

HILLVIEWS by Hannah Lowe

1890

Place a hand against the chiselled sign
mid-wall on Midhope Street

and I can almost feel the beating hearts
of those Victorian Reformers

who said the Match Girls, Chimney Sweeps,
the Labourers, must have a place to live

and built this block of hutches
between the Euston Road and Cromer Street

and whose idea it was to send as rent collectors
not meat-faced men who'd pound your door

but tender women, who'd sit
beside your fire and tell you how to live

while taking all the embers'
nearly-not-there-heat

until you'd dread the gentle tapping
of the cotton glove, the tiny sniff she'd give

when stepping through your door –
the love-hate-love for the 'beautiful poor'.

Rita

Sometime in '76, Rita gets to Hillview.
Kicks down a door. Steps in and looks around.
Yeah this'll do.

It's not got much but her bloke drags back a red settee
and they've got a fish tank, they've got a fish
who stares out, fishy-mouthed

as Rita gets the lock on, quick.

*long-haired-lazy-hippie-scrounger-good-
for-nothing--waster-criminal-rent-
dodgers-bloody-thieves*

Rita teaches kids' Karate
Her bloke lays bricks.

*

Rita's come from a care home by the sea –
they used to put her in a room

to mind the babies
no one wanted

all those lonely lives
lying in their cots,
she used to pick each up
and whisper in their sea-shell ears

but when Rita turned fifteen
the care ran out

and now look,
she's got a make-shift family again –

all the wonky fish
the fisherman plucked out the net
and chucked back in
have washed up here at Hillview

but all of them birds now,
baby birds who'd fallen out their nests
are tucked
below her wing

Maria

She's been camped out at the offices for weeks
with sandwiches and a flask to tea

She knows a flat on Hillview's going empty
since Ginger clambered through a skylight

and got a bad surprise – his boot right through
the geezer dead-for-days in an old tin bath,

the windowsill gone marmitey with flies.
Not much to laugh about round here –

syringes in the trees, those cuffed-eye girls
in the alleys on their fishnet knees

The tabloids called it 'hell-hole'
but seven hundred on the list for this 'slum estate'.

Maria calls it 'gold-dust'. She's at the office
every morning with her sandwiches and tea. She'll wait.

Jim

*Only last night I found myself lost
by the station called King's Cross
Dead and wounded on either side
You know it's only a matter of time – Pet Shop Boys
And here come Jim and Aloysius*

walking with a book-size gap
between them and hands that burn to touch

but they never know who's watching
who's got a brick, the straightening iron
so they keep things straight

up Sandwich Street and through the gates of Hillview
where they've got their flat,
their books, their bed...

*Now let me read to you
Now let me read to you*

Now let me read you

let me, let me...

*

Jim remembers Barts: sick children in every bed
time slipping by the windows
like watching from a moving train

for weeks then months
bedridden, fevers, Jimmy's ankles swollen fat
as iron ball, legs thin and rattle-y as chains

his body like an empty sack
where muscle use to be
but he learnt to walk so slowly slowly

the afternoon he staggers bed to bed
the other sickly children,
six or seven, cheer and shout

as through a cloud of pain,
Jim makes it to the wards' white door
and back again

which later, makes him think of Hillview –
folks smoking in the doorways,
a nod, a wave

if the world beyond the gate
feels carousel-come-battlefield
inside is inlet, harbour, shield.

*

After the ruck on Marchmont Street,
Jim gets a whistle to blow first sign of any trouble

and soon the Hillview folk

have got them too

so if you hear the whistle blowing
full bodied tootle, half-a-yelp?

you grab a rolling pin, your frying pan
you run and help

Charlie

Here's Charlie, strutting round the bend on Argyll Square,
guitar case slung on shoulder

and Jayne beside him, seven feet in platinum wig
and platform heels

They've left the squat on Cromer Street,
the Satanists on one side of the wall, the Junkies on the other –

they've been living on the foreign coins
that Siouxsie and the Banshees left behind

but now the bank's run out, and Junkie No. 1
has robbed the hoover.

Oh the things these two have had to do
in London to get a roof, some bad some good,

the girl that Charlie followed home from Dingwalls
for a bath? She let him stay eight lovely years...

*

When the Irish Guy gets murdered
(turns out he wasn't murdered)

Charlie forms a band, *The Friendly Neighbours* –
Charlie, John and Lucy from Tasmania

and Ray-Who-Took-Too-Much-Acid
on the sax or flute

At the Wake, they harmonise
on 'Satellite of Love' and 'Perfect Day'

and they play and they play
all the Hillview festivals and BBQs.

To make Ray stop the flute
you have to make him sing

though now and then
he cowers in a corner like a meteorite's

careening down the earth

and shooting straight for him.

*

Look down, and Hillview's a merry-go-round today
The kids are in the courtyards riding unicorns
The mums and dads are riding unicorns.
A Bangladeshi boy swings by your window
on a red trapeze

There's Charlie with his fender and his amp
singing about a hedgehog and a lost giraffe

and when the sun goes down
the Hillview folk race the courtyards
like phoenixes and dragons
shopping trolleys full of flames

then later, when moon is hangs over Hillview
like a chandelier, Charlie sings again:
*I came to London to see the world,
but I only got as far as here*