

Wall A long narrative poem about Byker,  
by Ellen Phethean and Byker people

Kylie

I often stare out  
me bedroom window: I can see  
a gang of lads and lasses: they look small  
from up here. They hang about, nothing to do  
nowhere to go, cannot kick a ball even  
so they sit, wait, smoke, swear, laugh and drink  
scaring the bairns, the old folks as they call out.  
Mam says they're animals, they're not, nah.  
she says it's a jungle, the bushes grow too tall  
you might get jumped on by chava's  
rapists, smackheads, or what all.  
People say it's rough. Nah, its not that bad  
I should kna, I live here, in the Byker Wall

Kylie looks out of her window at Night

Sometimes

I lie in bed with the curtains open  
before the moon rises.

On a clear night yer might see one  
travellin ever so slowly  
remote and cold

like those mini diamond ear studs in the sky  
not stars;

dad pointed one out to me  
once up the coast

we were on a long sandy dune  
with only the sound of the surf  
and a huge black sky:

'You have to be patient', he said  
to look, and wait. And

if yer lucky, yer see  
a little pin point of light

moving through the stars  
in a steady line.' And we did.

'That's a satellite' he said.

'Just imagine it whizzing messages around the world  
could be from Australia  
or Aberdeen.

A radio wave bounces off the earth, up  
into space, hits the satellite dish  
it's like a bat, bounces the wave back  
to another part of the earth.

Just remember that' he said

'When your troubles seem too big.'

Which surprised me

cos normally all dad sees in the sky  
is pigeons.



My troubles  
Me Granda died six month ago,  
it feels like yesterday,  
like forever.

Everything fell apart:  
Mam got down, Sean got wilder;  
Granda was the only one could stop him.  
Dad. Well. he's just Dad.  
And I felt lost.  
Like when things yer rely on,  
yer cannot trust them no more.

But Nana, she's been solid  
as a wall, stronger than all of us. divvent kna what I'd de if she wasn't there.

Take Mam.  
When it comes to her  
I might as well be a switched off moby  
or made of glass  
or a tv with the sound down -  
she doesn't talk to me  
she doesn't see me  
she never hears what I say;

I might as well be dead.  
Sean's all she's bothered about.

Sean's me big brother,  
he never sits still, he's never quiet  
he's like a tidal wave takin over  
yer cannot avoid him  
he's everywhere taking up space  
getting into trouble.  
Never bin to school since he was 12  
since Mr Cairns  
made him sit in the Removal Unit  
all day til 4 O'clock. No Break,

no dinnertime. Just sitting.  
Did his head in, so much sitting still.  
All because he threw a book  
and swore. In the end he broke a chair.  
Mam says he didn't mean to.  
He couldn't help it. He's hyper.  
There's all sorts of words for Sean,  
but basically when he's on a radge, he's mental.  
I tell you, it drives me mental  
when he comes in my room  
fiddles with me stuff.  
Cack-handed, breaks things  
just by pickin them up.

An he's crap at reading an writin,  
'He's got other skills'  
Mam says. Yeah  
like twistin her round his little finger  
he's mint at that.  
He'd win prizes the way he acts sweet  
and she'd be first to hand em out.

But me ?  
If I get wrong off the teachers  
Mam hoys a fit  
or if I get a good report  
she says 'Oh Aye ?'  
like I just said  
'it's raining'.  
She's more interested  
in Coronation Street  
than she is in me,  
I'm tellin yer. It's shit.  
So. I say nowt.  
No point.

She's only bothered about me  
going ter school cos

the Welfare Wifey sent a letter;  
they said it's her fault  
if I don't go.  
I divvent see why, like  
but it makes me laugh -  
she hates getting them  
Official Letters.

Kylie goes down Raby Street Youth Centre

She's thin and hard as a table leg  
with lacquered hair, curls like a sloth in a chair,  
until she's asked if she wants to participate  
in a discussion on a Teen Shelter  
then she's a pebble shot from a catapult  
dangerous and accurate:

"Nah

I'm not doin it.

Ask her - she'll talk.

S'daft man.

I'm not makin a fool of meself

Got nowt to say.

Ask them. Them lads are mouthy

got too much to say

I hate it here, me

s'boring

I'd rather be down the dene any day

hanging out.

Nah

I'm not saying nowt.

I'm going forra tab."

She likes Scotty, but keeps it to herself.

Kylie finds silence

can protect her like a wall :

no secrets get out, no pain gets in.

'Say nowt, and nowt'll happen.'

## Sean's Tag

*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder , Dyslexia, Special Needs Removal Unit  
Caution, Custody, Persistent Youth Offender , Acceptable Behaviour Agreement  
Criminal Damage , Racially Aggravated Burglary, Anti Social Behaviour Order, Crime  
and Disorder Act, Anger Management Course, Intensive Supervision*

Sean's head swims with words  
they've always been his enemy  
won't stay still on the page  
like black demons or matchstick men  
that hop in front of his eyes, like fleas  
teasing him, moving their little letters about  
making a fool of him, making others laugh at him  
infuriating him.  
Until he discovered a way to make them do what he wanted.

If the page was big enough, the letters bold enough  
the colours not black, but crimson, emerald, silver and jet  
with spray paint and a blank wall  
Sean could write his tag, his name  
with care, detail, artistic flair

A'CEE

and other words too, words the whole of Newcastle could read

School, the Polis, Adults, Everyone  
said he was no good, a failure, the worst  
So Sean said Right, I'll be the Best  
at being Bad.  
It was his message to the world.

Sean AKA A'CEE

Sean's haircut is a number one  
he's banana nosed, it curves from a childhood fall  
jumping out of bed  
he's got a big smile, a mobile expression  
his mouth's a squashed strawberry  
fleshy and red

with a can of spray paint in his hand  
and a picture in his head, he's happy

but often he's on a come down,  
after a night of clubbing, dope and alcohol  
he can't get out of bed  
full of aimless anger, he's all aggression  
his mood is dangerous, raw,  
his eyes very red

then he hates the world  
and  
he hates himself

## Sean's Piece of Graffiti

I did this sweet piece  
side of Dallas Carpets Warehouse  
ten foot by four  
Massive - it was Bad !  
A'CEE in black wildstyle  
with a blood red infill  
and a green fade

It was up for days  
yer couldn't miss it, man  
could see it for miles  
from Byker Bridge Metro Train  
the top of Tom Collins  
all ower.

My Tag - A'CEE  
King of Byker,  
Bad, that's me.

Mam  
has oven-roasted hair  
oyster shell eyes, grey and ridged  
her body is a comfy sofa, welcoming  
but saggy from use, she waves a tab:  
“The Polis caught him red-handed  
aye, and a mean red  
a can a spray paint in his hand  
an his sign, his tag  
wet on the wall A’CEE.  
The others had scattered,  
buzzin, he was. Off it,  
full of summat,  
laughin his head off,  
never saw the bizzies til too late  
and language ? oh the air was blue  
effin this and calling them  
the black bastards. I coulda died  
of embarrassment. They called for me,  
him shouting his heed off in the van,  
in front of all me neighbours:  
‘Will yer come to the station, Missus ?’  
they asked. They know Sean  
gets a bit excited when he’s mixed it  
EE’s and spliffs and Fosters.  
He couldn’t hold the pen still  
to sign his name, bit the stick  
in two for the DNA test  
spat it out, told them to stick it  
the other end.  
But he means no harm.  
I mean, graffitti ?  
It’s not like muggin old wifies  
is it ? Even has artistic possibilities  
so I’ve heard.  
I can’t see it meself, like,  
and I’m sure they’re all sick of it  
round here. No wall or door way

is safe.

The thing is, it's like leaving your fingerprints  
all over the scene of the crime:-  
the Polis know whose tag's whose.  
But that's the point, Sean says  
somewhere public, big,  
then everyone knows it was you,  
graffitti artists are famous, he says  
in America.

Aye, I say and this isn't  
the Big Cox's Orange Pippin is it ?  
Wake up I say, but  
he takes no notice of the likes of me  
takes after his dad,  
he was a fool an all. Feckless.  
Mind I love him to bits  
Sean's always been a lovely lad  
wild and reckless  
but lovely. Big cheeky smile  
could make me laugh, even when I wer cross.

But this is his second time in court  
yer cannot get away with it like yer did  
I tell him, the council sent a letter  
we'll get chucked oot if you don't behave.  
This is serious, Sean, I tell him.

His Granda had the knack, could make Sean listen,  
calm down, just with his tone of voice.

