

Rowbotham's Round Rotherham

Dedicated to the memory of Mr Rowbotham.

Brampton Beirlow, the truths in its name
When the mines were closed it was a corpse on its frame
But reviving now, although sleeping this night
There the owl sees a building with too early light

Held by winter air, crimped with cold
A hall, time grimed, here gather the daft; or the bold
You saw them in the car's mist murked beam
As you came to this place still half in a dream

Now you must join them, leave the car's warm womb
Shiver in starlight as you hurry to the sweated room
There see the young Adonis clad in Lycra tight
About him age, but wrinkles hide a sinewed might

What draws them now to this desperate place?
Soon to be shunted out in winter's face
Whilst others sleep, dream of shopping mall's maw
These folk shun coats to brave the season raw.

Leggings, even shorts, a thermal vest
Lean rucksack, mud stained trainers, their sartorial best
Now they shuffle out; atmosphere, embrocation, anticipation
Into the dead dark, dawnless northern nation

Gathered silent: is there anything forgot
A few words spoken, veterans compare their lot
Master of ceremony gives shivered speech
No time now for oratorical heights to reach

You're off: no trumpet, no crowd's roar
But pump the legs and blood to brain does pour
Fears away in adrenalin's exciting trick
One hundred yards done: reality, fifty miles to lick

You notice now the drowsy way; the dwellings bleak
Outside the pool of street light yellow, no glint from windows peak
Is a sleeping world within each dark shape?
Or like Appian's Way are they the tombs that mocking gape

The road rises, passes over highway, at height
Below, motoring larks streak the black with light
But not for us the asphalt's easy way
A few torches lit, show steps to muddy grey

Down and daring, let feet feel their ground
The first dawn breaking, trust to luck and bound,
Over root and puddle, hope for the best
A careless move, your pride in mud depressed

So on towpath narrow, caution slows the crocodile
No overtaking now; it's single file
What thinks the night bird of this new creature?
Its silent shape winding, wan of feature

Swart heaven has a paler blush
Canal's mirror reflects, in the dawn's last hush
And now find the only remnants of true night
Hidden under bridges humped and tight

Near here once when twilight sight, half made
You ran headless into goo and pace did fade
Dredgings from the canal's decaying belly
Clings to legs and feet, grey septic jelly

Now only slack mud and grass white riming
Lead you to Elsecar's clinkered siding
Here was history, industrial and brute
Now turned attraction on the tourist route

The path until now the Victorians' road
Becomes medieval; here the peasant trekked to his abode
Uphill, rough grass, tussock and rut
This tests the lungs, unlike the stroll beside the cut

Reach the crest, enter the Wood of Kings
Where many paths deception brings
Go right, or wrong you'll slip and slide
The paths a big dipper where some on bottoms glide

Leave upon an easier track
As yet no sun, but full light is back
Take the road, make for village small
Where spire and god tower oversee all

The people few and sacrificed their daily bread
For faith they built two fine churches instead
And did these overbearing edifices of stone
For their sins, or the sins of lords atone

In this land of the alliterative line
Wentworth, Woodhouse, Watson, their estates combine
And whilst the rest laboured in mine, or farm
They built mansion, follies; entertained with charm

Now line of road where drivers have not rubbed their eyes of sleep
Cautious you cross and go on lessening ways, soon rutted deep
Becomes a greenway descending fast
And then a glimmer red; the sun is up at last

The remains of hoar fade swift away
And you on path beside stream with waters fay
Ahead runners through a kissing gate's clack clack
You in your stride no thought of turning back

But always after water's cleft, a hill
Yet you breathe deep, dig in, confident still
And soon you enter new built suburban grace
With garden patch and parking space

Somewhere here, but which you never see
The heart of ancient, grandly named Thorpe Hesley
Once the manufacture of nails was its fame
Now proximity to junction 35 is the estate agents' claim

Turn left, turn right, down steps and then
You turn and find yourself in countryside again
On rough ground a zigzag climb in shadow solemn
To reach a ridge and light, behold the landmark, 'Keppel's Column

