

# People's Landscape, East Durham Coast Poems

Katrina Porteous

## Tiny Lights

At the edge of the industrial estate,  
Fierce spikes fencing the weed-strewn pit site,  
A fly-tipped sofa, black sacks spilling

Paint cans and polythene,  
We found it – the track –  
And followed it down the millennia, into the Dene,

Where we waited, like brigands, for the dark,  
And after a long while, you saw it first,  
Hanging from a grass-stalk –

Greenish-white, faintly aglow,  
Mysterious in the twenty-first century – alien, ancient.  
We drowned its ghostly signal with the beams of our phones

And a torrent of information, explaining  
How oxygen binds to a chemical, luciferin,  
And how its hideous, segmented, armoured offspring

Paralyse snails and suck them out of their shells.  
Not a mile away, a police siren wailed.  
This wingless female,

Barely a glimmer in the cool, damp, scented night,  
Seemed to have hauled itself  
Up a long, long path –

From the remotest deep, the prehistoric  
Ocean teeming with miraculous, barbaric  
Creatures of dark places that emit their own light –

And we with it.

## Wildlife

### i) Lee

Lee loves to play in the Dene. From a green flush  
A wren is singing. 'The V' is a swamp,  
Seething with prehistoric creatures. Dragonflies flash

Their glassy emeralds. Lee stirs the mud with a stick.  
Tadpoles, beetles, scatter in alarm.

Lee likes to trot the wild-eyed ponies bareback

Over the pit site. A dumped fridge-freezer towers,  
Its door wide open, clean lines, shelves intact.  
Lee can't read what his friend's dad posts on Facebook –

'Horden's answer to Easington's Pit Cage.' Aged nine,  
Can't write his name, but knows the woodpeckers  
By theirs, loves hedgehogs; wants to join the Army.

### ii) Lloyd

Lloyd dreams of becoming an astronaut. At night,  
He looks at the stars above the Numbered Streets,

Smashed glass, boarded-up windows: can't understand  
How space is infinite, but everything ends.

He can't find words for all the contradictions.  
The neat houses, 'respectable people', tidy gardens –

Lloyd thinks about these things. His caterpillar  
Wrapped itself into a papery chrysalis; weeks later,

Shook out its flickering wings and flew. His Gran  
Grew up on the same street, in a different country.

iii) Kayleigh

It's a short bike ride from the pit. Though the weeds conceal  
Aerosols, glue cans, plastic bags, and in the Gill  
Somebody's big sister is being sick beside a burned-out car,

On Limekiln beach, among the remains of coal,  
You can run and run, dig and build – make fires, feel free –  
Crack the sea-smoothed rocks wide open to reveal

Fossils, crystals, caves of gleaming flourspar.  
And though the beach is brassy with pyrites, sulphurous, stained,  
Deranged from everything it's seen, for Kayleigh the future

Glitters. She loves this place; and with her friends  
Seeks out the scuttling hermit crabs, crimson anemones.  
The dazed beach offers them its treasures. What will they find?

## Coastal Erosion

First to go is the footpath, smoking fireweed, the hawthorn  
Reddening along the Grassy Banks; then the railway line,  
The end terraces, blackened memorials –

Pit cage and pulley-wheel, small family shrines,  
Allotments, Community Centres. Then the words for these things –

*Bairns, Flower, Hinny, me Marra.* Reminders

That what will survive of us is not love but chip forks,  
Booty that Liam and Reece grab on their Pirate Litter-Pick –

Bottle tops, take-away cartons, lids, straws, nappy liners,  
Carrier bags, falling apart into ever-smaller pieces,

Accreting down there on the beach, while a limp balloon  
Snagged on the whin's thorn, indestructible plastic  
Printed with soon-to-be incomprehensible runes,

Announces to no one, 'Baby! I love you!'

## A Short Walk from the Sea's Edge

'The Sea is History' – Derek Walcott

'The coal is beginning again' – Sean O' Brien

Our Billy's Da walks the dog on the Grassy Banks each morning.  
 Seventy steps below, in the soft ochre shelf,  
 Each new tide kirves its judd. Its strata an archive,  
 The beach is forgetting itself.