Mebbes I've been too soft on him ?  
But life's hard for the young ones.  
Education did nowt for'im,  
and there's nee work; they can all see that.  
'What's the point of learnin  
when there's nowt to learn for ?'  
That's what our Sean says. And what canna say in reply ?  
I just sigh; stare out the window, thinkin

what this street used to be like  
when I was his age.



Kylie and Sean

Mam, tell him !  
he's in me room  
tell him, Mam  
he's messin with me Toon Top !  
Piss off Sean  
you get on my tits  
Piss off Sean  
leave my friggin little bits  
Piss off will yer ?  
get out of my space  
Piss off Sean  
I'm sick of your face

Alreet , I'll not tell you then  
About Scotty  
Doing Decks at the New Monkee next week,  
All nighter.  
Bet you're gannin down the Youth Club the neet ?  
Scaby Raby Street?

Piss off Sean

Piss off yerself, I'm gannin down the dene

Dad down the Ouseburn Pigeon Crees

has a forgotten air, left there  
by history going in another direction;  
his glasses held with elastoplast,  
his good jacket dusty  
now just a remnant of that other life.  
Dad has a view of river  
through a gap in rooves,  
'He talks to pigeons, not us', complains Sean.  
High up Dad flies on a dandelion and chickweed carpet  
bound by concrete and iron railings.  
Crees built by the council for £3,000  
shocking Mam who can't get a window fixed.  
"The taste of a threepenny bit  
it's weight, how many sides,  
these I remember...  
my wife's voice,  
the birth of Sean  
the foreman's parting words;  
I cannot bring these to mind"  
Dad whispers to a cooing breast.

Sean can't remember the word  
logarithms, ships at the end  
of the street, sherbet dips,  
he's forgotten when  
his Dad stopped bringing  
surprises home from work.  
Sean lives on street cred below,  
he's lost something  
but doesn't know.  
"He's never needed to use his eyes"  
Dad says, releasing the pigeon,  
"not like us".  
Sean says "I know how to ride in cars  
and to look out for my mates,  
one day I'll take off so fast."

Dad wipes his hands and says nothing,  
rubs his glasses on his shirt and sits  
on an old chair from the tip.

Kylie's his little pigeon  
first time he held her in that pink hospital room  
and cooed to her, she beamed for him  
Mam was scornful, said it was wind  
'Newborn bairns cannot smile'  
but he was sure.

'She's bonny, and she's canny with school work.  
But is she canny enough ? There's plenty of scallys  
that'll try and pull her off course'  
and he watches the Ouseburn  
fill with tidal water, making the small red  
and blue boats bob, then float.  
He whistles Bobby Shaftoe  
through his teeth.

## Dad's Story

I was born at the end of the war  
like thousands of others - men coming back:  
Boom - lots of little bairns.

Of course, we all grew up,  
lads together, playing games  
on bomb sites, bogey's down the bank

then we all left school together  
so yer had to be top of the class  
to get the job I wanted:

TV engineer. Telly was the big new thing.  
Yer got a van wi that job.  
But I was third from top.

So I got an apprenticeship  
in the shipyards - Fitter and Turner  
when I turned twenty one.

Mind, it was hard physical work  
seven thirty in the morn,  
fog drifting off the Tyne,

that metal ship's belly  
was icy cold, so the lads  
would set a welding rod

strike an arc against the bulk head  
and leave it, glowing,  
like a one bar electric fire.

Against the rules, like  
but hey, when did the rules  
ever work for us, eh ?

It was like that with her too;  
I wasn't her top choice,  
but Jack went off to Australia

So, she married me.  
But I was always second best  
I think she regretted it.

Then things changed at work  
big ships being built abroad, cheaper.  
Yards closing, like the mines, the steelworks

a right epidemic it was: I lost my job  
too, then she kicked me out  
said she didn't want me

under her feet. But she  
changed her mind when  
she saw how much Benefit

two households can get.  
Now we're neither one  
thing nor the other.

She lets me sleep and eat  
at home, but I spend all day  
at the creeks. I've got the keys

to the other flat, but  
I'm never really there.  
I'm not really anywhere.

It breaks me up to see Sean  
going the same way  
only faster, younger.



### The Asylum Seekers Family

Mr Jayasinha and his wife are hot house flowers  
transplanted into a northern rockery,  
they struggle in the cold climate.

Their boy stares with marble eyes  
his mouth a thin wall of defiance:  
'Mama and Papa speak loud to our neighbours,  
but they don't understand.  
I talk in whispers but they don't hear.  
They think we are stupid, call us Paki.  
But we are from a country they have never heard of.'

Surrounded by those who do not know  
the geography of east or west  
except in their own city, who go no further  
than Macdonald's and think beyond the wall is enemy territory,  
this family has travelled over oceans and mountains  
to seek refuge.

Their boy struggles to learn English,  
he already speaks  
two other languages; at School  
some in his class cannot read or write.  
"They are angry and say they will beat me."  
Mr Jayasinha soothes his son, but frets and muses  
'We left because of such threats.'

Mrs Jayasinha likes her new home, speaks to the kind lady  
a few doors down:

"Why do some people here spoil their country ?  
the trees, the grass, so green  
why do they burn cars there, hn ?

'Well, hen, there's good and bad everywhere.  
Generally Geordies are friendly folk,  
I found that when I first came, like you  
young, and a stranger to this town.'

Nana

came from Scotland and married a man from Walker

She's never told the secret she carried with her.

Her body's taut, a rolypoly sausage

skinned by tight cream leggings, a man's cardigan

round her undulating figure, stomach like a bun.

Surprising like a golden dram of whiskey

that slips down easily, then burns,

she talks of lochs and brogues, a foreign tongue

lilting in her throat, softly sung:

'Awa wi yer, ma wee bairns.

There's no such thing as no work.

We all do it, d'you ken,

although our tools may be unnoticed.

Nappy pin or rivet, pliers, spoon or pen

all worked by human hands,

tools don't discriminate,

only minds do, hen.

Sometimes there's no call for our work

or no pay, but still we do it

for love and dignity,

we do it for ourselves."

But she knows that it's hard to understand

when poverty and lack don't mean

what they did back then:

'No breakfast and no shoes - but we didne know

any different, no-One told us we were poor.

Oor riches were a house full o' laughter

and freedom te roam.

These young folk don't listen,

they've all got those ear plugs,

heads full o' noise, never been anywhere,

can't see past the end of their noses.  
No pride or skill like my man had.'

## A Fistful of Dolers

The lads hang around outside  
Sid's corner shop,  
Lee's on a bike, his foot on a bollard  
like a cowboy in the saddle,  
the bike rolls back and forth,  
restless as a horse,  
Dez and Shabber lean against the wall  
one leg bent back, foot on bricks  
tabs cupped in hands,  
no faces visible, all shaded with peaks  
jackets bulge with shapes  
carried beneath, out of sight.  
Sean stands, hands in pockets  
scuffing trainers on the pavement:  
the gang, the posse,  
the insignificant seven.  
Grouped round the door,  
loitering, muttering,  
putting off shoppers  
irritating the shopkeeper  
waiting,  
waiting for their lives  
to happen.

## Kylie's Night Out

She's wearing her pink top  
with lacy straps, it's stretched  
round her slim body,  
her belly pouts like a mouth  
her jeans show the top of her hips  
'A zip so short it's hardly there !'  
tuts Mam, 'You're getting  
undressed to go out.'  
Kylie says nowt, but lines her lips  
and checks her reflection: gold at her lobes  
chains round her neck. Grabs her bag and she's gone  
to the New Monkee - Scotty is MC  
tonight.

Meets Sammi, Dawn, Debbie and Jo  
at the Metro. They share a tab  
then heel it out as the yellow train  
opens its doors, the buzzer sounds:  
she's away, up, high, zipping over Byker  
looking down on her childhood as the sun sets  
leaving fifteen behind, she's eighteen  
for tonight.

Will he notice her, call her name out  
give her a shout while he's on the mike ?  
is this the night,  
tonight ?

Scotty Does his MC thing

Checka check it out now  
time to score  
gange and xstasy  
time to soar  
out the window  
time to fly  
poppin an'a rockin  
gettin high

bidda bidda bad boys  
on a roll  
goin fasta  
outta control  
minna minna  
movin to the beat  
MCMaster  
time to lift your feet

didda didda dancin  
New Monkee  
After Dark  
buzzin with Ees  
MC Master  
gotta new sound  
gotta stash, gonna crash  
passin it round

MCMaster  
never get caught  
bidda betta listen  
you won't get taught  
bidda bidda bad boys  
on the town  
crashing and nashing  
get on down



## The Chill Out Room

Purple sofas, blue lighting  
bottles of water and glistening bodies  
scattered like the tide's gone out.  
It's 2 am; Sammi and Kylie  
are having a breather from heaving dancers  
the relentless beat. Sammi spies him  
digs her elbow into Kylie's ribs  
'Look who's here, eh ?'

