

V.

*'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words.'*

–ARTHUR SCARGILL<sup>1</sup>  
*The Sunday Times*, 10 Jan. 1982

Next millenium you'll have to search quite hard  
to find my slab behind the family dead,  
butcher, publican and baker, now me, bard  
adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.

With Byron three graves on I'll not go short  
of company, and Wordsworth's opposite.  
That's two peers already, of a sort,  
and we'll all be thrown together if the pit,

whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,  
causes the distinguished dead to drop  
into the rabblement of bone and rot,  
shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop.

Wordsworth built church organs, Byron tanned  
luggage cowhide in the age of steam,  
and knew their place of rest before the land  
caves in on the lowest worked-out seam.

This graveyard on the brink of Beeston Hill's  
the place I may well rest if there's a spot  
under the rose roots and daffodils  
by which Dad dignified the family plot.

If buried ashes saw then I'd survey  
the places I learned Latin, and learned Greek,  
and left, the ground where Leeds United play  
but disappoint their fans week after week,

which makes them lose their sense of self-esteem  
and taking a shortcut home through these graves here  
they reassert the glory of their team  
by spraying words on tombstones, pissed on beer.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Scargill was at the time the president of the National Union of Mineworkers (N.U.M.), with whom Margaret Thatcher clashed in her final (successful) attempt to break the power of the unions.

This graveyard stands above a worked-out pit.  
Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.  
One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked SHIT  
sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed.

Farsighted for his family's future dead,  
but for his wife, this banker's still alone  
on his long obelisk, and doomed to head  
a blackened dynasty of unclaimed stone,

now graffitied with a crude four-letter word.  
His children and grandchildren went away  
and never came back home to be interred  
so left a lot of space for skins to spray.

The language of this graveyard ranges from  
a bit of Latin for a former mayor  
or those who laid their lives down at the Somme,  
the hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer,

how people 'fell asleep in the Good Lord,'  
brief chisellable bits from the good book  
and rhymes whatever length they could afford  
to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!

or, more expansively, there's LEEDS v.  
the opponent of last week, this week, or next,  
and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses  
on the team or race that makes the sprayer vexed.

Then, rushed for time, or fleeing some observer,  
dodging between tall family vaults and trees,  
like his team's best-ever winger, dribbler, swerver,  
fills every space he finds with versus Vs.

Vs sprayed on the run at such a lick,  
the sprayer master of his flourished tool,  
get short-armed on the left like that red tick  
they never marked his work much with at school.<sup>2</sup>

Half this skinhead's age but with approval  
I helped whitewash a V on a brick wall.  
No one clamoured in the press for its removal  
or thought the sign, in wartime, rude at all.

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<sup>2</sup> In Britain teachers generally mark good points or correct answers in essays with a tick.

These Vs are all the verses of life  
from LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White  
and (as I've known to my cost) man v. wife,  
Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence of US and THEM,  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor<sup>3</sup> and the N.U.M.,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind,  
East/West, male/female, and on the ground  
these fixtures are fought out on's Man, resigned  
to hope from his future what his past never found.

The prospects for the present aren't too grand  
when a swastika with NF (National Front)'s  
sprayed on a grave, to which another hand  
has added, in a reddish colour, CUNTS.

Which is, I grant, the word that springs to mind  
when, going to clear the weeds and rubbish thrown  
on the family grave by football fans, I find  
UNITED graffitied on my parents' stone.

How many British graveyards now this May  
are strewn with rubbish and choked up with weeds  
since families and friends have gone away  
for work or fuller lives, like me, from Leeds?

When I first came here 40 years ago  
with my dad to 'see' my grandma I was 7.  
I helped Dad with the flowers. He let me know  
she'd gone to join my granddad up in Heaven.

My dad who came each week to bring fresh flowers  
came home with clay stains on his trouser knees.  
Since my parents' deaths I've spent 2 hours  
made up of odd 10 minutes such as these,

Flying visits once or twice a year,  
and though I'm horrified, just who's to blame  
that I find instead of flowers cans of beer  
and more than one grave sprayed with some skin's name?

