

## **Yellow Light**

**Louisa Adjoa Parker**

Perhaps it was the lockdowns –  
being shut up in our homes  
knowing we could have housed  
the homeless all along,  
and the people who slipped through  
that net spun from thin air  
and closed hearts had no hostels,  
warm, dry clothes, no shower  
or a bed, no drinking water,  
toilets, food or even a kind smile –  
perhaps the sight of human beings  
slumped in doorways  
wrapped in dirty sleeping bags  
when the world sprung back to life  
was like seeing the sheer horror  
for the first, and only, time.

\*

Once, they built a home  
made of local brick  
which sprouted wings and grew  
and grew, where both adults  
and small children, their feet  
encased in hobnailed boots  
spun white oiled wool, got whipped  
for misdemeanours, or locked  
in small dark spaces, where people  
were allowed to fill their bellies  
once a year at Christmas, a home  
where they'd keep the people –  
the lost, the poor and rootless –  
in good and honest order.

\*

Being in this life  
is like standing in a muddy river

sharp stones pressed  
into the soft pads of your feet  
not knowing what could lurk  
under the surface of the water.  
I dipped my toes in once  
then ran out, crying with the cold.  
I longed for people who were sober,  
a belly full of food, clean air,  
a place I could call home –  
clean sheets stretched over a bed,  
the hiss and tick of central heating,  
untarred lungs, the ground  
underneath my feet  
remaining in one place.

\*

This building on Exe Island  
was a doss house once –  
all red brick and lost souls,  
rows of metal beds, a length of rope  
pulled taut, which ran the full length  
of the attic, rope which men  
who had no money for a bed  
could drape themselves across  
like washing on a line  
and try their very hardest  
to fall, and stay, asleep.

\*

I'm walking down Gandy Street  
on a night out, yellow light reflected  
on the cobblestones, when I realise  
that the man shuffling towards me  
in the half-dark – baggy trousers,  
jackets bulking out his frame,  
unwashed hair, a smile  
that lights him up – is someone  
I once knew. He wraps his arms  
around me, smells of sweat  
and booze and hash and life lived  
on the streets. His skin tells the story

of too many cold nights.  
*I was surprised to see you  
hug a homeless man, a friend says later,  
over cocktails in a basement bar.  
But he's my friend, I say, I know him,  
knew him once.*

\*

You're always on the move  
weighed down  
by a heavy bag  
which holds  
everything you own –  
sitting still  
becomes a luxury  
for those who have a home.

\*

Once you're in it, it can feel  
impossible to leave. You can't just wake  
one morning and shower and get dressed  
in line-fresh clothes and walk into a job,  
a home, all sober and unbroken. I remember  
how in time you can grow used to  
that ache of hunger in your belly,  
how it feels to sleep outside in winter,  
the way cold seeps into your bones,  
cracking ice so you can boil the water  
for your morning tea, to be rootless,  
the ground under your feet ever shifting,  
to stand outside a supermarket  
asking strangers for spare change.

\*

We called him Graveyard Tom,  
others prefixed his name with 'Acid'  
due, of course, to his fondness  
for those tiny squares of paper  
which took us into different worlds  
infused with colour, streams

of yellow light. He lived,  
for an entire summer,  
in the corner of the graveyard  
tucked under a cluster  
of wide-trunked oak trees  
next to lichen-covered gravestones  
half buried in the earth, a redbrick church  
with stained glass windows.  
The dead watched over him at night.  
With his bare – and filthy – feet,  
large ears, small bones, when he sat  
cross-legged, he'd remind me of a pixie.  
He'd chat to any of us kids, share a can  
of beer or pipe. One day, he left: for years  
we wondered what had become of him.  
Last year I heard the news. I don't know  
really, who he was, or who he might  
have eventually become, but I hope  
he's sleeping in a graveyard  
watched over by his fellow dead,  
a headstone etched with words  
that mark his life with joy,  
remembering him.

\*

Winter is the hardest time –  
it's the two extremes: a roof  
over your head, a bed, a mug  
of builder's tea, hot water  
on your skin. You get used to  
being warm, and clean,  
then you're outside  
in the cold and wet again  
dirt and sweat etched into your skin  
rain dripping down your face  
like icy tears.

\*

I can't help but wonder  
if this would been  
have my first love's life –

if he'd managed to stay in it –  
would he have become  
a shadow-man,  
with unwashed hair  
and tattered clothes,  
forever roaming,  
blagging, drinking,  
no proper home  
to call his own, forever  
on the outside  
looking in?

\*

Oh, the tiredness  
creeps over you  
like a sickness,  
weighs your body down.  
Yet the quiet power  
of a single smile – how  
it can warm your bones.

\*

This patch of land belongs  
to people who've gone without a home  
in a way the rest of us  
will never truly understand –  
how many steps have their feet taken?  
How many nights did they lie down  
to sleep on the cold Devon earth  
underneath the Devon skies  
while the city thrummed with life  
and towns and tides and people  
ebbed and flowed around them,  
and seagulls cried, and we went back  
to our homes with their central heating  
and squares of yellow light,  
turned on our TVs, closed the curtains  
shutting out the night?

*Author's note:*

*This piece was inspired by real stories: my own lived experience and reflections on it; two men I knew who were homeless in Exeter and Totnes; stories from the St Petrock's website and in the local news; and historical stories from the Exeter Memories website. Having experienced homelessness briefly myself, I have never been able to walk past a person who is street homeless without wondering about their story. It feels unacceptable that people live like this, with an average life expectancy for a homeless man being 45, and for a woman, 43. In 2017, an ITV report stated that the city of Exeter had the second highest number of rough sleepers outside of London, with 600 people facing homelessness in Exeter per year; a big problem for a city of this size and location.*

*I hope that when it comes to reimagining heritage, we can make space for everyone, including those who live on the margins of society. People who have experienced homelessness are very much part of the history of Exeter and surrounding area.*

*If you'd like to read stories of homelessness in Exeter as told by some of the people themselves, please visit this page on the St Petrock's website: [Client Stories | \(stpetrocks.org.uk\)](http://stpetrocks.org.uk) and you can donate to the charity here: [Donate | \(stpetrocks.org.uk\)](http://stpetrocks.org.uk)*