

Collier

1.

Though he never once placed a bet, my grandfather
sat in his chair every day and picked out winners:
Larkspur, League of Nations, Isinglass, Never Say Die

in the 2.30 at Epsom or Newmarket.
He'd follow their dips and peaks, ingesting the painfully
difficult newsprint on off-work afternoons,

or he'd rely the tug-at-his-sleeve of instinct:
his grandmother's Romani nous with horses, his blacksmith-
father's apprising sense bred into his muscles and veins...

And so his damaged house filled up with winnings:
tickets to a race, pairs of boots to choose from,
a tea cosy from a shop, a pigeon cote out the back,

and after each spectacular nose-across-the-finish-line
outsider made him rich (which happened twice)
he'd sit and eat his wedding supper over again in his imagined

life: ham-on-the bone; salmon, roast beef, egg-and-cress; a cake.

2.

No matter the shift, the only food he'd take with him
down the pit was bread and jam, two slices wrapped up
in grease-proof paper, and a bottle of gone-cold tea.

He'd perch in a cranny to eat it half-way through
his eight-hour stint at the coal face, black as a bat
bar the whites and reds of his eyes and his teeth's gapped ivory.

Each mine an auditorium. Under the fallen sun
of his headlamp, like the ghost of the boy-he-was
at the sorting station sorting out nuts from brights,

he'd array the sounds the tunnels carried
—the squeal of the wheel, an invisible neighbour's cough—
discarding each in turn until, in his blue-scarred palm,

he held up gold: miners' saviours in cages singing their lack
half a mile off, back by the fluted shaft, singing
no black damp, no gas, until he'd sing himself.

He knew eight-and-twenty ways to raise the roof, some safe, most not.

3.

What possessed my granny, slim, smart, solvent, raising the roof
every Friday night after work at the Palais de Danse
in Nottingham, showing the band what-for with spies and soldiers,

to marry him? Some runaway freight car undid her, shunting her north.
Already his breath was a wounded animal pacing its ever-decreasing
circle underneath his ribcage. He couldn't afford linoleum.

The village had five shops. He was born in the reign of Victoria;
they'd finally buried the dead of Ypres before my granny
came caterwauling in. Once, as a child,

visiting her spinster-aunt's friend in the countryside
who kept house for her younger brother, she was privy to this:
a walking shadow, the size and shape of a man,

stole across the room towards the kitchen, not touching anything.
The kettle's whistle. Splashing. Singing. Then the shut door
opened abruptly and out stepped a white vest and a clean face

and the moon's penumbra vanished into brightness.

4.

Bright as a whitebell in Handley Wood, bright as the heads
of poor man's pepper shaking their throwaway lace
all over the lanes between New Whit and Eckington

was the evening he proposed (and the proud hart fleet
upon the enclosing hills and the honeycomb oozing honey).
And late the next day he stepped into a cage

and fell the length of a tarpitch mile, not looking, *yes*,
to where pit ponies stamped in their stalls, not listening, *yes*,
and was out along a by-line

dreaming his Skegness honeymoon into place
when a heaped tub of altogether coal, *yes you Tom Goodwin*,
yes, began snarling his name.

You might measure the force of its freak uncoupling
by what was crushed: it took an hour to manage the mess
of lungs and bones and blood to the surface.

He sat out in blankets and looked at the sea for his month at the Miners' Rest.

5.

A month at a Miners' Rest, alright, but no compensation—
every time she paid a coal bill, or dressed my mother
in a cousin's pinafore, my granny would preen and peck

at the elderly man grown elderly early
hunched across from her in his armchair.
He'd turn himself into a tree and wouldn't answer.

And the silence of Glasshouse Lane burred with thistledown
like a blanket sewn by swallows just for them
would settle over the room

and he'd light up a woodbine and smile until she smiled too
and then the damp-blotched ceiling would open
and in their last companionable hours together

they'd play host to strange familiar visitors
soft-landing expertly in amongst the furniture:
Eric Coates *Calling All Workers*; Ralph Elman and his Bohemian Players;

Ron and Ethel taking forever to get nowhere in *Take It From Here*.

6.

Because the distances you travel are unimaginable
to the man who flicks open each wing in a fan-card flourish
checking for balance and corkiness

before shunting you onto the train for your journey south
and over the freezing sea
towards liberation at Rheims or Poitiers

and because your tiny friable arrangement of magnets and air pockets
through which the planet articulates its cleverness
might be crushed by a falcon in an instant, but isn't,

and because your most exhilarating trajectory
is not just from darkness to light, as his is,
but from darkness to the upper storeys of the air itself—

coaxing you down off the toss from Bordeaux or Nantes
to the landing board, getting your leg-ring clocked,
is to stand with a capful of coins in the Miners' Arms, a balloon adventurer,

or like a man who has tasted the rind of the moon, without ever leaving home.