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<sup>3</sup> Ian MacGregor, Chairman of the National Coal Board, the government body in charge of the mining industry.

Where there were flower urns and troughs of water  
and mesh receptacles for withered flowers  
are the HARP tins of some skinhead Leeds supporter.  
It isn't all his fault, though. Much is ours.

5 kids, with one in goal, play 2-a-side.  
When the ball bangs on the hawthorn that's one post  
and petals fall they hum 'Here Comes the Bride'  
though not so loud they'd want to rouse a ghost.

They boot the ball on purpose at the trunk  
and make the tree shed showers of shrivelled may.  
I look at this word graffitied by some drunk  
and I'm in half a mind to let it stay.

(Though honesty demands that I say *if*  
I'd wanted to take the necessary pains  
to scrub the skin's inscription off  
I only had an hour between trains.

So the feelings that I had as I stood gazing  
and the significance I saw could be a sham,  
mere excuses for not patiently erasing  
the word sprayed on the grave of Dad and Mam.)

This pen's all I have of magic wand.  
I know this world's so torn but want no other  
except for Dad who'd hoped from 'the Beyond'  
a better life than this one *with* my mother.

Though I don't believe in afterlife at all  
and know it's cheating, it's hard not to make  
a sort of furtive prayer from this skin's scrawl,  
his UNITED means 'in Heaven' for their sake,

an accident of meaning to redeem  
an act intended as mere desecration  
and make the thoughtless spraying of his team  
apply to higher things, and to the nation.

Some, where kids use aerosols, use giant signs  
to let the people know who's forged their fetters  
like PRI CE O WALES above West Yorkshire mines  
(no prizes for who nicked the missing letters!)

The big blue star for booze, tobacco ads,  
the magnate's monogram, the royal crest,  
insignia in neon dwarf the lads  
who spray a few odd FUCKS when they're depressed.

Letters of transparent tubes and gas  
in Dusseldorf are blue and flash out KRUPP.  
Arms are hoisted for the British ruling class  
and clandestine, genteel aggro keeps them up.

And there's HARRISON on some Leeds building sites  
I've taken in fun as blazoning my name,  
which I've also seen on books, in Broadway lights,  
so why can't skins with spray cans do the same?

But why inscribe these *graves* with CUNT and SHIT?  
Why choose neglected tombstones to disfigure?  
This pitman's of the last century daubed PAKI GIT,  
this grocer Broadbent's aerosoled with NIGGER?

They're there to shock the living, not arouse  
the dead from their deep peace to lend support  
for any cause skin's spray cans could espouse.  
The dead would want their desecrators caught!

Jobless though they are how can these kids,  
even though their team's lost one more game,  
believe that the 'Pakis,' 'Niggers,' even 'Yids'  
sprayed on the tombstones here should take the blame?

What is it that these crude words are revealing?  
What is it that this aggro act implies?  
Giving the dead their xenophobic feeling  
or just a *cri-de-coeur* because Man dies.

*So what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't yer speak  
the language that yer mam spoke? Think of'er!  
Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?  
Go and fuck yerself with cri-de-coeur!*

'She didn't talk like you do for a start!  
I shouted, turning where I thought the voice had been.  
*She didn't understand yer fucking art!  
She thought yer fucking poetry obscene!*

I wish on this skin's word deep aspirations,  
first the prayer for my parents I can't make,  
then a call to Britain and to all the nations  
made in the name of love for peace's sake.

*Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole  
'ave got about as much scope to aspire  
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal  
aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire.*

O.K., forget the aspirations! Look, I know  
United's losing gets you fans incensed  
and how far the HARP inside you makes you go  
but all these Vs: against! against! against!

