

*Alexander Pope at Twickenham*

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# Alexander Pope at Twickenham

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To my Mother and Father

## MANDELSTAM IN EXILE

It was a time of blizzards over transit camps  
When the age screwed tight its eyes  
Raw from rubbing away the light. A time of  
Villages with disappearing names  
Scattered like salt in the north. Wolf years  
Behind whose grin lay nothing  
But the scorched earth of amnesia. A hunger  
Cold enough to eat the wind.  
So this Dante once more paced the metre of his exile  
As Guelph and Ghibelline  
Between them divided the days. In Voronezh  
His teeth crunched the bread's  
Forgiving snow and, as the crust was torn,  
His emblematic tongue gave  
Benediction. But night intruded and prevailed:  
A black hood gathered gently  
Over the axeman's eyes. Night, that ransacked  
The apartment, turning up  
Those beautiful equations discrediting paradise—  
Catalogued and packed away in boxes  
They were shifted to the centre of the zone.  
There the temperature was zero,  
The population nil, and famished verses drifted  
Over squares so dead  
Euclid would have wept. There an iron lung  
Hushed with grey breath  
The calendar's progress. A spider manoeuvred  
Round her frail necropolis.  
Into the gauze mesh of her eye, stars disappeared  
As the weather told lies  
To blindfold icons razored out of mute cathedrals.

Frosted acres out of which a spadeful of glistening  
Black earth protested.

A solid lake of milk on which a raven landed.

Vladivostok. December. 1938.



# THE FLASH AT GRESFORD

## *To Goronwy Tudor Jones*

*In the Gresford Colliery disaster of September 1934, 266 miners lost their lives. Almost all the men's bodies were sealed into the pit and never recovered. At the subsequent inquiry no owner ever appeared. Half a century later a memorial was erected to the memory of these men. It is all that now remains of the Gresford Colliery.*

*The Flash is the name of the nearby lake, where miners would sometimes walk with their families.*

### 1

A flash.  
Past meets present  
In an instant.  
Each photograph halts time.  
Faces are for ever thus.  
There is no photograph of this.

Marshlight firedamp carburetted hydrogen methane,  
A miner's litany of menace.  
If aisles and alleys  
Are not sprinkled with stonedust then coaldust  
Ignites beyond any warning glow  
Of Davy Lamp or Geordie Lamp  
Ringing bells or running feet  
The screams of men  
Who know this final shift will not be ending.

Those the explosion doesn't take  
Carbon monoxide does.  
A cough into sleep  
From which there is no awakening.

266 men.  
September 1934.  
Gresford Colliery.  
Sealed in their underground seam.  
The price of coal.

2

A Davy Lamp like a tamed owl  
Hangs from a collier's hand  
Wings retracted in metal sleekness  
An Egyptian god surfacing from time's deposits  
A falcon of industry  
Eyes welded together into one steady glow.

When it jumps, jerks and brightens into blue.

A flash  
(The Gresford flash)  
The flash Sir Humphrey dreamed  
His lamp might draw a line beneath  
The living on one side  
On the other, only black fossilised carbon.

One inquisitive atom  
Spearing its beak into another –  
That's all it takes –  
Making 166 widows  
229 orphans  
One flat mining day in September.

Look around you, visitor;  
 Revenant from the curious future.  
 Not many have come back to see.  
 This is not Persephone's second home  
 The blazing halls of Dis  
 Through which a god strides, shouting orders.  
 Dirt corridors 2000 feet underground  
 Held up by crooked pit-props  
 Where a man must satisfy his needs  
 In sundry corners. The cage  
 Does not go up and down at your pleasure.

Matter simplifies itself at the first opportunity.  
 Bonding its atoms more tightly, then  
 Expressing the difference between first state  
 And second  
 As energy.  
 Gas, for example. Luminescent gas.

Such differences.

Women lay heads on pillows  
 As wives  
 To wake hours later as widows.

At the inquiry  
 Hartley Shawcross spoke for the owners  
 And took his fee.  
 Stafford Cripps waived his,  
 To speak for the miners.  
 None of the owners ever turned up.  
 Some men go down into darkness  
 So others might live in the light.  
 They worked for nine shillings a day.

Half a century later  
 The memorial  
 Made out of blue and grey slate  
 Welsh slate that's leached the mist from the air  
 As it does to this day in Blaenau Ffestiniog.  
 Perfect stone for rooftop and grave  
 The world's rain, it seems, already solid inside it.

(Always a curse to go down there  
 So said the myths  
 So many mouths  
 Full of earth  
 Eyes turning white with the darkness.  
 One thin seam is graveyard enough to swallow the sun.)

A pit wheel stands upright  
 As salvage from the enterprise  
 Stationary  
 As the others are now  
 And always, each day, flowers in vases.

No messages any more  
Only fresh flowers in glassware.  
Placed with such care  
By fingers from somewhere.

5

Half a mile away is the Flash  
A little lake  
Pitmen would stroll around.

Why Flash?

'A pool, a marshy place,' the OED informs us,  
Though in miners' usage there's always  
Been the sense of a rapid subsidence  
From workings underground  
Like that other flash:  
'A sudden outburst or issuing forth of flame or light';  
And of a hydro-carbon: 'To give forth vapour at a temperature  
At which it will ignite';  
And lastly (the Dictionary speaks dispassionately):  
'To scorch with a burst of hot vapour'.  
Hard to read that without seeing faces.