This celebrates the Admiral's return to grace
After courts marshal tried his reputation to efface
But after this the old sea dog got in more trouble
Grew a belly that reflects the column's bubble

Enjoy the view as you run twixt plough and hedge
But soon you reach a road, exit your ledge
The land undulating behind, ahead
As creased as sheet on nightmare's bed

But now you have Keppel in your sight
So in hillside grass your trainers bite
The slope it eases, duck boards over bog to zenith
The grey crumbling bulk of the admiral's modern megalith

A mighty milestone passed, but back to smoke
Dead smoke that as paint the older buildings cloak
Two town's industrial histories abut in the scene ahead
But a checkpoint before the slag heap scape you tread

First point of rest, but a Spartan vale
Cold water to drink; no mulled ale
It shivers your gullet, but you must hydrate
If the rest of the route you mean to gyrate

Now threads of cloud obscure the sun, new fledged
A breeze disturbs the air, still ice edged
And standing, sweated, you feel the chill
You cannot linger, time for legs, once more to mill

Refreshed you hurry down the grassy slope
Past bollards, over pitches (now caged) you lope
And find the rough ground and search for the track
Frustrated you run forward, back

At last you see the trodden grass
Follow a steep and root trapped pass
Here each step might pitch you down
Over muddy scarp to stream with waters brown

So you descend with circumspection
Leave the dare devil dash to those without imagination
And in one piece you reach the wooden bridge
Then climb the steps towards the ridge

So far you've run, if sometimes slow
But now the lane rears steep, you begin to blow
A change is required to walking gait
Still you stride out; this is a race, no time to wait

Cross tufty green that wets your feet
In this damp season dew departing is not fleet
And find your way to cross Hill Top road
No tranquil dale to view, but industries dark abode

The hills you see are not god's peaks
But the spoils of man ants where toxin leaks
Once black and foul, but now with hygiene all the rage
Disguised by grass and shrubs to suit the leisure age

Yet still enjoy the scar cut scene
It's down hill now and you feel keen
Tramp grass and stone, discarded litter
'Keep Britain Tidy', no slogan fitter

Turn left at the pylon's humming might
It looms above, a metal gunslinger keen to fight
A scrubby path; barely fit for feet
Leeds to the highroad, long straight and neat

Ahead, runners hesitate, search for the hidden way
A path encaged to keep the factories at bay
It leads, once found, from road, to rail, to wide canal
Transport finds the easy ground, commerce can swell

After the rusted rail bridge with clanging stair
The path drops to the water, greying sky reflected there
Deep and iron bound, devoid of flow
No Constable here its charms in paint to show

Yet all has its interest and the path is firm and flat
No runner will complain at that
For such sections are rare and them you savour
Hills, muds, deeps; you can have too much flavour

Follow the mirror where bridges' reflexion
Is copied intact without deflection
Until the water is broken by stiff armed locks
And you come again to building blocks

There underpass has steps to slow
Instead you brave carriageway's erratic flow
To reach the street that leads up to suburban isle
Calm, but surrounded by industry's defile

Pass silent school to lane with offices and super sheds
It's the weekend and pantechicons rest in their beds
We leave them, go on shabby sheltered path
That cowers below the M1's wrath

We turn and slip below the motorway's roar
Could your ears ever attune and the noise ignore
To pass what was once a riot of rails
Now steel is dead and desolation prevails

But the new world of travel is there in its stead
And shiny in scrubland pilot's traffic lights, green, amber, red
They lead you down the steps to follow the rubbish strewn trail
By the track, then a maze of bushes, naked and frail

Round an angle of shrub land, another mile fulfilled
The path to Catcliffe, once rural now boxed in new build
Here they once made glass in upturned cone
And spanned the river with viaduct of brick, not stone

Now the sky is grey, clouds driven by wind
You hope that heaven the rain order will rescind
As you take a back road, then up to river's bank
That's the Rother, whose waters once foetid and rank