*Ab'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke.  
It's reading on their graves the jobs they did—  
butcher, publican and baker. Me, I'll croak  
doing t'same nowt ab do now as a kid.*

*'ard birth ab wor, mi mam says, almost killed 'er.  
Death after life on t'dole won't seem as 'ard!  
Look at this cunt, Wordsworth, organ builder,  
this fucking 'aberdasher, Appleyard!*

*If mi mam's up there, don't want to meet 'er  
listening to me list mi dirty deeds  
and 'ave to pipe up to St. fucking Peter  
ab've been on t'dole all mi life in fucking Leeds.*

*Then t'Alleluias stick in t'angels' gobs.  
When dole-wallabs fuck off to the void  
what'll t'mason carve up for their jobs?  
The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed?*

*This lot worked at one job all life through.  
Byron, 'Tanner', Lieth 'ere interred!  
They'll chisel fucking poet when they do you  
and that, yer cunt, 's a crude four-letter word.*

'Listen, cunt!' I said, 'before you start your jeering,  
the reason why I want this in a book  
's to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing!  
A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!

'The only reason why I write this poem at all  
on jobs like you who do the dirt on death  
's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl!  
*Don't fucking bother, cunt! Don't waste your breath!*

'You piss-artist skinhead cunt, you wouldn't know  
and it doesn't fucking matter if you do,  
the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud  
but the *autre* that *je est* is fucking you.'

*Ah've told yer, no more Greek. That's yer last warning!*  
*Ah'll boot yer fucking balls to Kingdom Come.*  
*They'll find yer cold on t'grave tomorrer morning.*  
*So don't speak Greek. Don't treat me like I'm dumb.*

'I've done my bits of mindless aggro too  
not half a mile from where we're standing now.'  
*Yeah, ah bet yer wrote a poem, yer wanker you!*  
'No, shut yer gob awhile. Ah'll tell yer 'ow...

'Herman Darewski's band played operetta  
with a wobbly soprano warbling. Just why  
I made my mind up that I'd got to get her  
with the fire hose I can't say, but I'll try.

'It wasn't the singing angered me.  
At the same time half the crowd was jeering  
as the smooth Hugh Gaitskell, our MP,  
made promises the other half was cheering.

'What I hated in those high soprano ranges  
was uplift beyond all reason and control  
and in a world where you say nothing changes  
it seemed a sort of prick-tease of the soul.

'I tell you when I heard high notes that rose  
above Hugh Gaitskell's cool electioneering  
straight from the warbling throat right up my nose,  
I had all your aggro in *my* jeering.

'And I hit the fire extinguisher ON knob  
and covered orchestra and audience with spray.  
I could run as fast as you then. A good job!  
They yelled 'Damned vandal' after me that day...'

*And then yer saw the light and gave up 'eavy<sup>4</sup>  
And knew a man's not 'ow much 'e can sup...  
Yer reward for growing up's this super-bevvy,  
a meths and champagne punch in t'FA Cup.<sup>5</sup>*

*Ab've 'eard all that from old farts past their prime.  
'ow now yer live wi' all yer once detested...  
Old farts wi' not much left'll give me time.  
Fuckers like that get folk like me arrested.*

*Covet not thy neighbour's wife, thy neighbour's riches.  
Vicar and cop who say, to save our souls:  
Get thee behind me, Satan! drop their breeches  
and get the Devil's dick right up their 'oles!*

It was more a working marriage that I'd meant,  
a blend of masculine and feminine.  
Ignoring me, he started looking, bent  
on some more aerosoling, for his tin.

'It was more a working marriage that I mean!  
*Fuck, and save mi soul, eh? That suits me.*  
Then as if I'd egged him on to be obscene  
he added a middle slit to one daubed V.

*Don't talk to me of fucking representing  
the class yer were born into anymore.  
Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting  
it's not poetry we need in this class war.*

*Yer've given yerself toffee, cunt. Who needs  
yer fucking poufy words. Ab write mi own.  
Ab've got mi work on show all over Leeds  
like this UNITED 'ere on some sod's stone.*

'O.K.!' (thinking I had him trapped). 'O.K.!'  
'If you're so proud then sign your name  
when next you're full of HARP and armed with spray,  
next time you take this shortcut from the game.'