266 faces.

The Flash is a great place for birds  
Gulls black-backed and black-headed  
In the briefest of migrations from the Dee.  
Flutters of warm snow above glinting water.

Air feathers itself into brief commotions  
Before they settle down again and the water  
Rings them in widening circles.

The nearby fields afford such a variety.  
Lapwings with their peewit treble  
Tweezering the air.  
Blue tits, robins, goldfinches,  
Blackbirds, rooks and the occasional raptor.

How many colliers observed these birds each Sunday  
Staring at the light all around them that would be gone again  
Come Monday morning?

## 6

Two minutes walk away,  
Wrexham and District Model Engineers Society  
Steams up its painted miniatures.  
The engineering skills  
That built the mines and worked them once,  
Scaled down now since the days of Brunel.

Boilers heat. Valved pressure hisses.  
A whistle announces  
One train ready at last for its tiny journey.

**1**

**London**





## THOMAS MORE IN CHELSEA

This gilded face looks out on the embankment, expressionless  
noting the sleeker bodies of the Japanese saloons —  
My statue silts here at the margin of their progress.

Behind me the Old Church chapel where I knelt in prayer  
restored since the night in 1941 when four hundred  
Bombers targeted London with pentecostal fire:

A thousand bodies counted, two thousand others wounded  
(what's my head weighed in gold compared to that  
Or this mouse-whisper of my breath, these eyes long-blinded?)

Say that I'm made of bronze, of books and prayer-cards, a bust  
at the dingy end of red-brick sanctuaries  
Paired up with Saint John Fisher, both veiled with dust

We thought we had escaped forever, bending to His will  
kneeling before the block and praying  
*Christ come quickly* beneath the scaffolding on Tower Hill.

Thomas More, chancellor, author of *Utopia*, a laughter-driven  
tract Karl Kautsky recommended as part-Bolshevik.  
A black feather on the frozen Thames, dropped by a raven.

Say I'm the prayer of everyone these last four centuries  
sent to me (care of heaven) from a thousand cells  
Where men with steel smiles and syringes shoot disease

Into the veins of hope, say I'm nothing but an emblem  
faith calls to account, faith smiling before kings  
For which each paternoster audit's richer than a dukedom.

Join me at the sharpening edge of the King's displeasure  
although our hospitality and table grow exiguous  
And Alice mutters ceaselessly *Only a fool and his treasure*

*Could separate so swiftly on a point of disputation —*  
even Meg stares at me, wanly curious  
To ponder the unaccountable extent of my misprision

For between the lion and his wrath's no place of peace,  
my prayers Saint Jerome answered with a smile:  
The paw he pulled a thorn from bore no royal fringe of lace.

Henry's anger quells my lords, would indeed quell me  
did I not fear God's wrath a little more than his  
(The judgement one of them bestows is final, gospels tell me.)

Yet now in this our time of tribulation I grow merry  
each meal a eucharist of bread, though seldom wine.  
Son Roper's quit his heresy, confessing himself sorry

For the Lutheran rant I once found so tormenting,  
affairs of state slide off like golden chains  
Since I have seen where Harry's heart is bending.

He'll have his new queen and he'll have a son  
if the cost is laying half the nation waste  
Or taking an axe to necks he recently laid kisses on.

But English shires won't rouse from drizzled torpor  
though beckoned by the saints at lattices.  
Anne gleams on in the frozen silver of her mirror.

Revelling, or ditched in sleep to quench his light  
outside his lawns are splashed with roses. Come dawn  
you'll see the red ones blaze among the white.

Mistress Alice frets and swoops and claws away my plate  
her face pinched ferret-tightly as she goes.  
Wooden plates, for cheese, dark bread and rabbit meat.

She liked it better when her mighty lord once held  
England's laws, a diamond turning on his finger.  
For now her finery is pawned, her rooms grow cold

Whose fires have warmed ambassadors and poets, their wit  
fresh out of Europe might have skimmed her scalp  
But she knew well enough the cost of entertaining it.

Once I laughed so loud against Erasmus whooping, Holbein  
dropped his brushes in the bowl and filled his glass.  
He said to limn hyenas mating he might need more wine.

Now beneath the scalding acid of my wife's sharp tongue  
lurks the apothecary, fear. Praying out of earshot  
She senses menace even in the shadows that I move among.

(And I'll have time there to repent the heart's diseases  
in the vermin cloister of a cell, before I'm put  
Beneath the ancient haunting-ground of English mercies)

*Why will you not bend, she says, as have your elders?  
Divines and scholars daily shift their ground  
Remarking how their heads stand tickle on their shoulders*

For Henry will never let me be, she understands.

He doesn't want my silence but acclaim,  
A kiss of absolution for the jewels on both hands.

But if my worldly prince assume such priestly graces  
then will he be lord of all that he surveys  
Heaven and hell mapped out as royal hunting-places.

He'd have my mind. If that's impossible, then instead  
despite a love for me he pledged and once intended  
He'll take, for his bleak consolation prize, my head

Together with whatever laws might query its removal. Now  
see Son Roper rush back breathless, close to tears.  
The field that has lain fallow must receive the plough

To yield the hidden pearl that costs a man his kingdom.  
Officers from Lambeth moor their barge. On their return  
They'd be obliged, they say, should I accompany them.