better than this. We are a city of crowbars
that pry open scrutiny, organises trade unity.
The bankers keep getting big bonuses
but what about our key workers?

Praise this city of contradictions.

The joyous intrusion of children larkin out,
their football kicked repeatedly into our backyard.
Boys who play with a tigerish intensity of affection
are labelled jobs or troublemakers,
but these lads have the potential to be change-makers.
Even flowers treated like weeds
have the capacity to crack concrete.

Praise this city of contradictions.

The millions poured into restructuring school buildings
while child poverty is on the rise. There are teachers
living on the dark jolt of coffee who stuck by pupils
when schools turned academies, when funding
was cut and classes were stretched
and all that mattered was the grade at the end.
Praise the young people that walk into class hungry.
Anger erupts out of this constant state of empty.

How is a mind supposed to focus on learning
when their growling stomach slits open silence?
Praise to the parents who make do,
who have to resort to feeding children
the cheapest of cheap, anything
to fill tiny hungry bellies.

An uncomfortable survival. You see,
we are closer to being on the streets
than ever being billionaires. Soon
the skies will turn the colour of chipspice
The air will sting our eyes, taste like ash
and we must fight back.
The love we share is tender like a bruise
like reluctant fingers unzipping in the interchange.
A wristband of rain circle fists raised in solidarity
at a Black Lives Matter protest that saw Hull folk
kneel into grief, tears mixed with deluge
as silence speaks volumes.

This city is in a boxing match with time.
A sandbar sinking under the waterline.
Amputate that canker of poverty,
which like a swollen river, drowns all.
Calcified hearts soften as we stand on the rim of hope
and look down into the crater, extend a hand
to those looking up. Pull hard; hold tight.
This city is both lifeline and fishhook.
We turn our noses up at those who had it easy;
it is easy to hate tranquillity
when you feel most alive in a storm.
This city is a city of contradictions.
We are the end of the line loneliness
and yet cannot escape seeing old friends in town.
We are not perfect, and we never pretended to be,
but in our history, and in our hearts,
Hull is a city of revolutionaries.
We plug in an amp and crank an electric howl
into the dark. A Polar Bear captured
by the community, roars freely,
music I carry home on the bus.

This is the city of contradictions—
the proud slog of the underdog,
the groaning creak of metal moth wings
slowly,
fluttering.