

All Points North

stupidity. It's been a long hot summer for Mr Newton, a man in a permanent state of nervous sweating, it appears, and a man who seems determined to comb his hair into the shape and style of a wig. Earlier this year, after pledging allegiance to the cause and stating publicly that he'd given up his ablutions, he was caught nipping over the border to his sister's house for a jacuzzi, or so the story goes. Mr Newton, who takes early retirement in May, conceded during the debate that the drought had been a disaster, and at one point held out an empty glass, saying 'Chairman, if I may, I have just run out of water.' Mr Peter Bowler from Yorkshire Water Watch then offered him his own jug for £50. The inquiry continues, as does the gurgle of water from Noah's burst main, sluicing tons of gravel and cinders along the gutter towards the drain by the roundabout, as does the calculation of Yorkshire Water's pre-tax profits, to be announced at the end of the financial year.

The Tyre

*One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,
That all with one consent praise new-born gawds,
Though they are made and moulded of things past – Shakespeare,
Troilus and Cressida*

*The human heart is like Indian rubber – Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre – Kipling, Recessional*

You've just finished writing a poem about a tyre. In the first half of the poem, you remember finding a tractor tyre on the moor behind your parents' house, then rolling it down into the village with four or five friends, to burn on Bonfire Night. Somewhere during the last year or so, you've begun to think of your upbringing as supernatural in some way, a notion based mainly on experiences like this one with the tyre, experiences involving some element of exploration or expedition, and quite often ending in mystery or alchemy. In a similar incident, you and your friends made lead ingots by melting down metal stripped from rooftops and windows, having discovered all the necessary tackle buried in the earth under the mill. Who'd left it there?

It wasn't unusual to go wandering off over the hills, just as it wasn't unusual to find things in the middle of nowhere without any reasonable explanation. A bag of golf balls on one occasion, a pram, the bottom half of a turquoise bikini, and so on. In the case of the tyre, we must have tripped right over it, because it was

sewn to the earth with tuft-grass and rushes, and the stitching had to be unpicked before we could prize it out of the peat and lift it up.

Growing up plays tricks with the brain, especially where weights and measures are concerned, and if in the end the tyre was actually the spare wheel from a Morris Minor, then so be it. But at the time it was massive; thick-skinned, hardly manageable, a huge monster of a thing, staggering blind drunk across the moor as we rolled it, using the diagonal wedges of its tread as handles.

You're more or less certain that the past, as some poets have already said, is a writer's only reserve. Almost all poems are the products of memory and recollection, as if the process of writing were an effort to recombine with that semi-conscious, half-innocent state of childhood, as if all poems were statements of loss. It's the same lamenting over the past that leads to so much anthropomorphism in poetry, and the sampling of inanimate objects for their human impressions to return to that dream-like country of 'before'. Having come too far to go back, we appeal to the super-conscious to win out over the everyday and the commonplace, to bring about some momentary flash of reconnection. Words are the conductors.

You're also thinking here about the way that very small children don't distinguish between the natural and the unnatural, the way that if a toy train chugged across the carpet under its own steam in front of a child, the laws of the universe wouldn't suddenly come into question. Once you were babysitting for a neighbour, and their little boy wouldn't go to sleep, and you could hear him fidgeting and grunting through the home-made intercom between the bedroom and downstairs. After a couple of hours, you flicked the switch on the tannoy and said, 'Go to sleep,' then flicked back in time to hear him saying to the loudspeaker, 'You shut up, Mr Box.' Animals have the same capabilities. Most people interpret

this as the inability to determine between fact and fiction, as we grown-ups understand it.

In the second part of the poem, you describe what happened when the tyre reached the road. The village is down in the bottom of a geographical bowl, with all roads descending into it at a steep angle. This particular road is steeper than most, and straighter, and there came a point at which the tyre gained an unstoppable and terrible momentum. However much we tried to slow it down or tried to wobble it to the ground with rugby tackles and Kung-Fu kicks, it didn't even flinch, and carried on picking up speed towards the junction with the main road across the Pennines. At one stage, it even mounted the banking to turn a right-hand bend, then crossed the A62 between two wagons going at sixty miles an hour in opposite directions. You sometimes wonder if the two drivers ever jump from their sleep as a hundredweight of black rubber passes in front of the windscreen.

