

Outside the Miners' Cathedral

Raymond Antrobus



A man lingers like fog
in a thick grey coat and flat cap.

Are you the deaf poet?

I nod. Stare at his hands:
Torn nails, sore scaly skin.

He points at his ears,
says, *industrial deafness*.

What is this harsh and strange
economy of hearing?



Earlier, I bought a sandwich on the train.
The cashier said, *do you want the grief?*

I didn't understand.
The windows, tunnel black.

I said *yes*. The cashier handed me the receipt.



The ex-miner taps his walking stick on the ground.
In a long wheezing, he tells me about *The Big Bands*,
The Big Meeting, about *Pitman Poetry*, the digging

into dark. And the Miners' Cathedral, where they'd hold up
their blackened spades and sing to the steeple, and pubs,
where barmaids come early to fill pints along the bar like lamps.

He leans closer, his voice finding something to hold up to the light.

*Now imagine the pit dust,
imagine that thirst, imagine them prayers,
men in that pub, holding pints like nowt holding them.*



There's a statue you should see,
says the ex-miner's wife,
coal and coastal winds in her breath.

We walk past children in play parks,
past a small field of flowers.
There stands a steel

nine-foot statue of a pitman. His huge hands
holding a hammer, his chest cracked open,
his heart smashed out.



The old miner says,

*Down the pub I tell
some young lad about pulling
men from the pit. The ones*

I saved. The ones I couldn't.

He goes quiet on the word *couldn't*,
lets it fall into darkness.

*That young lad hugged me proper.
Said a man pulled his father out the pit.
It might've been my hands.*

We stare at the statue,
the air tremors.

*Look what we're made of, lad,
look what we're made of.*

Rain and rusted steel,
eyes and lips,
heavy hands, no ears.