Back in the days when coal was king
Few roads on the land, but below a great road ring
This black way, deep under ground
So deep that of miner's hammer you heard not a sound

But the earth like a bowel should keep its venom within
Released they marked the land with the stain of the sin
It's tidied up now, but no reversal of time
Orgreave on the tombstone, in the soil black grime

Take an old iron bridge to cross the river
Glance at its dark waters where fish now come hither
The smell it has gone, the vapours abate
But to most it will not in the picturesque rate

Yet at this moment you're not concerned with the view
Unless it's the rail footbridge where your course must pursue
For over its steps volunteers winter braving
The refreshments they have your stomach is craving

No time to linger, follow the rail
Then turn to see the lake, its waters pale
Cross a causeway, half sheltered by trees
Beyond the mere, its surface wrinkled by the breeze

The bow lake bows, but you exit left
To pass a miner's terrace of miners bereft
Briefly on the road where motorists stare
Then a path across the flood plain bare

A flat expanse where you once sank deep
The waterlogged ground wants your feet to keep
But now a path made from the amenities budget
Makes it easy for you and a tourist asset

Smart was the path when first was laid
Now nature fights, see the path degrade
And vandals who must make their mark
Have smashed the gates, it's just a lark

Turn to cross under viaduct's stout stays
Soon to parallel the iron ways
Then the path pirouettes, up, across and down
Such effort to bridge the rail must entail a frown

Rise to the embankment that limits the Rother's course
And look towards the placid lakes made by force
For once this was the collieries' scrape
Where giant machines left the land agape

In summer it's a place of play and sport
Picnickers watch the boats disport
Now winter waters grey and drear
Only the twitchers venture here

As we turn into the east wind's chill
We see them above the waters, gathered on the hill
Anoracked and binocular eyed they stare
Priapic cameras click; dull bird thinks only of springtime fair

You feel kindred with their happy eccentric state
But now a muddy slope you climb towards a different fate
Edge across the wasted ground
Until the edge of another dead canal is found

The waters half hidden by bog plant and reeds
Difficult to imagine how the painted boat proceeds
But once it was a fair way to Chesterfield
When the navigators made the land to yield

The cut; climb of lock on lock with waters still
They bored the earth through Norwood's Hill
Three thousand yards, give or take
Through a brick lined hole your passage make

But that was in a different age
The picturesque decay now you engage
As you jog wearily along the crumbling bank
Least you slip and land in waters dank

In woodland now the canal makes sluggish ponds
The executive by building trendy home responds
The sign bids you convict creatures not to stay
But, if disreputable you look, you know your right of way

Now the canal interred below your feet
As you leave the wood and with a muddy field compete
You are attracted by the endless roar
The M1 is your roof once more

Follow now the tyre tirade
Until the path on hillside is clear portrayed
The slope, the cloying mud, bring you too a walk
Then at a high stile you balk

But as sky, horizon, merge with rain
You chide yourself, go on again
The slope ends leaving just the sticky ground
A road; scrape shoes on stone barriers, lose a pound

Time to don rain jacket before you proceed
Least the growing squall your progress impede
For you must make your way through quiet Woodall
You'll know the name when at motorway services you call

Find a hidden pathway and then more plough
At least it's down hill, until you reach the slough
Cattle churned muck about the stream
You tip toe the clods to avoid the pig's wet dream

Bear right, you find some grass again
A series of stiles the next to make you complain
But at last you find Harthill's rain swept field
Here eat and drink, lest to the elements you yield

Mean comfort in this ancient land
Where lords did dine in halls, fire warmed and grand
But you are keen to say goodbye
So up the snicket, as turns blue the sky

Now bright and cold; long the shadows throw
You take the path besides hedgerow
A way made narrow by the farmer's greedy blade
So tread wary lest the bed of sleeping seed you invade

White rags on blue, the sky is vast
Copses where naked trees huddle must be passed
Then over road and stile to find the courses emptiest miles
Divided only by muddy lanes and rickety stiles