Across the room Scotty stands  
tall and skinny in a peaked cap  
and stripy top. He turns  
Kylie raises her hand, just a little  
he moves slowly, fast : Hi  
Hiya  
Enjoying it ?  
Aye. Scotty ?  
Aye ?  
Will yer give us a shout, next time. Will yer ?  
Aye. Ok

As they push back onto the dance floor  
crowded as a swimming pool  
above the bass 'n drums, the driving rhythm  
they hear:

Coming on Strong  
It's MC Master  
rock your bodies to the beat  
c'mon people, move those feet  
Hold tight Kylie, and the Byker Massive !  
pump it up, drive it up  
up to the very top

but all Kylie hears is the echo of her name  
ringing in her ears.



Mam thinks about Dad

I worry, I can't help it  
I cannot sleep till I hear  
the door go, then I know  
Kylie's back. God knows  
where Sean gets to. And him:  
we lie there, not speaking  
his back like Hadrian's Wall  
endlessly silent,  
but crumbling; our bed bleak  
as a Northumberland winter.

When he does talk  
it's a different language,  
he might as well be an Emperor from Gaul.  
I tell him he's useless as a brick;  
like a Roman Mile, he's odd  
a bit short  
nobody needs him anymore.

I spose I should feel sympathy;  
it breaks a man to lose his job,  
those foreign companies acting like gods  
taking over, they divvent care,  
don't take account  
of what it does to the families.

With a pigeon in his hand  
he comes alive;  
the way he parts the feathers  
with such care, and puts his lips  
to that warm breast  
like once he did to me.  
To think how I used to race to his arms  
my heart flying.

## Mam's Dream

When I do sleep, I dream  
of how it was, how it might have been  
that summer in 1984,  
when the world turned upside down.

The Raby, afternoon  
sun slants in through  
stained glass windows  
making a weedy light  
like we're underwater  
my brother and Jack  
half in shadow, talking low  
there's a quiet hum of voices  
the clink of glasses  
the smell of leather seats  
and Golden Virginia - Jack  
rolls his own. There's  
an air of defeat, they stare  
at me, holding their brown pints  
nearly empty, laced with froth:  
My brother says: 'I'm emigrating, lass.  
To Australia - start a new life.  
There's nowt here for us'  
he looks into his glass  
Then Jack says 'Aye' real slow  
'An I'm going too'.

And I wake with the sun on my face  
I turn and look at my life  
feel the stone in my chest.

The Bella Brigade Meet the Lads in the park

Down the pavilion a fashion parade  
posing on the steps, the Bella Brigade

lads in the bushes, a breeze block party  
faces like dishpans, kegs all clarty

a tippie in the rubble is a can of red bull  
lasses sup Lambrusco, waitin for a pull

alcopops, wkd, cherryade and vodka  
squawkin, larkin, a slab of Lambrella

the dene is spinnin, Shabber hoys a whitey  
soz Dez, soz, Dez says Aye Shite, ye

they're all laughin, its a sick joke  
'Gan on, Sean son, gorra tab, gorra smoke ?'

Scotty eyeing Kylie, she feels his stare  
he moans 'Nee money, nee more beer.'

Girls are gigglin, shoving together  
Scotty is laughing, moving nearer

Kylie and Scotty, sittin and moochin  
eyes on each other, holding hands and snoggin

Kylie smiling wide as the sky  
Scotty winks at Sean, who shouts 'That's sly

that is'. Sean is ugly, starts to makes a scene  
Kylie gets angry, stands inbetween them

'Come on Scotty, let's gan forra walk'  
Arm in arm they go off in the dark.

Kylie goes To School

1

So. Kylie has honoured us with her presence this morning  
what time do you call this, spit that gum out please and  
Will You Take Those Things out of Your Ears. Now.  
I'll take that walkman. How  
do you expect to hear what I'm teaching  
thank you  
where's your assignment ?  
coursework?  
Homework ?  
tuck that shirt in, are those regulation earrings ? I don't think so  
Sit up, don't slouch Wake Up Are You Listening to Me  
What sort of Attitude is that Young Lady ?  
Don't answer back I will not tolerate language in my English Lesson  
is that how you talk to your mother at home ?  
quiet the rest of you that's quite enough Kylie  
I'm not having that sort of thing in my class  
thank you very much  
Off to see the Head of Year Now

2

Now Kylie,  
do you know why your English Teacher has sent you to  
See Me ?  
Let's have a look at your record, not very impressive  
Is It ?  
Oh Kylie, Kylie, you were doing so well last year  
What's Happened ?  
you know you're quite capable of some decent grades if you  
Apply Yourself  
rules and timetables are there to keep you focussed, not to  
Punish You  
If you're experiencing problems at home, you can  
Tell Me  
try and see we're here to help you, but first you've got to  
Help Yourself

## Brian at the Centre

Once he was a bad lad  
doing drugs and petty crime  
running wild, riding cars,  
he ended doing time.

Now he runs the Centre  
at the centre of it all,  
 juggles money, needs and problems  
like a set of coloured balls;

The Over 60's Bingo, the seaside trips for kids  
the teenagers want space to hang,  
the Refugees, all scared of gangs  
of lads who roam the Wall.

He's short and shaven headed,  
a ball of energy and hope,  
a tattoo around his knuckles  
a chinese symbol of Good Luck.

He understands it all.  
He's Been There, kicked the habit  
and survived. He knows everyone  
is fighting for their lives.

Mrs Jayasinha Washes up

I am singing this day, a lullaby  
my mother sang to me  
I am washing my dishes  
looking out of my kitchen window  
bushes with flowers, pink and blue  
many tiny petals, but together  
as big as a child's soft head.  
My lady neighbour tells me:  
Hydrangea. 'Hydrangea'  
I practise this word  
the colours remind me of Home, but  
there is beauty in this country too  
and I sing.  
Then I hear running feet  
my heart beats, it's my son  
his face is washed  
like my dishes, there is blood  
on his forehead, a small cut  
but it hurts deep in me.  
He does not weep,  
he points and says  
'These teenage boys:  
one shouts at me  
Go Back Home Paki !  
one throws a stone'.

I say Why can't they leave us alone ?  
I want to hold my son  
and never let him go, but he pulls away  
with tiger eyes he looks at me:  
'Don't Tell Papa'.  
Such secrets he carries on his small shoulders.

Nana talks to Brian at the Community Centre about Grandad

He worked in the shipyards all his life  
neat as a golfer, but his hands were big as crane hooks  
ye could see they wiz powerful tools  
one tip on his ring finger missing.  
He was fierce and unafraid, and he loved his work.  
He'd take me and thi grandbairns to the museum,  
"Now this's a turbine  
with a single flow triple compound  
with a dummy piston, shunt-wound  
the blading is formed from a delta metal strip  
gashed on the skew"

He made me laugh, I couldne understand a word,  
He said the same about me, when we first met.  
He called me Jock. I felt so different at first,  
he made me feel I belonged.

Aye, he loved thi museum, thi working machinery  
they were both from another century, there's few  
left who remember it.  
He used to tease thi grand bairns  
tell them 'Grandad speaks three languages:  
Geordie, English and Bad language'.  
It was his wee joke,  
but they all spoke like that, effing and blinding was normal,  
in the Yards.  
I miss his wee jokes.  
I've too much time now, I need to be busy.  
I'd like to help others feel they belong too.  
Geordie, Scots, Russian, Iranian, we're all the same really  
eh hen ?

Kylie's carrying Nana's shopping

I always think  
we're seeing thi same river and sky  
thi first Romans saw, then thi keelmen,  
thi soldiers, thi sailors and miners,  
thi teddy boys and now you disco lasses.

'Nana, yer don't call it disco lasses'

Standing on thi station  
of Byker Metro thi other day  
watching a couple kiss  
I was reminded of the War.

'What was it like, Nana ?'

Wartime was like a railway line  
curving away out of sight,  
none of us knew our destinations.  
Men were always saying goodbye  
on railway platforms. Coming or going  
it wis a good excuse for a squeeze, anyways,  
hugging under great coats  
feelin hot, despite thi freezin wind  
thi end of a weekend  
maybe thi end.  
It made us restless,  
we thought we'd invented sex.  
That wis before I met your grandad, mind.