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish import beer, favoured in England by the macho drinker.

<sup>5</sup> Football Association Cup: the top prize in the English Premier League.



He took the can, contemptuous, unhurried,  
and cleared the nozzle and prepared to sign  
the UNITED sprayed where Mam and Dad were buried.  
He aerosoled his name, and it was mine.

The boy footballers bawl 'Here Comes the Bride'  
and drifting blossoms fall onto my head.  
One half of me's alive but one half died  
when the skin half sprayed my name among the dead.

Half versus half, the enemies within  
the heart that can't be whole till they unite.  
As I stop to grab the crushed HARP lager tin  
the day's already dusk, half dark, half light.

The UNITED that I'd wished onto the nation  
or as reunion for dead parents soon recedes.  
The word's once more a mindless desecration  
by some HARPoholic yob supporting Leeds.

Almost the time for ghosts. I'd better scam.  
Though not given much to fears of spooky scaring  
I don't fancy an encounter with mi mam  
playing Hamlet with me for this swearing.

Though I've a train to catch my step is slow.  
I walk on the grass and graves with wary tread  
over the subsidences, these shift below  
the life of Leeds supported by the dead.

Further underneath's that cavernous hollow  
that makes the gravestones lean towards the town.  
A matter of mere time and it will swallow  
this place of rest and all the resters down.

I tell myself I've got, say, 30 years.  
At 75 this place will suit me fine.  
I've never feared the grave but what I fear's  
that great worked-out black hollow under mine.

Not train departure time and not Town Hall  
with the great white clock face I can see,  
coal, that began, with no man here at all,  
as 300-million-year old plant debris.

5 kids still play at making blossoms fall  
and humming as they do 'Here Comes the Bride.'  
They never seem to tire of their ball  
though I hear a woman's voice call one inside.

2 larking boys play bawdy bride and groom.  
3 boys in Leeds strip la-la Lohengrin.  
I hear them as I go through growing gloom  
still years away from being skald<sup>6</sup> or skin.

The ground's carpeted with petals as I throw  
the aerosol, the HARP can, the cleared weeds  
on top of Dad's dead daffodils, then go,  
with not one glance behind away from Leeds.

The bus to the station's still the No. 1  
but goes by routes that I don't recognize.  
I look out for known landmarks as the sun  
reddens the swabs of cloud in darkening skies.

Home, home, home, to my woman as the red  
darkens from a fresh blood to a dried.  
Home, home to my woman, home to bed  
where opposites are sometimes unified.

A pensioner in turban taps his stick  
along the pavement past the corner shop,  
that sells samosas now not beer on tick,<sup>7</sup>  
to the Kashmir Muslim Club that was the Co-op.

House after house FOR SALE where we'd played cricket  
with white roses<sup>8</sup> cut from flour sacks on our caps,  
with stumps chalked on the coal grate for our wicket,  
and every one bought now by 'coloured chaps,'

Dad's most liberal label as he felt  
squeezed by the unfamiliar, and fear  
of foreign food and faces, when he smelt  
curry in the shop where he'd bought beer.

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<sup>6</sup> Old Norse for poet. Leeds is in the area of England settled by Scandinavians during the ninth to eleventh centuries.

<sup>7</sup> Credit.

<sup>8</sup> Emulating the white rose of Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

And growing frailer, 'wobbly on his pins,'  
the shops he felt familiar with withdrew  
which meant much longer tiring treks for tins  
that had a label on them that he knew.

And as the shops that stocked his favourites receded  
whereas he'd fancied beans and popped next door,  
he found that four long treks a week were needed  
till he wondered what he bothered eating for.

The supermarket made him feel embarrassed.  
Where people bought whole lambs for family freezers  
he bought baked beans from checkout girls too harassed  
to smile or swap a joke with sad old geezers.

But when he bought his cigs he'd have a chat,  
his week's one conversation, truth to tell,  
but time also came and put a stop to that  
when old Wattsy got bought out by M. Patel.