At least one landmark to sign your way
Vast barns that loom up from the clay
But when the fog falls and visions short
You're lost in grey sea; fear you'll never find the port

Not quite leaving Yorkshire's bound
Through gates, down steps, cross ladder stile and corner round
To half way: its mark, a grassy landing strip
Keep down; don't lose your head in the tail winds rip

As clouds build again to blot the midday sun
Past gentry farms, by-ways and over stubbled field you run
Soon to find Turnerwood upon the canal's side
Canal once passed as silted ditch now picture postcard pride

Picture now muted in a mist of rain
Here ignore the towpath and follow the stream drain
Until its waters under a culvert sails
And you up steps to cross the glistening rails

Beyond, the streamside path is faint and rough
Such awkward ground; your legs cry, enough
Then a small churned paddock divided by suspended rope
Here a horse considers with disdain your tired lope

Away from this equine critic's glare
Another hedge side path is a muddy stair
It takes you to a wood where branches make a leaky roof
You'll find no shelter here that's water proof

But shake the heaven beads from your brow
And plot a course; you're on the sacred golf links now
Yet in the rain no one dares to crush the hallowed green
So there's no likelihood of being seen

Not so empty the road that's straight
The motors speed and you must gauge your fate
For half blind amidst the rising spray
They won't, for slow legged runner, make delay

Safe again on new wealth's quiet lane
Clouds breaking to release sun beams once again
They illuminate long lawns of millionaires' row
Where the grand facades make money show

At last to find the precipitous road
Up which your muscles you must goad
For once you've reached the highest grade
It's down hill to tables with goodies laid

Woodsetts might not be etched in annals of fame
But for those runners cold, tired, hungry, half lame
It's better than all the palaces of Kubla Khan
Relax; over half way, it's all going to plan

At the checkpoints so far you've sucked the tech goo
Taken perhaps a biscuit, or two
But now before you a spread of delight
Fruit, sandwiches, cake, mouth watering sight

Now from the feast you sample all that you can see
Then wash it down, a drink, hot and not sugar free
Refreshed, but with tired legs that go slow
You put on extra layers to keep in the glow

For you must force yourself from this warm place
Edge to the door; go on, get the wind in your face
Across the football pitch; back to the road
At least no sign of showers waiting to unload

A rutted lane; empty sun on your back
You run a little, but your legs are slack
Cross a stream to Notts, where fields are slow to drain
The earth like glue makes trainers ball and chain

You clump along with your swollen shoes
Then between two lakes, a causeway, here bad news
The ground not quick sand, rather slow mud
Where you sink ankle deep without cooling the blood

With great effort your feet you extract,
Examine them carefully, they're still intact
Wellingwells is the place and apt is the name
Here a mud wrestle, not running, is the game

At last a firm track to Carl's farm in the lime wood
A once Saxon place where we'd go if we could
But we just skirt its backside and cross the main way
And search for the path that the copse won't betray

At last you see it and move on by a fence
Past the green domed hill to the leisure park hence
There Langold Lake; by the miners once made
Was a mecca for swimmers, but its glory did fade

Now enter woodland, we're still in Nottingham's shire
Part of great Sherwood where green's the attire
But you won't see Robin, or the Sheriff, his foe
Not even a squirrel, as onward you go

In the wood you walked on a carpet of leaves
Soggy perhaps and it sometimes deceives
But better by far than the field mud you find
When you cross into Yorks, leave Notts behind

You're heading North West now, the winds in your face
But the circle is turning; you're far into the race
A track takes you to Firbeck where another checkpoint
Here you suck your gel sachet and tonsils anoint

Take a swig of juice; consider this hamlet small
It once had a racecourse and a great hall
The first is gone, the latter a pitiful sight
Once a palace, now an elephant white

Once more to fields that stretch to the sky
On causeways that intersect the plough hard by
In the afternoon light of the westering sun
The furrow tops glisten, blade polished they run

The field path favours the geometric line
And you, half on autopilot, the squares define
Yet shun precision; get to the meandering road
For now you are nearing history and the monks abode