'Oh Nana'

## Tea time

Mam's dishing out the tea, Shepherd's Pie  
her cheeks have two red spots  
anxiously she cuts up tomatoes, cucumber  
looks up as Dad slides in the door  
"Wash your hands, I know where  
they've been all day.  
Bird muck. Kylie set the table."  
"I'm watching TV"  
Mam rattles cutlery,  
pushes past Dad slowing soaping his hands.  
Kylie flops onto the settee, flashes the handset  
flicks through channels speedily  
"Dad can do it"  
"I'll just have it on me knee" Dad says  
and dries his hands.  
"Where's Sean ?" Mam shouts, kicking the oven door  
shut with her foot, hair sizzling ,  
hurrying the hot dish onto the table  
she stares, it steams:  
"I'll just talk to meself then";  
she dishes up plates, plates onto trays  
silently each take them, oblivious,  
Kylie watching Vampire-slaying teenagers  
Dad holding up something small between his finger and thumb.  
"Boody" he announces.  
He displays a small piece of china  
white with blue patterns, an edge, a chip  
a shard of plate he's pulled from the tip  
"Boody was our money when we were bairns,  
playing shops. The better the pattern  
the more it was worth. Two shillin' this"  
He smiles, Kylie stares, Mam rolls her eyes  
"I'll bloody boody you in a minute."  
She leaves her food, stands at the front door  
lights a tab, watches the west turn peachy  
tapping her toes, wondering about Sean

where he's gone and those meal times  
once upon a time  
when they sat round the table  
all together.

## Down the Dene

five tab ends in the dark  
Shabber, Scotty, Lee, Dez and Sean  
hustling and bustling  
clicking sticks  
buzzin and whizzin  
jabberin and jokin  
rapping and rhyming  
throwing out lines:

'Coming on strong  
with a bucket, and a bong  
got the boosh, got the booshwah  
got the tack, the weed, the ganj  
for a smoke, minna moke  
got the dope, got the rope,  
got the skins, getting skinned up, way up high  
laughing, off it,  
getting wrecked, well stoned,  
getting chongo, monged  
chongofied, chinkified  
we're laughing laughing can't stop laughing'.

Bushes rustle  
stones click  
a flick of the head  
jumpin, on a skitz  
the bizzies are buzzin  
round the dene  
it's the pigs, the polis,  
radios jabber  
lads all scatter  
gotta Nash, gotta dash  
coke bottles, plastic,  
ripped rizla packets  
lighters, grass

everything trampled  
only footprints  
left.

The coat

Nana sighs, knows it's time  
to face the task  
sort the past, his shirts  
and shoes, hat and trousers.

Opening the cupboard, the coat  
shocks her. It's him, waiting  
to be gathered in her arms  
smelling of engine oil, allotment air.

Burying her head in it, she cries  
his name, unexpected tears,  
whispers her fears for the family  
he's left behind, his heirs

to an uncertain future; then holds  
the coat at arms length  
flicks dust, admires its cut  
remembers the life left in it.

She needs all her strength  
to put it in the bin bag.

Nana does Asylum Seekers Morning

at the Community Centre

outside

is like a high security prison

cameras on poles, high wire fences

no windows, heavy padlocks on the doors

concrete garden, no grass

a touch of graffiti the only splash of colour

in this grey place.

Inside

is warmth and smiles from Brian 'Y'alreet ?'

Nana and the local women share tea bags

between three cups and laugh as they sort

black plastic bin bags of clothes, books

shoes and bric-a-brac.

At ten o'clock the world arrives:

Mongolians, Malaysians,

Romanians, Serbians,

Africans, Czechoslovakians, all

without a space, aliens

living in the Wall

seeking asylum, needing

anything

as they left

everything

behind.

There's racks of jumpers, T shirts, sweat shirts

tops and joggers, dresses, pyjamas

knickers and socks and bibs and bits and bobs.

Buggies, books, plates and cutlery

sofas and suites, curtains and help

with the jigsaw puzzle of filling in forms.

The coat finds a new home

Brian brings in a new family  
Nana sees it's the man from number 56.  
she holds out her hand, he takes it  
his slim brown fingers feel cold  
are bone to her warm skin.

"Good Morning. I am Mr. Jayasinha"  
"Welcome, my name's Aggie,  
I believe we're neighbours?"  
he nods, his face grave  
his eyes have a spark  
that ignites her into action  
"Yer jacket isne thick enough"  
"Excuse Me?" he's trying to translate  
"It's cold - brr - whit ye need's a guid coat"  
without a moment's hesitation  
she pulls it from the bag  
and both of them are smiling  
as he puts it on.

Mr Jayasinha talks to Brian and Nana at the Centre

Why are the Churches closed ?

The shops boarded up ?

The houses empty ?

Some people, they have lost

their Spirit,

a rich country

so poor

so much Hate.

It is not my fault.

it is not these people's fault.

Governments do not always do

right in any country.

But there is freedom here,

I trust my child's teacher, the police

I trust you. Tell me,

what can we do ?

Mam makes a phone call

Hi, Nana. Alreet ? How's yer legs today ?

Aye, I'm fine

Listen - I'm worried.

Aye. Sean, Aye how did yer guess ?

Will yer talk to him ? He doesn't listen ter me.

Kylie ?

Yer kna what she's like.

Rather swallow bleach

than speak to me.

it's Sean I'm bothered with.

Will yer talk tiv him ? Ta.

Me ? I'm fine. Really.

Ok, I'm not. I miss Granddad. I kna, we all do.

But what with Sean and Kylie and him, then the council on my back  
everything's getting on top of me.

I cannot sleep properly

then I can't get out of bed.

I cannot face the post, those letters

with more problems.

I've no energy, no spark.

Aye. I'll gan to the doctors, get summat. Pills.

That happy drug, what d'they call it ?

That's what I need.

Aye. Do yer want any shopping gettin ?

Ok, thanks Nana.

Bye

Scotty gets Dizzy  
The lads are hanging out at Lee's,  
lounging on his mam's settee  
watching footy on tv,  
cans of Fosters, bottles of cokes  
and all the lads are having a smoke.  
Bad boy Scotty's up a height,  
mixin it, messin it, talkin shite:  
'Shabber disses my decks  
I'm gonna smack'm  
that's pure shady, proper stimnady  
proper slobber, Shabber,  
don't go dissin me, dosser  
tossler, skip rat  
ye cannot scratch my vinyl,  
hard core, trance or fast dance.  
Nee stottin ye.'  
Shabber's prodding Scotty  
'Did yer shag her yet ?'  
Dez says 'Have yer ?'  
Lee says 'I would, me'  
Gan on, give her one, give her three  
Gan on Scotty man, get yer end away  
Now's yer big chance, she fancies ye.

They pass round the spliff, some more cans of lager  
Scotty takes a swig  
he's acting Mr Big  
he grabs Shabber  
shaking, he's blabberin  
on about nooky, sayin: Aye,  
I'm gonna buck her the neet,  
she's a slag, a grubber,  
gonna buck her,  
good and proper,  
she'll babble then she'll bubble  
I divvent give a monkey's  
Mint me, cushtie, lush

I'm flying, belter.

## Kylie Dreams

In a dream of What Ifs  
she stares out her window  
across the night view  
over the Wall, the balconies  
the trees and scrubby bushes  
the spire of St Michael's  
down to the quayside  
where the posh footballer's flats  
have pride of place, twinkling  
lit up turquoise, purple, electric blue:  
she'd like to live there.

Her and Scotty in a love nest  
in the air, smart, in the heart  
of the city. Later maybe  
a baby or two, but first  
a job, perhaps in travel  
or the perfume counter  
of Fenwicks, curvy glass bottles  
golden liquid  
shiny labels:  
Opium, Chanel, Calvin Klein  
giving make-up advice  
to footballer's wives. Her dream  
is cut short by a shout -  
Kyleeee !  
Scotty's outside  
calling up to her,  
she leans over the balcony  
her hair flowing  
and drops down the keys.

## Not Romantic

In the dark fumbling  
with fingers, lips and thumbs  
it's hard to tell what's what  
It's like I'm two people:  
being me and watching me,  
wanting to and feeling No,  
Scotty kissin an kissin me,  
puttin his hand  
up here, down there  
this hot wave creepin from below.  
Me face's burning but I'm ice  
feeling odd, it's not right.  
He's drunk and stoned  
I want to push him away  
but I'm holding tight.  
Wonderin what it'll be like

I smell the tabs on his breath  
I feel sick to me stomach  
but I can't tell him to go  
will it be ok ? I want to know  
Does he love me ? Will he afterwards ?

