

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil

by Les Murray

The first night of my second voyage to Wales,
tired as a rag from ascending the left cheek of Earth,
I nevertheless went to Merthyr in good company
and warm in neckclothing and speech in the Butcher's Arms
till time struck us pintless, and Eddie Rees steamed in brick lanes
and under the dark of the White Tip we repaired shouting
to I think the Bengal. I called for curry, the hottest,
vain of my nation, proud of my hard mouth from childhood,
the kindly brown waiter wringing the hands of dissuasion
O vindaloo, sir! You sure you want vindaloo, sir?
But I cried Yes please, being too far in to go back,
the bright bells of Rhymney moreover sang in my brains.

Fair play, it was frightful. I spooned the chicken of Hell
in a sauce of rich yellow brimstone. The valley boys with me
tasting it, croaked to white Jesus. And only pride drove me,
forkful by forkful, observed by hot mangosteen eyes,
by all the carnivorous castes and gurus from Cardiff
my brilliant tears washing the unbelief of the Welsh.

Oh it was a ride on Watneys plunging red barrel
through all the burning ghats of most carnal ambition
and never again will I want such illumination
for three days on end concerning my own mortal coil
but I signed my plate in the end with a licked knife and fork
and green-and-gold spotted, I sang for my pains like the free
before I passed out among all the stars of Cilfynydd.

Favourite Poem cont.

By the end of the first stanza of this poem you know it has to be read aloud. Failing Dylan Thomas himself, or Richard Burton, I'd opt for Michael Sheen to do it justice.

Except, of course, that the author, the late great Les Murray, was Australian!

The poem exults in ventriloquising Thomas (in his cups?) and plays upon the similar sounds of Welsh and Hindi - 'O vindaloo, sir! You sure you want vindaloo, sir?' And how can we forget the description of consuming 'the chicken of Hell in a sauce of rich yellow brimstone' observed by 'hot mangosteen eyes'?

Legions of Dylan Thomas fans will surely enjoy the cosy Milk Wood feel of the opening stanza as the visiting poet leaves the pub and sets off 'in good company' among the 'brick lanes' and 'White Tip' of Merthyr Tydfil to find a restaurant, and then will recognise the ecstatic rhythms of *Fern Hill* and its inebriated echoes such as 'Time struck us pintless' or 'green-and-gold spotted I sang for my pains like the free'.

I find this a joyously funny poem, as well as being a celebration of the rhythms of speech and the rich diversity of language.

Margaret Seymour