After the junction, the tyre careered on into the centre of the village, and we lost sight of it as it followed the camber of the street and turned to the left by the graveyard. Out of breath, with our hearts in our mouths and our hands black with the evidence, we entered the world of houses and shops, expecting broken glass and buckled metal at least, or at worst, the swatted fly of an upturned pram, with its wheels spinning in mid-air. But the tyre was nowhere. The giant vulcanized beast we'd brought to life had completely vanished; no one knew a thing about it, and being thankful and exhausted and children, we simply accepted it as a fact, and got on with the next thing.

There's probably more going on for you in the poem than there is for anyone who reads it. Your dad once made his living buying and selling tyres, so for you, those circles of carved rubber are a kind of currency or coinage. We'd be driving along some out-of-the-way

road in North Yorkshire going across to the coast or up to Scotland on holiday, when he'd spy a haystack from a couple of fields away, with a sheet of black plastic over the top and half a dozen tyres holding it down. Ten minutes later you'd be sharing the back of the van with four remoulds and a pair of cross-plys, usually with water sloshing around inside them, and giving off heat like bread from the oven. Usually he'd pay for them, but there wasn't always anybody around to agree a price, so the tyres would jostle for room for the rest of the journey under an old oilcloth, like stolen sheep.

The only other time you saw your father take something that didn't belong to him was again on holiday, in Scotland, when he stopped the van at the side of a plantation of young pines, and asked your mother how much Christmas trees were going for these days. It was the middle of a very hot summer. We kept watch both ways while he pulled and wrestled with the little tree for what seemed like an hour, until the thing rocketed out of the earth and sent him spinning off into the woods. He came back covered in tiny cuts, with pine needles glued with sweat to his arms and face, and passed the mangled tree into the back of the van, still hung with a great clump of Scottish soil. When we were stopped for speeding in the Borders, you had to hold it down like a kidnapped child, and back at home he planted it in the bottom garden, away from the road, well out of sight. Pine trees mustn't travel well, or the soil wasn't right, or the shock of being attacked by your dad had finished it off. Within two weeks it was nothing but a skeleton, naked and shivering, and the rose-bay willow-herbs blew little fluffy white kisses at it from across the fence. Come Christmas, and maybe to make up for the failure, he came home with a tree that was so big it wouldn't come in through the door. Always someone to use the wrong tool if it was nearer than the right one, he went outside with a bread knife, but came back with the bottom half of the tree, having thrown the top part into the

river. That year we had the only flat-topped Christmas tree in Christendom.

During the time when he was in the tyre trade, you hadn't realized how tight money must have been, until one week during the school holidays when you travelled around in the van with him. It was a bottle-green Ford Transit, with a double seat on the front passenger side, and something called a 'tickle-box' in the middle of the cabin, next to the driver's seat. What you remember about the tickle-box was that it made do as an extra seat in an emergency, and that it got very hot, especially for anyone wearing shorts who happened to brush against it with a bare leg. Its only use, as far as you could make out, was for keeping fish and chips warm on the way home. Vans don't have tickle-boxes any more – you've noticed this every time you've hired one to move house – or if they do, they've put them in the engine with all the other hot bits.

We drove around West Yorkshire for four days: Queensbury, Brighouse, Wakefield, Elland, stopping at garages and farms and mills and depots, but on Thursday night we still hadn't bought or sold a single tyre. On Friday we went further afield, places you'd never heard of and didn't recognize, out of his patch, and during the afternoon he talked less and less, and turned the radio off, and leant forward so he was almost driving with his chin on the steering wheel. Every time he stopped somewhere you'd wait in the van, watch him through the wing-mirror talking to men in brown boiler suits who were either shrugging their shoulders or shaking their heads. These silent conversations always ended with directions to another place we might try, or with a map drawn in the dust on the side of the van.