I stare, he lights a tab,  
says "You alright ?"  
he strokes me hair  
I cannot stop the tears,  
I whisper "Scotty ? Do yer love me ?"  
he says nowt but "It's late"  
like he didn't hear me and I  
don't ask again.

Nana talks to Sean

When I was a wee lassie we had goats  
it was my job to milk them. Up at five every day.  
Allotments and domestic animals,  
you don't see them so much now.  
They've gone, like the jobs,  
the apprenticeships, all those lovely wee boys  
goin off with their bait every morning  
pride in their step, to a real job.  
Now ye just sign on, or eat paper in the Civic, if you're lucky,  
or talk all day in a call centre.  
I mean, whit sort of job is that ?  
To me, that's no usin yer muscle or yer mind,  
no challenge to it.

There's nee jobs that'll have me, anyways, Nana.

I see you young lads, sittin on the walls  
all skin and bone  
No difference between ye  
and the wrecks of old cars.  
It breaks my heart to see it,  
going to waste.

I like hanging out with the lads, they're me mates.

Having something to do  
keeps me going, Sean.  
Helps me get out of bed every morning.

I'm not bothered.

It might help you.

Aye, Nana, divvent gan on.

The Bella Brigade miss Kylie

Dawn and Sammi, Debbie and Jo  
texting each other to and fro  
on their mobile telephones  
heels clattering on paving stones  
the Bella Brigade meet down the dene  
texting Kylie, no-one's seen her:

K - we R n Dene, CU ?

Sharing secrets, swaying on swings,:

who d u fancy ?            X is lush            Y is cushti

riding the roundabouts, the moon is rising

got n e tabs ?            K - ring us

turning round, slower and slower  
where is Kylie - does anybody know ?

## Teen Talk

'Haway Kylie !'  
Sammi calls for me,  
says 'it's chilly out'  
windows in the Wall like eyes  
watching us  
the bushes and litter bins  
look different  
like strange dogs  
or crouching people.  
It's Teen Talk tonight  
I'm not keen,  
Sammi's blabbing on  
about a skirt she's seen  
in Top Shop.  
We stop at the door,  
for a tab  
our usual, we light up  
Sammi looks young,  
I feel old,  
the sky is violet,  
we stamp our feet  
I take two drags  
stub it out  
head feels big like an empty balloon  
Sammi, I says  
Aye ?  
Nothing.  
And we go in.

It's about Safe Sex  
I sit, say nowt  
while this wifey gans on  
showing pictures of positions  
waving this condom  
all the others giggle  
all except me.



Getting up

The alarm goes off at seven thirty  
Kylie feels as tired as death  
like she hasn't slept  
her legs and arms are made of lead  
she cannot lift them off the bed

she hears mam shouting  
Tea's in the pot  
then  
C'mon Kylie, it's nearly eight o'clock

Kylie lies still, unable to move  
the light grows stronger through  
a crack in the curtains. Kylie is certain  
if she sits up now  
her head will fall off.

Eight fifteen, Mam bursts in  
For God's sake Kylie, yer'll be late  
an it's me that'll get into trouble  
Kylie whispers from the duvet  
I don't feel great  
Mam scoffs Yer can't fool me

Kylie opens her mouth to speak  
but her stomach flips  
like a skipping rope  
she leaps out of bed  
locks the door of the toilet  
and heaves, cold sweat on her brow  
cold realisation  
beginning to grow.

Mam sighs,  
I'll phone school then.



Messages for Kylie

We R in Pk  
C U ?  
Sammi

Ansaphone

Er...aye....hi  
it's me....Scotty  
er...you're not in...  
I'll ring....later  
bye

A scrap of paper on the table

Kylie, I'm out with Nana  
pizza in fridge  
pop it in 4.30  
back at five  
Mam

The mess in the kitchen  
says Sean was here  
and muddy footprints  
leading to the sitting room  
says Dad's in there:

Kylie Wants a Talk With Dad

Dad, have yer ever thought, like, if things were different  
what would you be ?

I sometimes wonder what it would be like  
to be a pigeon

Aye - think with a pigeon's eye  
seeing one grain on the dusty floor

the wicker basket, fretting the light  
the feel of other pigeons warm and close

large hands reaching towards you  
holding your wings firm

a blinding light as yer set free  
then all of the country laid out below.

I sometimes think the Byker Wall  
is like a big pigeon cove

all them nesting humans, ruffling their feathers  
one on top of the other in their little cages

callin to each other, billing and cooing  
beady eyes at the small windows

feeling the light, watching the horizon  
waiting for the right moment

to launch themselves out  
into the world, to escape.

Bloody pigeons !  
is that all yer ever think about, Dad ?



Kylie won't talk to mam

She pulls her red striped Nike top  
and struggles to make the zip  
meet together, it used to fit  
easily, but nothing's easy  
these days.

From her window  
she can see the football stadium  
like a white castle, she can hear them roar  
Sean and Scotty are at the match,  
kings of the league  
as white turns to gold  
in the autumn sun,  
she can see the river, glinting like a knife  
but she can't see her future  
or what she's got herself into.

She touches her Westlife poster, ripped at the edge  
her pink hairbrush, tangled with blonde  
her tv, her cd, then her stomach, it aches.  
This doesn't add up to a life.

Lying on her bed  
staring at the wall  
lying to herself about dates and signs  
remembering girls behind ringed fingers  
whispering old wifies tales:  
not on your first time, not standing up,  
not if you didn't come, not if it's your period

A careful tock tock!  
sets her face to a closed door  
it's mam's knock,

'Kylie ? Kyle ? Canna come in ?  
the dressing gown trembles

as the handle turns.  
She stand at the glass  
her back the only part of herself she trusts.  
'Are yer alreet pet ?'  
She shrugs  
'Yer seem very quiet, like'  
'So ?'  
'Ye've not touched yer tea'  
silence  
'A' made chips'  
'Leave us alone'  
in the mirror  
she catches mam  
looking back at her  
with a face shaped into a question  
she doesn't want her to ask.  
She holds her breath and waits.  
Mam gives up, she breathes out,  
the door shuts, a tear escapes  
the quiet evening closes in  
like a million feathers fluttering down  
smothering her, each one a word she wishes  
she'd uttered to her mother.

## White

The white lid  
of the toilet  
sticks to her legs  
as she waits  
making white rings  
on her thighs  
it's the only room  
that locks  
even though  
she's the only one  
in the flat;  
the frosted glass  
lets in  
a hazy white light  
she can hear her wrist  
watch, its tiny white ticks  
and her blood  
in her ears,  
the white water rushing  
in the pipes upstairs  
the white noise  
of the central heating  
and her own  
shallow breathing  
white faced  
as she watches the line  
in the middle  
of the white stick  
change colour.

## Hoying Up

I couldn't wait, just hoyed up  
all down the wheels of this blue van  
didn't make the toilets,  
they stink anyways, locked  
cos the lads hang out, sniff glue  
and drink and that.  
Just leant on the bonnet, chucked up  
could see me breakfast, toast and tea  
all brown and bitty  
couldn't get the taste out me mouth  
had to go to school, I'd promised mam.

The Welfare wifey was waitin  
face like a cat's arse, all frowny lines  
lookin at her watch, dead obvious like  
I wanted to shout Leave us be,  
I'm hoyin me guts up  
an all ye want is me name in the register  
before the bell goes !  
'I'm here ent I ?'  
is all I says.  
I feel like death warmed up  
goin to hoy up again  
so I keep me mouth tight  
say nowt. Nowt, right.

Not givin them the pleasure  
I know what they'll say  
if word gets out  
be all over, man. Nah.  
Keep me mouth shut  
swallow it  
down.

Scotty and Kylie talk

Scotty ?

Aye ?

Aye, What ?

Yer didn't phone

I did, yer wer out.

Once !

I've been busy, like

Busy ?

Aye

I haven't come on

You what, Like ?

Yer Knaa

I divvent knaa

Come On !

Yer mean ?

Aye.

Yer, like, period, like ?

Aye

God, me dad'll kill us.

Don't tell anyone, will yer

What're ye gonna do ?

What're you gonna do ?

Me ? I divvent kna

Neither do I.

Kylie visits Nana

Kylie trails though the walkways  
trying to finish her tab  
before she arrives at her Nana's  
past peeling paint and drab  
litter-strewn gardens

Once these houses were bright  
green, blue and red  
now windows are boarded up  
a lot of the old community are dead  
and young ones move away

Nana has seen all the changes  
says she'll never leave  
she sees good in everything  
"Yer have to believe, hen  
expect the best, and nine times out of ten ye'll get it".