The coast path tells one story, and the shore another.  
 A steep drop, headlong, precipitous. Inaccessible, inviting,  
 The sea rolls its old stones, stained fiery amber. 'Once  
 The worst pollution anywhere in Europe', boasts the sign.

Now hogweed and scrub willow are slowly erasing that hard-drive;  
 Shales, pyrites, oxides, remember hermit crabs, rock pools.  
 Inland, behind the railway line, our Billy's grand-daughter,  
 Chloe, checks in with Insta before school.

Our Billy's Chloe has no word for bluebell or cowslip,  
 Willow or yellowhammer. Granda's pigeons wheel and turn  
 Over the tracks, but she doesn't know *stobbie* from *skjemmie*.  
 A soft breeze blows from the beach. A smell of burning.

Lads on their dirt-bikes down the slacks. Amid the limestone rubble,  
 Tall reeds, rushes, someone has tried to set that sign alight,  
 Photographs of butterflies, orchids, twisted, distorted.  
 Half a mile from the coast, impenetrably tight,

The roofs, rows, back lanes – safety. Chloe has a butterfly  
 Emoji glued to every nail. Her own words – *Gels*, *Acrylics*, *Apps* –  
 Incomprehensible to Billy's ears, are strange, untranslatable  
 As *yella-yowlie*, *gowdspink* are on Snapchat.

The old words clatter off men's lips: honeycombs of tree-bark  
 And giant ferns, frozen in limestone sinking into slag  
 In the relentless crunch and uproar of immense machinery –  
*Canch*, *post*, *rammel*. *NCB*. *The Low Main*. *Maggie*. *Scab*.

Beyond them, wordless, stretch the fields, the sea. Glued to her phone,  
Chloe waits at the bus-stop on the Coast Road, at the edge of the Dene  
Where, among sparty ground, green seggs, gigantic ferns  
And spidery horsetails, the coal is beginning again.

Glossary:

*kirve a judd* – in mining, to undercut a section before taking it down; *stobbie* – unfledged pigeon; *skiemmie* – weak, sickly pigeon; *yella-yowlie* – yellowhammer; *gowdspink* – goldfinch; *canch* – large slabs of stone in a coal mine; *post* – hard sandstone; *rammel* – loose stones; *NCB* – the National Coal Board, the statutory authority which ran the nationalised coal industry from 1946 until its demise in 1987; *The Low Main* – one of the deep seams worked at Horden pit; *Maggie* – Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time of the 1983-4 miners' strike and subsequent pit closures; *scab* – a strike-breaker; *sparty* – damp, marshy; *seggs* – sedge and rushes.

## Painted Ladies

Although she would never normally set foot  
Beyond the railway line, because the beach is dirty,  
Her Mam said; spoilt before she was born, rust-stained and orange,

Black with slag and dolly-wash, its terrible lagoons  
Haemorrhaging sulphates, oxides – some ancient outrage  
No one alive can remember now – Leanne sets out

Down her grandda's red-black raa' – path of putter and hewer,  
Backshift, foreshift; pigeon-cree; policeman and picket –  
With his bairn in a Tupperware box. Up the White Lea lane,

Through fireweed and meadow grass, she wades, to the brink –  
To the windy cliff at Shippersea, the clean horizon.  
In a handful of ashes she brings her Mam to beauty.

Then far below, incarnadine, ochre, black, white  
Pigments of caustic pools and residues, fly up, combine –  
Embers, aflame inside, aglow in the grate,

Flickering from knapweed to thistle-top, they rise  
Blazing before her – butterflies – the fields  
From Hawthorn Hive to Eden Dene on fire with them.

## Speckled Wood

Holly has found a butterfly  
In Hawthorn Dene. The Brownies  
Have been given cameras.

Framed in the viewfinder,  
Its drab brown colours  
Spring to life: snap

Into focus, coffee and toast,  
Caramel, splotches of cream,  
Smoke rings. Scalloped like bunting,

Its edges bristle with hairs.  
What Holly, aged nine,  
Can't know, is that it has come back

From wherever it has been,  
In the new millennium, to say  
It is warmer here now.

Don't move, thinks Holly,  
Though whether to herself  
Or the butterfly, she isn't sure.

The camera is showing her  
What her eyes can't –  
How to look. How, when you're still

And quiet, the world  
Rises anew  
To meet you, shining.