Over a stream, then stone wall set with footholds
To come to a valley where the rolling green enfolds
This was a work of capability; Mr Brown
Who to enhance the aesthetic, history would drown

But now Roche Abbey, protected and visible stands
Its remains imperious, although pillaged by many hands
The last sunlight illumines the arches high stone
And the wind whistles through as the last monk's moan

Through a damp vault then into the deepening vale
The woods up high, the stream below pale
And beyond a lane the trees close in
Twisted and black their branches winter thin

Here you must tread the decayed summer floor
Until you find a path that climbs to an unusual door
A railway arch set in the thick of the trees
Where's the mystery train; its faint whistle on the breeze

Can't wait, you must pass under, then twist fence and hedge
Till you're on a wide green slope, you run down this soft ledge
Find the hidden stile; it's not really a test
Then a dike side march, where it's marshy at best

Escape from this mire to where the dead sleep
Between yew and church where the shadows are deep
Before your skin crawls escape via lichgate
To enter Maltby, another town where coal rules its fate

You come to a high wall, on whose back a highway
Here you climb narrow steps to the traffic's affray
Now tired legs must quicken their pace
Avoid the Xmas drivers who from the shops race

So you don't see Maltby, or its great mine
Only a back road, but that's really fine
For you know you're approaching the lonely tent
Where warming brew, good cheer, is given and meant

Exchange a few words, hold your cup tight
It warms chilled fingers, a simple delight
But the last miles beckon, but not with smiling face
Outside only winter and its fatal embrace

Tent flaps in the wind to wave you goodbye
You don't want to go, but you really must try
To get yourself moving is to busy the blood
So that into sore muscles warmth will flood

Your out again, now do your best to speed
At the junction it's the track ahead you need
The straight line diverts round a no go grand dwelling
Then to an open ridge, here wind your advance repelling

Now the sun's sick flushed face is on the horizon
He's failed to bring heat, now he slips away wizen
From the track see a runner, down the long road he stamps
Facing the cars and their brightening lamps

You must go this way; pylons march your landmark
Beyond the motorway deep, in its cutting dark
Then at last you go under the singing wires
To soon find a field path beyond the hum of tyres

Say hello to the walker walking the dog
Admire the valley view as the miles you log
Then down the green sward; run again in a dream
To cross the clattered bridge over limpid stream

Back to reality, your legs grind slow
As up the bank to muddy track you go
But finally this gains a metalled face
It's all down hill, but tender quods can't race

You're in a valley where waters collected
To refresh the towns when desiccated
But you've no need of refreshment yet
In the cold evening air you've ceased to sweat

So all good descents must surely end
You cross a bridge, turn a corner, then ascend
And up the road, up the claggy field
Till summit cove at last revealed

Over forty miles gone, you'd think hills you'd hate
But here no guilt for abandoning the running gait
That comes when path dips down through wood
But underfoot a slippery mire; you'd run it if you could

The ground is flat, where next; Hooton Roberts is your quest
Not a village idiot, owl obsessed
But a settlement known to Saxon thane
Now bisected by a highway, the residents bane

The next lane it falls, darkening heavens they rise
The first star, quite dim, blinks in surprise
By track and by path you climb empty hill
Silent; not even a nightingale's trill

You turn to the west where the sky is still bright
Against it great trees, black silhouettes of might
You go under their eaves then on the dark slope process
Make a last run to the checkpoint, but who to impress

Last call before port, your repast is swift
Thank the checkpointers, their time is their gift
Agriculture is behind you, back to the offspring of coal
Mine owner's castle, back to backs and men on the dole

First Old Denaby; many houses are new
Now they twinkle with fairy lights to brighten the view
But the last sheen of evening, reflected on the lake
Is far more impressive than all the lanterns China can make

Once you recall in a year of rain
Nothing the rising waters could restrain
And here a path you take with ease
Had a dark flood that reached up to your knees

Cross the rail through snapping gates
A pair of parallel canals awaits
Here you proceed twixt one and t'other
Whilst black factories loom and sky do cover

