

# ***Division Street*** **by Helen Mort**



Helen Mort won the Foyle Young Poets Award five times, and poetry readers keeping an eye on her subsequent run of pamphlet publications from tall lighthouse and The Wordsworth Trust eagerly awaited her first full collection. [\*Division Street\*](#) arrived in 2013 and was quickly shortlisted for both the Costa Prize and the T S Eliot Prize, judges and readers alike connecting to her poems of conflict and resolution which thread an accessible demotic through precise form. Mort is a keen runner and climber, but when she's not doing either, you can follow her PhD research into contemporary poetry and neuroscience at [www.poetryonthebrain.blogspot.com](http://www.poetryonthebrain.blogspot.com)

## **Division Street**

You brought me here to break it off  
one muggy Tuesday. A brewing storm,  
the pigeons sleek with rain.  
My black umbrella flexed its wings.  
Damp-skinned, I made for the crush  
of bars, where couples slip white pills  
from tongue to tongue, light as drizzle,  
your fingers through my hair,  
the way you nearly sneaked  
a little something in my blood.

At the clinic, they asked if I'd tattoos.  
I thought about the parlour  
with its jaundiced walls, the knit-knit whine  
of needle dotting bone, and, for a moment,  
almost wished you'd left your mark;  
subtle as the star I cover with T-shirts,  
the memory of rain, or your head-down walk  
along Division Street, slower each week, pausing  
by the pubs, their windows so dim you see  
nothing but your own reflection.

## **Miss Heath**

At seventy, our dance mistress  
could still perform  
a perfect *pas de chats*.

Her French was wasted  
in the north. We stood in line  
repeating *parr-durr-shat*

or sniggered  
as she waiting in the wings,  
her right hand beating time

against her hip, her eyes  
avoiding ours. She never  
made the stage.

It took me twenty years  
to understand. Alone tonight  
and far from home

in shoes that pinch my toes  
until they bleed, my back  
held ballerina straight,

I wait as she did, too afraid  
to walk into a bar  
where everyone's a stranger,

see her glide  
across the city night  
to meet me, tall and white

and slim. A step behind,  
she clicks her fingers. Elegant,  
she counts me in.

## **Fur**

Snow wants my childhood for itself.  
It wants to claim The Blacksmith's Arms,  
digest the Calow Fish Bar whole. Snow's tongue  
has found the crevices of Eastwood Park.  
It licks the war memorial, weighs down the trees

and everyone I knew is sinking past their knees.  
On Allpits Road, the family dog is swallowed neat.  
Snow gets beneath my schoolfriends' clothes  
and touches them until they freeze, and still  
it wants the long-abandoned Working Men's Club,

hollows where bar stools scuffed the floor.  
It moves to fill each empty glass behind the bar.  
On Orchid Close, I stand to watch it fur the driveway

of a man who's lived in the same bungalow for thirty years  
and dreams of digging his way out.

### **Discussion Ideas**

- How benign or malign a force is the snow in 'Fur'? It wants the poet's childhood for itself, does it succeed in its aims? What might the snow represent?
- Compare 'Miss Heath' with Hannah Lowe's 'Dance Class' teacher, Betty Finch. Are they two of a kind? Do you have a similar memory of a childhood dance teacher? Has this stock figure become a cliché ... and if so, is the cliché a useful shortcut to a consideration of the emotion or circumstance under examination in these two poems?
- 'It took me twenty years / to understand.' Understand what? Does it matter that the subject that is finally understood is not stated?
- 'you nearly sneaked', 'I almost wished' - note how the rhythm of those two phrases in 'Division Street' is the same, yoking them together and highlighting their importance. Is this a poem about something that happened, or something that didn't happen?
- What sort of clinic is under discussion?

Helen Mort was born in Sheffield in 1985. She has published two pamphlets with tall lighthouse press, *the shape of every box* and *a pint for the ghost*, a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice for Spring 2010. Five-times winner of the Foyle Young Poets award, she received an Eric Gregory Award from The Society of Authors in 2007 and won the Manchester Young Writer Prize in 2008. In 2010, she became the youngest ever poet in residence at The Wordsworth Trust. *Division Street*, Helen's first collection, published by Chatto & Windus in 2013, was a PBS Recommendation and was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize.

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