

# **Helen Mort**

## there & back

Helen Mort was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Northern to write a sequence of poems inspired by the journey along the Manchester to Hebden Bridge line. The poem was performed on a special poetry train event on Sunday 13th May 2018.

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**there & back**

**Helen Mort**

**i. there**

**Victoria**

At ten, my globe  
was this tiled atlas,  
crimson-black veins  
the neural pathways  
of Yorkshire,  
Lancashire. Here,  
it's always evening

and I'm holding  
my dad's hand, asking  
*what's Huddersfield?*  
but now we're moving,  
travelling backwards  
till we're out of sight,  
now I can't see  
the curve  
of his face.

\*

**Moston**

*Dear Cottonopolis, dear town  
of moss and bog. I like your empty  
benches and your bramble-twine. I like  
your leaves of peeling paint. You look  
like the teacher I never had -  
flint eyes, cloud-coloured hair.  
Stay with me, Moston. Tell me  
something I don't know.*

*- Hasty, 9.27 to Leeds*

\*

**Mills Hill**

It's LOVE backwards in the window  
of a terraced house: magenta capitals.  
It's the frayed ribbon of Oldham Road  
and the gate that reads STRICKLY  
NO DOG WALKERS. It's grandad  
on the platform, waving, jogging  
on the spot, pretending  
to keep up with us.

\*

### Castleton

Two black dogs on leads  
drag a man the length  
of a hedgerow. The day  
is a caught scent.  
My heart fills slowly  
like the level of a lock.

\*

### Rochdale

*You were George-Clooney-grey this morning  
and you had your neat industrial tattoos on show.  
You were holding an oil-bright magpie  
and a single newspaper. I tried  
to read over your shoulder  
then the sky took all the words away.*

*- Speechless, 9.47 to Leeds*

\*

### Smithy Bridge

An old man unseats himself  
says *give my regards to Ilkley*  
and his friend answers *I will*  
but Ilkley doesn't exist here  
only a stately home  
where the slim windows  
seem to multiply  
like frogspawn

and wind turbines  
horizon-close  
turn the day over  
and over, making  
more of it  
each time.

\*

### Littleborough

Your small name  
and your big ridges  
planted with pylons.

How the horses all turn  
to face Manchester  
as they graze.

The tinder of felled birches  
and the match of 10am  
unused, unstruck  
this store of  
sunlessness.

\*

### **Walsden**

*I was flying from a tunnel.  
You were edged by vivid rocks,  
wrapped in a woodland shawl. You  
had rooks in your hair. I was  
moving too fast. Meet me  
next time at the junction  
with your flashy redbrick jewellery on.*

*- Speedy, 10.01 to Leeds*

\*

### **Todmorden**

Everything is painted *sage*  
or *landrover*, or *brand new wellingtons* -  
a deeper colour than the lichen  
of the church. The hillside  
turns away, shaded with jealousy.

A weathervane. The cool, black tracks.  
The unsmudged lipstick of the station doors.  
The breath of passengers  
outside the waiting room  
translucent, rising, mingling.

\*

### **Hebden Bridge**

Come with me, Dee from Bradford  
with your tiny silver nose stud,  
walk with me from the bridge.  
We'll laugh at ourselves in the windows  
of vegetarian cafés, our faces  
tasteful bric-a-brac. There's time

and we'll run off with it,  
find the hills you used to long for

from the carriage window as a child  
the bleached, frost coloured flanks  
above Heptonstall, like snow hares  
patient, tentative, pausing  
to test new air.

\*

## ii. & back

### Todmorden

*Small bullet slicing the afternoon  
seeks expansive market square,  
proud chimney tops and spires  
for long journeys into summer,  
mud and cuckoos, leaf-canopies  
Must have own Post Office.*

*- Ambitious, 14.24 to Manchester*

\*

### Walsden

The poster pinned to the fencepost  
says *talk to us*, so I do.

I describe the low and high places  
of the land, the rabbit-coloured  
undergrowth, the leaning  
improbable sheds. I say what I mean

by *stranger* and by *homecoming*  
and rooks settle in the branches  
and nothing contradicts me,  
nothing murmurs its assent.

\*

### Littleborough

Little lover, stealing  
the duvet of the sky  
and curling into it  
switching off  
the valley moon  
and reading alone  
by the light  
of the silver canal.

\*

### Rochdale

As if I could step down from  
the train, walk blinking through  
the birth and boom of wool,  
the clamour of the Rochdale Pioneers,  
as if I could touch baize,  
kerseys and flannels

my body whirring  
spun like cotton  
on the river's spindle.

\*

### **Castleton**

*You say 'mind the step'  
and I think of you climbing down  
from heaven, treading gingerly.  
I know your secrets,  
Blue Pits Village, know your given name,  
your ancient boundaries.  
Oh, build new walls  
around me, Castleton. I promise  
to tread carefully.*

*- Cautious, 14.45 to Manchester*

\*

### **Mills Hill**

I'm still a kid  
on the sandpapery platform  
with my Reebok Classics on,  
waiting for the arc of track  
to sharpen with sound,  
waiting for the rails to sing,  
waiting for the train to show itself,  
smelling the vinegar  
and hops of home.

\*

### **Moston**

Orange flowers  
and autumn leaves  
the size of dawn  
on the Welcome mural.

\*

### **Victoria**

I used to dream of flying  
above Accrington and Burnley  
Bury, Radcliffe, Pendleton,  
fast over Skipton, Gisburn,  
Nelson, Colne and touching down  
somewhere this map could only



gesture to - black margins,  
daubed white with Zeebrugge  
Antwerp, Ghent, all the  
the world after Oldham

and now, all I want  
is to ghost the tracks at night  
go unnoticed  
to the boundary  
of the place I was born  
and the place my name's from  
throw stones  
at the terrace window  
where my grandad's pianos  
still keep their music  
land just one right  
and hit the keys  
with a noise  
that might be  
joy.