The last glow of evening now has sped
Reluctant you fit the torch upon your head
Now the residents you will fright
As a black Cyclops of the night

At least, although its beam is pale
Your stride it's freed from the darkening dale
For now you can see where feet do tread
The lights as good as Theseus' thread

It shows you where the path does veer
And takes you to the stations rear
Here under a tunnel, don't knock your head
To another canal side you are led

Now tramp the rear of warehouse Lego land
Where the distribution industry does expand
All you want is sight of landmark water tower
Now gone, perhaps felled by Health and Safety's power

The path turns you from the water's side
Back to a rising road that rail and canal does stride
Here you must descend a long stone stair
Reach the lower ground your muscles in despair

Between the houses, then a pub's back yard
What's this town where you labour hard?
Swinton: they made ceramics called Rockingham here
A bit like Meissen, but not so dear

Another canal, but this one fades away
A form of transport that did not pay
Waters shallow, become weed painted green
Then murk of dark mud with an oily sheen

The mud dries, crazed with a maze of cracks
Like the face of a dowager, who botox lacks
But dead canal still has bridge, with a towpath of brick
Then it turns into a park; quite a trick

Now keep to the rail side, don't wander off on the grass
For if you're not careful the right way you'll pass
And find that you're lost in a suburban sprawl
Making diminishing circles as you slow to a crawl

But don't go aimless, study the map
Else fatigue and frustration you won't zap
Concentrate now, retrace the false ground
You don't want to be listed as missing, not found

Relief is profound for those who find the right road
Perhaps not divine revelation, but from the mind a great load
So now you can follow the path left and right
Till you come to a cycleway that's supposed to have light

But even if dark, it's an easy way to trace
It brings you to new industry's bright glassy face
Weave your way through it; the paths in a cage
Then over rutted wasteland the road to engage

Now it's pitch night, the cold vapours twist
Around the heads of the street lamps a halo of mist
You shiver as you search for a gap in a wall
Then you find it and take the path where no light does fall

Back to a road roundabout, there take the paved path
This is euphonious Wath and there is its Bath
Here you could follow the road and break the rule
But cheats cheat themselves and play the fool

You take a side road then another black path
Then jump at a roar and the breath of hell's wrath
Is this a vent from a mine that burns down below?
No time to investigate, but you'd really like to know

Now about you deepest shadows loom
Even star speckled sky, is bright against the gloom
Only your head torch stares into the void
So tread wary, the deceitful umbra your step to avoid

Is that a humpty back bridge, it's the only mark
That in its grave below; a canal, carrier of industry's ark
So many canals today crossed and followed
'Venice of the Midlands' a term ill borrowed

For there's no lilt of gondolier's serenade
Distant rattle of train then silence invade
Yet listen hard; what was that cry
Perhaps the ghost of a dead bargee, for a lost world his sigh

Slowly the path turns towards domestic light
You try to hurry, shimmy through pinch bars tight
And at last a gap that takes you to the road
You cross and dog leg through suburban abode

You know it now, the finish is near
A spread of black grass then the hall does appear
First find a way through the railings march
At last you're inside, but no fanfare, no triumphal arch

Rather, as in Japan, shed your shoes when you call
For the house proud geisha you trainers would appal
So you must struggle your sodden feet to extract
Wet laces knotted, numb fingers, calves cramping contract

Yet the last pain and frustration are soon forgot
As you hand in your tally you feel the big shot
Yet this hobbler who goes with white wrinkled feet
Looks more like the victim that hospitals greet

But it's Christmas, your decorated, yes baubled with grime
You'd look good on a card with the appropriate rhyme
So smile; enjoy the pie with grey mushy pea
And wash it all down with a mug of sweet tea

Swop stories with regulars, effort drawn on their face
Complain that the mud hindered your pace
But if there are moans; the events too severe
Still the happy masochists will be back the next year

Adrenalin ebbs; it's all over now
You pack up your bags and take your bow
Out to the car, and the frosty night air
Legs are stiff, car is iced, but you don't have a care