The light was going and he'd just about given up. We were driving back towards the motorway on the outskirts of Bradford, when he suddenly swung round in the middle of the road and pulled up at the top of a dirt-track running down to a dilapidated

mill. He seemed to study the place for a couple of minutes, with the engine ticking over quietly, then dropped the handbrake and went bumping down the track towards the building. The inevitable Alsatian came tearing out of a half-eaten kennel, and was yanked back by a length of heavy-duty chain. Dad got out of the van and disappeared into the mill through a rolled-up metal door, and you sat there for twenty minutes, wondering how long you should wait before going inside to look for him. Suddenly he came jogging back out with a different look on his face, and drove the van around the rear of the building, into a courtyard where a man was wheeling a huge tractor tyre out of a garage, followed by another, then another, until there were eight of the things leant against an old diesel tank. You hopped out and helped roll them up into the van, using two oily planks for a ramp. Before leaving, you watched him put his hand in his pocket, but the man waved him away, and half an hour later we were back at the garage in Huddersfield, with three filthy mechanics hauling the tyres out into the light, and your father doing business in the tatvy little office with the blow-up Michelin Man beaming through the window. You don't know how much he got for them, but when we arrived home and he put the money in your mother's hand and folded her fingers across the wad of torn and dirty one-pound notes, she cried, and everything was good.

Maybe if he hadn't done the U-turn in the van and gone bouncing down that cinder-track, there wouldn't have been any money in the house that weekend. Maybe when he put his hand in his pocket back at the mill, there was nothing in it. Whatever the truth, he'd come home with a fortune, and after the tears had stopped we sat down in the living-room and started laughing hysterically at things that weren't even funny. It was the same day that a pole-cat had jumped out at your mother from behind the washer, so emotions were running pretty high.

The tyres were sold to exotic-sounding companies such as Honduras and Vacu-Lug, in exotic places such as Dewsbury and Keighley, to be remoulded. If they were too knackered, they went abroad, to Russia and East Germany. The remaining tread was ground off, manually, leaving a tyre 'carcass' on to which new raw-rubber treads were glued, the resin being sealed by heat in an oven as the tyre was 'cooked'. One of the reasons lorries are restricted to lower speeds is to stop a tyre becoming hot and shedding its skin. One of the reasons the hard-shoulders and central reservations of Britain's motorways are full of sloughed black hide is because wagons don't stick to the speed limit.

Tyres that were totally kaput went off to power stations to be 'crumbed' and burnt. Modern tyres won't break down in the same way because they're steel-braced, so have to be dumped in pot-holes and canyons, and burn for evermore if they catch fire, or become ecosystems for rodents and reptiles and certain plants if they don't. Dad still has theories about what to do with the world's unwanted tyres, including a plan to make a rubber path across the Pennine Way and other moorland walks, thus cutting down erosion, preventing the need to quarry expensive stone, and presumably solving the unemployment problem in the same stroke. He once went to Fort Dunlop, the Mecca of the tyre trade, on a three-week training course, and remembers that the factory was so big it had traffic lights inside the building. He also talks about one of the compounds in the tyre-making process as if it were a secret potion. Carbon Black. One teaspoon of this in its powder form, sneezed accidentally into a front-room, would coat every wall and every object in a shiny, black layer, indelibly. Those who worked in the business couldn't wash it off. It got into their skin, and under it.

When the company he worked for realized he was doing all right, they took the van off him, so he changed jobs and bought a Morris

Traveller. The Morris Traveller – the only car with timbers instead of welds. When it broke down, it was better to phone for a carpenter than a mechanic. After the Morris Traveller came the Morris Minor, which eventually suffered from the same problem as every other car of its kind. One night, Christmas Day probably, we were driving home from someone else's house, the car loaded up with presents, Dad taking it slowly down the steep hill into Crimble Clough, when suddenly a car wheel went past us on the outside and rounded the bend up ahead. We watched it for five or ten mesmerizing seconds, before realizing it was the small runaway wheel of a Morris Minor, and at the moment it dawned on us, the car tipped over on to the front axle on the offside, and we came to a slow, semi-circular halt in a shower of orange sparks. Dad walked down the hill into the darkness as if he was on the trail of the tyre, tracking it down, but half an hour later he came back in a fire engine, driven by a fireman he used to work with. We went home in the cab with the big horizontal steering-wheel and the cinemascope windscreen, leaving the Morris Minor with its nose to the ground like a dog asleep on a rug, and the tyre still rolling down the valley, over the bridge and out of the universe.