A bitter wind shakes the trees  
she hears a sudden dog bark  
Kylie hurries to Nana's front door  
"Come in, hen. It's getting dark  
out there. Will you have a cup o tea?"

The small kitchen smells of cake  
the evening news trickles from the radio  
Nana's world is safe and timeless  
Kylie sits and feels she's letting go  
of something very heavy, held too long.

Nana takes the teapot down to make a brew  
watching Kylie from the corner of her eye  
she puts the knitted cosy on the pot  
casually asks: "Now why  
did you call round this evening?"

Kylie talks to Nana

Y'kna like..

y'get this feelin  
when something's  
happened

Aye ?

an you don't, y'na like  
know what to do ?

Something's  
happened

to me, like, and I  
don't know what to do

Aye ?

y'na like  
what I mean ?

Mm Mm ?

As she walks home  
Kylie thinks the good thing  
about Nana's way of talking  
is the space she leaves for you  
a helpful quiet  
not a stony place  
big enough to swim around and reach  
your own conclusions  
no-one shouting, pushing you  
in this or that direction.  
She hasn't told Nana everything  
but wonders if she's guessed  
as if the look in Nana's eyes  
has guided her, made her realise  
she feels less depressed

now she knows she's going to tell her parents, get if off her chest.

## The Jayasinha Family

At seven o'clock, it is calm. A hint of spice  
tinges the air: ginger, garlic, star anise;  
they sit with plates on knees  
in front of the tv  
the three of them, on their second-hand sofa  
the faded pattern threadbare,  
the one lamp lights them to a burnished brown  
the sound is turned down,  
they are reading the subtitles in English for practice  
the gas fire hisses.

The peace is shattered  
by a battered front door, three lads roar in  
looking, touching, shouting, nicking  
Mr Jayasinha grabs his wife  
who pulls their son behind them both,  
she is crying 'Who ? and Why ?'  
their boys stares with frightened eyes  
at his father, afraid of what he might do.  
Mr Jayasinha is still and firm  
'I call Police. They arrest you'

Sean is red-eyed, laughs out loud  
convinced he's invincible  
'I divvent give a shite, giz yer money',  
'I have nothing'  
Sean kicks the wall, blasting a hole in the thin plaster  
angry at the world and his own failure.  
Grabbing anything, he runs into the dark  
followed by his mates, heading for the park,  
leaving the lock broken on the family's door  
and their world, falling apart.

The stolen coat - One night, three scenes

The lamps are broken, there's a cloudy moon  
the stolen coat throws a mud-stained arm  
out from under the bush, half-hidden  
like a badly kept secret, Kylie screams  
she sees blood, a body, imagination  
running away with her down the dark footpath.

Clifford Street police station  
a constable filling in forms, asking questions  
Mr Jayasinha answers in halting English  
hating his lack of accuracy, he wants  
to be precise, "A coat" he says  
"My coat. They take it".  
The constable wants details  
colour, size and value  
doesn't understand the coat  
is the least of it.

Round at Scotty's, Sean is boasting  
about paper-thin doors and flimsy people  
'Fockin sweet - just walk in  
off the street, kick the door  
they don't say nowt - we took  
owt we liked, a useless coat  
an old tv, a stupid picture. Pakis, man  
pathetic, pissin themselves.  
Haven't even got owt to pinch,  
to score I'll have to go back  
try next door.'

Sean gets arrested

Convinced she's just witnessed a body that's dead  
dashing past bushes, the scene in her head,  
running and breathing so hard she feels sick  
a sight through the archway brings her up quick:

neighbours are out to watch the commotion  
spotlights are pinpointing Sean's wild emotion.  
A 'copter above, whirring over the scene is  
strobing Sean's body, he's making obscene

gestures, he's high as a kite on a string  
everyone's shouting and pointing at him  
up on a balcony, he's waving his arms  
cursing the polis, the siren's alarms.

Pushing through people, she reaches her dad  
scratching his head, says " I think Sean's gone mad".  
Mam is cajoling through a red megaphone  
Sean's got a spliff, he shouts 'Leave us alone !'

Kylie is green, she throws up in a rush  
Dad sighs 'Oh dear', disappears in the crush,  
Mam keeps on talking, she's watching Sean's eyes  
which don't see the polis catch him by surprise.

How Many Walls Make Right ?

Sean's banged up in a cell all night  
four tiled walls and a shadeless light

the family he harassed have left their flat  
no walls at all, afraid to go back.

## Sean's Statement to the Police

I'm not sayin nowt til me solicitor gets here

What Sean said to his solicitor

Me last can of Fosters was in the bin,  
there were no pills left to pop  
me an the lads were out of tabs  
no cash left to gan t'the shops

Me and Scotty'd were on a come down  
from a blaster yesterday neet  
I was proper chokin'  
for a good smoke 'n  
I was so tired I couldnt stand on me feet

me hands were shakin, me mouth was puar skankin  
says Lee, I'll give yer some EEs  
but I need more cash  
to buy a stash  
so you lot'll have to help me

I was off me heed, I was on a skitz  
we din't knaa what we was deein  
and Lee says Haway, it's easy as owt  
I din't kna he would spark 'im

we went to this house, Lee's shouting gan on  
so I kicks in the door with one blow  
there was this gadgy standing so still  
with his wife and his lad, I dunno

what I was thinking, I can't really remember  
what I did

The Row

Mam: Oh my god !

Sean, what are you like  
ye've gone too far this time

Sean Don't kick off, Ma !

It wasn't me  
I never meant ter do it

Mam Yer beyond control

I'm sick of yer  
It's them Ee's yer taking

Kylie Please !

Mam Look at him !

Look at yer son!  
Have ye got nowt to say ?

Dad: Well, I don't know

Mam In front of the neighbours

Any trouble now  
the polis call here first

Dad Your ma's right

Mam It's Sean this

and Sean that  
and then it's Sean the other

Sean They made us do it

It wasn't me  
it was Shabber, Dez and Lee

Mam Haway, divvent lie to me

I kna what's what  
Yer've gone & done it this time

Kylie Stop shouting

Mam The Violence  
The burglary  
You'll have us all in trouble

Sean I didn't take much,  
all fuckin rubbish.  
They're only pakis, man

Mam Bad Language  
Bad behaviour  
the polis'll have you for this

Kylie What did yer do Sean ?

Sean I never touched him  
the polis are lyin  
I only took a coat

Mam Tell him Dad

Sean Don't keep shouting !

DAd Oh, I don't know

Mam If you were the man  
my father was  
we wouldn't have this trouble.

Dad Don't start on that

Mam Yer weak,  
yer not a proper Dad  
no discipline, not like I had.

Dad Don't

Kylie Sean, I saw a body

Sean I'm sorry

It's just a paki's coat

Alright ?

## After the Row

I hate it  
when they shout  
all that shoutin  
does my head in.

when Mam and Dad argue  
like poison in the air  
spreading everywhere.

when Sean gets wrong  
everyone's up a height  
boilin forra fight.

because I wanted a quiet night  
so's I could get it right  
when I tellt them.

But they went ballistic  
and I missed it,  
my chance,  
so I said nowt.

## Sean's New Tag

No-one can see it  
round his ankle,  
no-one knows it's there  
under his trousers  
except  
the never-sleeping eye  
of the polis.

They know  
where he goes  
and when  
he's under a curfew  
in by seven,  
invisible walls  
keep him confined.

He feels a volcano  
building inside  
if he opens his mouth  
flames will shoot out  
burning them all to hell  
which is why he has to  
go on an Anger Management Course as well

Nana gives Sean a talking to:

Did yer know the Byker Wall lies along the line of an older, Roman one ?

Listen, hen, just imagine the Romans

invaded your home, right now, kicked thi door, marched in.

Powerful folk, wi masses of soldiers, weapons, armour.

You'd get angry, upset would'n ye ? Aye.

so you'd try and stand up to them,

but they kill or arrest folk like you.

Now you're in trouble. They've got your number, son.

You have to leave, without delay

just walk away, dressed like that

no time to pack a bag, no money.

Have you a passport ? No - I thought not.

Imagine, no more tea on the table,

no comfy bed, no knowing if

your mam or dad are dead,

afraid to trust yer neighbours.

Where will you go ?

Who will protect ye ?

Now imagine that family you robbed,

that's whit happened to them.

They're not Roman, no, nor from Pakistan, neither

You don't know where they're from, do ye ?

Ye don't know whit they're like, do ye ?

I'll tell ye - the father's a teacher

the mam owned a wee shop

and all they want

is for their son to get an education

to find a happy life.

Because they've no job, no property.