And there, 'Time like an ever-rolling stream' 's  
what I once trilled behind that boarded front.  
A 1000 ages made coal-bearing seams  
and even more the hand that sprayed this CUNT

on both Methodist and C of E billboards  
once divided in their fight for local souls.  
Whichever house more truly was the Lord's  
both's pews are filled with cut-price toilet rolls.

Home, home to my woman, never to return  
till sexton or survivor has to cram  
the bits of clinker scooped out of my urn  
down through the rose roots to my dad and mam.

Home, home to my woman, where the fire's lit  
these still-chilly mid-May evenings, home to you,  
and perished vegetation from the pit  
escaping insubstantial up the flue.

Listening to *Lulu*,<sup>9</sup> in our hearth we burn,  
as we hear the high Cs rise in stereo,  
what was lush swamp club moss and tree fern  
at least 300 million years ago.

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<sup>9</sup> '60s pop star known for her rendition of the song 'Shout', which, as far as I know, she is still singing.

Shilbottle cobbles,<sup>10</sup> Alban Berg High D  
lifted from a source that bears your name,  
the one we hear decay, the one we see,  
the fern from the foetid forest, as brief as flame.

This world, with far too many people in,  
starts on the TV logo as a taw,  
then ping-pong, tennis, football; then one spin  
to show us all, then shots of the Gulf War.<sup>11</sup>

As the coal with reddish dust cools in the grate  
on the late-night national news we see  
police v. pickets at a coke plant gate,  
old violence and old disunity.

The map that's colour-coded Ulster/Eire's  
flashed on again, almost every night.  
Behind a tiny coffin with two bearers  
men in masks with arms show off their might.

The day's last images recede to first a glow  
and then a ball that shrinks back to blank screen.  
Turning to love, and sleep's oblivion, I know  
what the UNITED that the skin sprayed *has* to mean.

Hanging my clothes up, from my parka hood  
may and apple petals, brown and creased,  
fall onto the carpet and bring back the flood  
of feelings their first falling had released.

I hear like ghosts all Leeds matches humming  
with one concerted voice the bride, the bride  
I feel united to, *my* bride is coming  
into the bedroom, naked, to my side.

The ones we choose to love become our anchor  
when the hawser of the blood tie's hacked or frays.  
But a voice that scorns chorales is yelling: *Wanker!*  
It's the aerosoling skin I met today's.

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<sup>10</sup> High-grade coal mined in northeast England.

<sup>11</sup> The world as ball imagery refers to the BBC's spinning globe logo shown before the news.

My alter ego wouldn't want to know it,  
his aerosol vocab would balk at LOVE,  
the skin's UNITED underwrites the poet,  
the measures carved below the ones above.

I doubt if 30 years of bleak Leeds weather  
and 30 falls of apple and of may  
will erode the UNITED binding us together.  
And now it's your decision. Does it stay?

Next millenium you'll have to search quite hard  
to find out where I'm buried, but I'm near  
that grave of haberdasher Appleyard,  
the pile of HARPS, or some new neoned beer.

Find Byron, Wordsworth, or turn left between  
one grave marked Broadbent, one marked Richardson.  
Bring some solution with you that can clean  
whatever new crude words have been sprayed on.

If love of art, or love, gives you affront  
that the grave I'm in's graffitied, then, maybe,  
erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT  
but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small *v*.

victory? For vast, slow, coal-creating forces  
that hew the body's seams to get the soul.  
Will earth run out of her 'diurnal courses'  
before repeating her creation of black coal?

But choose a day like I chose in mid-May  
or earlier when apple and hawthorn tree,  
no matter if boys boot their ball all day,  
cling to their blossoms and won't shake them free—

if, having come this far, somebody reads  
these verses, and he/she wants to understand,  
face this grave on Beeston Hill, your back to Leeds,  
and read the chiselled epitaph I've planned:

*Beneath your feet's a poet, then a pit.  
Poetry supporter, if you're here to find  
how poems can grow from (beat you to it!) SHIT  
find the beef, the beer, the bread, then look behind.*