You inherited a succession of your father's cars. The Austin Princess with its leatherette seats that performed skin surgery on bare flesh in hot weather. The two-litre Datsun automatic that rode up at the front when you hit the accelerator, like a speedboat. Your mother borrowed it once but couldn't find the knob to turn the cassette player down, and drove her Mothers' Union friends to a meeting in town with The Fall's *Hex Induction Hour* in wrap-around stereo at full tilt on looped playback. An amber-coloured Lada, oblong like a butterscotch, that boiled over every night on the ride back from Manchester, and needed water from the horse-trough at Globe Farm before coming home through the cutting. Another Lada that made a terrifying and expensive noise

when you changed gear, like stirring a bag of glass with a metal poker.

Every vehicle carried the immovable smell of pipe tobacco, no matter how many forest-fresh plastic pennants you hung on the rear-view mirror. St Bruno ready-rubbed seemed to be growing down the back of every seat and in the carpet under the rubber mats. A sack of old, rusty tools was handed down with every car, like a bag of bones.

When you left the Probation Service and cashed in your chips and counted your savings, you had just about enough for a new car. A brand new car. This was in the days when car salesmen were hanging themselves on toilet chains at the back of garages because business was so bad; if you said 'no' for long enough, they'd throw in metallic paint, a sun-roof and seven years' membership of the RAC, not to mention the number-plate and a full tank of petrol.

Part of the ritual of buying a new car is to turn up at midnight on the last day of July and drive it home through the early hours of August with all the other arseholes in their new toys. Part of the ethos of buying a new VW is to enjoy it, because if the advertising is to be believed, you'll never need to do it again. This particular year, July 31st fell on a Friday, which meant that most of the customers collecting their new Passats and Golfs and Polos and Cabriolets were half-cut in the first place, and the dealership had laid on champagne and Buck's Fizz, plus soft drinks and cheese footballs as a sop to anyone who wanted to stay on the right side of the law.

The showroom was hung with banners and streamers, and for the fifteen minutes before the appointed time, the salesmen slimed their way around the crowd, congratulating the new owners, handing over key fobs and registration documents, and raising the possibility of an extended-warranty option. You sat in one of the show cars with the doors and windows closed and the radio on.

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At midnight, after a final countdown and the release of hundreds of balloons from an old football net on the ceiling, the managing director of the franchise strolled out on to the balcony, took the microphone in his hand and said, 'Gentlemen, you may now go to your cars.'

It was the stuff of ceremony and sacrament, a future festival of ancient religion, the holiest day in the motorist's calendar. Bodies flooded across the forecourt, headlights blinked open and engines cleared their throats, and a convoy of L-registered Volkswagens – the people's car – turned right on to the ring road, into the witching hour.

Sport in the Region

Ian Rush, the man with the golden boot, has signed for Leeds United after a free transfer from Liverpool. In front of the *Look North* cameras, Howard Wilkinson unravels a tatty United scarf that looks more like an old beer towel, and holds it in front of an embarrassed-looking Rush, trying his hardest to conjure up a smile. Wilkinson looks uncomfortable as well, like a man who'd prefer to be dressed as Father Christmas, giving presents away in the children's ward at Leeds General, than pretending to be the manager of a Premier League football club. Pictures from earlier in the day show Rush in a sports jacket and red tie at a news conference, pledging his allegiance to his new club and looking forward to next season. The fact that he's now thirty-four and no longer of any use on Merseyside doesn't seem to be bothering anyone, least of all Howard Wilkinson, and Rush tells the camera how hungry he is for goals and how he never settles for second best. Rush in a white shirt might be a difficult thing to imagine, but it's his Liverpoolianism that's more troubling than anything else, being so blatantly and unapologetically a Scouser that he must be some kind of Trojan horse, sent across the Pennines to damage Yorkshire football from the inside. Even if he did manage to score fifty goals with Tony Yeboah next year, it would be an act of charity.

They spare Rush the humiliation of pulling on the United strip and juggling footballs in the rain, and instead we watch footage