Not so very different from your ma and da, eh ?

Just imagine the Refugee families round here  
could be your uncles, cousins, brothers.  
Because they are.

## A Coach Trip to Vindolanda

Dawn kicks her bag closer to Kylie's  
hisses "Miss'll go ballistic if she sees  
them earrings." A bubble smacks  
"Want a hubba bubba ?"  
Kylie unwraps the pink square and chews  
sweetness stifling her need to spew.  
Ten girls, ten packed lunches and coats  
in case of weather, wait between brick wall  
and coach, Dawn grumbles 'Why can't we get on ?  
School trips; what a pain. Who wants  
to see a stupid wall anyhow ?"  
The others mutter, Kylie is silent  
her eyes look away, distant as clouds  
that threaten rain.  
Miss Hood the history teacher urges  
'Come along girls, you're the lucky ones  
chosen to visit this world heritage site"  
Dawn whispers "world heritage shite"  
a giggle ripples through the group,  
"Who knows who built Hadrian's Wall ?"  
'The Vikings ?' 'No - o'  
'President Kennedy ?' Miss Hood sighs  
'Hadrian ?' ventures Kylie, Miss Hood is surprised  
'I didn't think you were listening. Yes  
and what was he ?' "Busy, I should say"  
quips Dawn and everyone laughs  
the coach trip is on its way.

Kylie watches out the window  
a film of countryside stream past:  
rich rusty bracken, autumn sun  
a light breeze, trees freeze framed  
on blow, a hot air balloon  
hanging like a plump ripe fig.

At Vindolanda, ten pairs of shoes shuffle

into the dim-lit small museum,  
Miss Hood is telling them: "These  
are the earliest writings recorded,  
The Vindolanda Tablets"  
"Take two" yawns Dawn "for boredom"  
"Tantalising fragments of domestic and military life;  
short messages sent back and forth across the empire:-  
come to my birthday party, send more socks"  
Kylie stares at the display, her thoughts  
stray : "Like Postcards "  
"Yes !" beams Miss Hood, "Exactly like"  
and ten girls flap out into the breezy day  
thinking who they'd like to send a postcard to  
and what they'd say.

Dawn and Kylie, backs against the roman stones  
eat their packed lunch, cheesy sticks and snack-a-jacks  
coats done up and shoulders hunched  
sheltering from the nipping wind.  
Dawn says 'I'd send a card  
to me Dad. I've never seen him  
since I was three' and she stares  
into her lap, 'But yer can't post cards  
to the past'.

Then Kylie blurts it out: 'My postcard  
is to the future -'  
Dawn turns her head and screws her eyes  
trys to read this strange face:  
'To my baby.  
Meet you next May,  
on your birthday  
safe journey. Love K'

'Ee, Kylie, does yer Mam know ?'  
Kylie shakes her head  
and starts to cry.



On Saturday afternoon, Scotty's Dad

is done in after a week at work  
wears a vest and holds a can of stella  
has a blue-black tattoo creeping round  
his arm and neck. He's missing a tooth  
and missing his football on tv while Scotty's mam  
is creeping round, trying to tell him  
without tripping the wire, something  
careful, choosing words, too slow  
for him, who slams his hand  
down on his knee:

'What the fock's he done ?

What ? What !?'

he doesn't really want to know  
but knows he's got to  
act the man, make a stand, draw the line.

Scotty's in his bedroom  
listening through the wall  
for the sounds that tell him  
the news; Dad's on a radge  
bawling his rage, 'Scot!  
C'm here yer toe-rag  
yer little piece of no-good shite,  
what's this ? Who is she ?  
I want to hear it from youse -  
yer ma's tellt us about this lass.  
Well ? Is it true ?'

'Yeah, but lissen Dad -'

'Don't you lissen Dad me, lad.

How d'ye kna it's yours ?

Them lasses from the Wall

all slags and whores

everyone kna's what's what'

'No, Dad, no, she's not like that.'

'Ye kna nowt, lad  
we'll gan there noo and sort it oot'.  
He stands curling his hands into fists  
straightening his knees, lifting  
his shoulders with a deep breath.  
'Wait, Dad..'  
But Scotty's arm is in his grip,  
the door slams and off they march  
Scotty, Scotty's Dad, leaving behind  
Scotty's Mam, tight faced.  
Through the archways  
down the path  
nets lifting, kids stop playing  
everyone senses something brewing;  
a small crowd gathers at a distance  
as these two stop at Kylie's place  
knocking on and on, insistent  
Scotty's Dad set with a concrete face.

Kylie's Dad looks with mild surprise  
at this unexpected visit,  
not prepared for confrontation  
he's drinking tea and there are biscuit  
crumbs around his mouth, he smiles  
and waits. Scotty's Dad gets in there sharp:

'Scot says your lass is pregnant. That's a shame  
but your lass says it's our Scotty who's to blame,  
how'd you kna whose bairn it is ?  
She hangs oot with lots of lads  
the gang that gather in the park  
who knas what gans on after dark ?  
If she has it, I'm tellin yer noo  
Scotty's having nowt te di with it.  
What your lass does, is up ter you  
but Scot's too young ter be a Dad  
he's got nee money, our lad's not able

to support a bairn. I've tellt him  
he's not seeing your lass again.'

Kylie's dad is silent, rocked to the core  
Now Kylie and her mam are at the door  
weak with shock, caught off guard  
mam examines Kylie's face  
see's her shifting look, and like a book  
she's reading, the last few chapters fall into place.

## Eruption

There's a silence, a moment  
where time is suspended  
far overhead a plane cruises  
a metro rumbles past  
there's a distant hum of traffic  
and one car horn blasts.  
No-one speaks, but Scotty  
shuffles his feet, his dad  
now seems lost for words  
he's said them all - he's waiting  
but he gets no reply  
just three pairs of eyes staring  
one in shock, one in anger  
one in fear;  
'Reet then' he starts into action  
'C'mon Scot' and turning swiftly  
they disappear.

The door shuts with a tiny click  
that breaks the spell  
mam turns, eyes burning  
her mane of hair raging round  
she roars, stamps her feet  
words spurting between gnarled teeth:  
'Yer little fool, yer bloody little idiot !'  
she grabs her daughter  
shakes her roughly, screaming :  
'Bloody little bloody fool!'  
anger greater than her words can say  
or body hold, she lashes out  
with one big smack.

Kylie's cheek is shocking red  
she's wailing, heaving pain  
up from her stomach  
pouring it out, eyes sodden

mouth half open, nose streaming  
coming apart like paper in rain.

Dad is weeping silent tears  
for his little pigeon;  
he wants to coo and rock her  
make it better, like he could  
when she came crying  
with a grazed knee  
but it's too late for sticking plaster.

Mam sits on the sofa, sobbing, head in hands  
repeating: 'I can't cope, first Sean, now this.'  
Kylie's on the floor, a little heap;  
dad pulls himself together  
he's got to get them through  
this family disaster:  
'Let's all have a cup of tea,  
eh pet ?'

Life's a drag

Sean's on an ASBO  
where he's got a new tag

Nana's phoning NACRO  
her shoulders sag

Mam takes an ASPRO  
lights her fortieth fag

Kylie's on the METRO  
someone whispers 'Slag'

Dad shops at NETTO  
with his black and blue bag

Scotty runs a DISCO  
down the Nag's head.

All of them unhappy.

## Kylie Lists her Options

Mam's tired, out of it on pills, can't think straight  
all she says is:

'What about exams ?

Yer cannot take a bairn te school.

I've got enough on me plate;

I've got a headache.'

Dad's in his pigeon cree, day and night  
says it's up ter me:

'But yer such a bright lass,

don't throw yer life away

you've got options,

not like me.'

Yeah, but how do I decide ?

Gettin rid of it's murder. Nah. No way.

Suicide ? I'd rather die

that'd be murder twice.

Givin it away ?

rich folks, big house

somewhere posh,

a nice safe estate ?

Maybe the baby

would have a better life ?

But how - knowing

that your own ma

didn't want yer ?

But I've no place, nee money

Mam and Dad not talkin

Sean's a liability

Scotty not allowed to come near me

I'd have to leave school

no exams

shit

I divvent kna.

Kylie goes for a walk

There's a salty layer of snow  
Kylie hugs her coat around  
stands in the shelter  
of the brick arch, her tab  
flickers in the wind  
that teases round the corner.  
She follows her feet  
leaving prints  
lonely as a school yard after home time.

She passes Byker Primary  
where she was a bright thing  
with bobbles in her hair  
she remembers  
sitting on the maroon carpet  
close to teacher's chair  
smelling good shoe leather  
hearing 'Well Done Kylie';  
gold stars and that special Mrs Gibson smile  
her rewards.

There's The Cabin, the corner shop  
where she would buy red licorice shoe laces  
and flying saucers with her pennies,  
where she was trusted  
with the treat of buying pop  
Irn Bru or Dandelion and Burdock  
a litre bottle wobbling in her arms  
as the liquid slopped. Now it sells  
samosas and mango juice as well,  
the windows boarded up  
looking more closed than open.  
Past The Plough that's lost  
its letters - it says Ugh  
At Byker now. Kylie  
remembers persuading

a bigger girl to go in  
to get her first tabs  
and bottles of Bella .

In the white-board November sky  
pigeons flap and criss-cross  
making arithmetic squiggles  
as jumbled as her thoughts:  
Kylie - Baby = what ?  
Kylie + Baby = when ?  
Kylie - Scotty ÷ Baby = How ?  
Like badly done sums  
nothing adds up.

She's cold and numb  
the snow blows her over Byker Bridge  
the buses drumming on the road.  
She leans over, picking out the scene  
below: the city farm, sheep  
like grey dots on white,  
goats trashing hay by the gate  
of a scrubby field under the viaduct's  
brick legs. Up Stepney bank the smell  
hits her, horses, dung and clopping hooves  
of the stables. She rode the tiny shetland ponies  
in the summer of her childhood  
and didn't ever want to grow up.  
She still feels five inside, but nestling  
up inside her little self  
is a smaller one who will call her  
Mammy and push her into  
the adult world forever.

Kylie visits Nana ii

Once again, Kylie trails through the Wall  
she smokes a tab but it makes her sick,  
thinking maybe a talk with Nana  
would help; a little lad waves a stick  
at her and shouts: 'Giz a tab or piss off !'

By Nana's porch the hanging baskets are empty  
her garden is always carefully weeded,  
but a few doors down it's boarded up  
nana says Families who'll stay are what's needed  
Kylie thinks you can't blame them for moving away.

She recalls the last time she came to visit:  
the drama of the coat and Sean's arrest,  
realises the boarded up house is the one  
Sean burgled and she becomes distressed;  
is she never going to escape ?

Nana opens the door, a smile on her face  
giving Kylie a welcoming hug and kiss  
Kylie thinks she might start to cry  
but simply says: 'Hi, I've missed yer Nana,  
shall I make us a cup of tea ?'

It's warm and quiet, there's a photo on the wall  
of Kylie, gap-toothed and scruffy Sean,  
his arm around her, Grandad snapped it  
long ago on a trip to Byker Farm  
when she was six and the world was safe.

Her words tumble out 'Granda was lovely  
good and kind, like a husband should be  
look at my life - it's in a mess.  
I wish I wasn't going to have this baby,  
I'm so unhappy.' Her tears cascade.

Nana tells her Secret

Listen, hen, I'll tell ye a wee story  
I've never told anyone before.  
It was a warm September, when I turned fourteen  
in Aberdeen at the start of the war.  
It was a glowing time, wi long shadows  
everything glistened in thi granite city  
a warm evening sun set afire to windows,  
Ma and Da, all the old folks were greetin  
worrying about war, but me, youth's audacity  
I thought life was just beginning.

Rationing, hardships, shortages, call-up  
men and boys going to join the Navy  
troops, manoeuvres, movement all up  
and down, it was hustle and bustle,  
more excitement than I'd ever seen  
in my fourteen years in Aberdeen.

We didn't go short, we had plenty:  
my Da would collect peewits eggs  
little wee brown things, twenty  
or so would fill a frying pan  
we'd go to the seashore, catch crabs or else  
hunt out gulls eggs, fishy and salty,  
Ma'd gather seaweed, we called that Delse  
we'd eat it wi vinegar; we improvised  
and we got by.

It was 1942, half way though the war  
I was lukin for williks, on ma own  
when I saw him walkin on the rocky shore  
I could tell he wasne from Aberdeen.  
Tall, he was, in a navy greatcoat  
he was stood, staring across the sea,  
as if looking for a boat.  
So still like a statue, his face carved wood,

sad but dignified  
I'll never forget that sight.

Imagine my surprise to find him  
sittin at oor table, in oor  
hoose. He was a soviet seaman  
shipwrecked into ma lap  
billeted they called it. Oh, hen  
he was so different from  
the rag taggle of menfolk  
left in Aberdeen by then.  
He smelt of the wind and foreign tobacco  
my eyes only reached his top button  
where I could see tanned neck. Oh  
he turned many a girls head, aye.  
He showed me ma how to cook a rook,  
he told me about his hometown Riga  
in Latvia on the Baltic Coast  
an he taught me some words of Russian;  
I loved to hear him talk, each word  
a whole new country that I could see :  
Archangel, Leningrad  
Simferopol, Odessa:  
The Soviet Union.  
Riga is on the same latitude as Aberdeen,  
we were linked by a line around the earth  
I thought that was romantic, meant to be.

With him I went into another world,  
carried away to where I felt foreign,  
I unfurled  
I was his flag, and waved  
goodbye to the rules of home  
I was fearless, and brave.  
Then suddenly he was gone.  
I felt defeated and alone, but  
he left me a little piece  
of himself. You know whit a mean ?

Ma and Da were furious wi him  
they'd shown him hospitality  
he'd taken more. Heartbroken wi me  
in straying from the path.  
They were strict Presbyterians.

Ma said she couldn't bear me at home,  
wanted to shut it out from her mind,  
I'd ruin Dad's good name.  
Heaven knows there were a few fell like me  
but my kind  
were sent away.  
A distant cousin of me ma's in Byker  
said she would have me. I liked her  
but Ma said "Never mention it again.  
Don't come home til it's all over".  
Ma's word was gospel in our hoose.

Because of the bombin and overcrowdin  
in Newcastle City, mothers were sent  
to a hospital in the country, Gilsland  
by a special coach; The Blunderbus  
the girls called it  
because there were a few of us  
unfortunate, unhappy, unmarried.

I had him early one spring morning  
and held him just for a moment  
masses of dark hair and Latvian eyes  
I loved him  
instantly, 'Gregory' I said  
'like your father' and kissed him once  
'Dos vidanye. Goodbye'  
I never even suckled him.

A postcard from Gilsland Maternity Hospital, 1943

Dearest Ma, this is the view from my window  
brown fields, green hills, no houses or shops  
a few trees, all bent like tired women  
and miles of empty landscape  
dotted with sheep and lambs.

I hear them bleating.

The gardens are covered with yellow crocus  
but the wind sharpens the weather.

The extra rations of milk and orange juice are good  
but some of the wee things are in whicker clothes baskets  
for lack of cradles. Matron doesn't smile  
like she does with the married ones  
just hands me a mop and bucket,  
says "And I mean clean, mind."

You said not to write, but that's alright  
because I haven't got a pen or a postcard  
and my room doesn't have a window.

I just wish I could have shown you  
my little lamb, then I know  
you would have wanted me to keep him.

After Kylie's talked to Nana

Kylie and Nana on the settee  
sharing tissues, wiping their eyes

Kylie hugs Nana, she hugs back  
They're both glad they had this talk

Kylie puts the kettle on, looks for Nana's sweets  
they sip tea and suck Black Bullets watching Coronation Street

Nana says 'I sometimes think of Gregory  
and wonder does he wonder about me ?'

Ten thirty, Nana makes her cocoa  
Kylie goes, walking slowly through the snow.

## The Jayasinha's Son's first Christmas

I have never seen Christmas before.  
It changes this place:  
These people  
let cars burn on their grass  
dogs foul their paths  
paper grow in their gardens  
but now  
they have silver lights  
round their windows  
angels and red berries  
on their doors.  
People who  
did not know our name  
never said hello  
now  
they have a smile on their face  
and a greeting on their lips  
I have never had a Christmas present before  
now I have one  
on my doorstep  
a pigeon with no head  
a note saying:  
Happy Xmas.

## Postcard from a Wall - Mrs Jayasinha

It's been cold this winter.  
Not like Home. Here they say too cold for real snow,  
like dust on the wall and walkways, thin  
like my coat. Brian says we have to go.  
It's for the best, he says "Pack up your things  
put them by the door. I'll load the car"  
I wait for him in the customer's cafe  
in Morrisons, a big shop. I have a cup of tea.  
My boy stares into the table surface.

He sees my face, he says it's ghostly,  
pale. Brian says  
I must do something for me -  
build my confidence. After this place.  
Like leaving prison.  
December

All the houses have their decs up, right  
windows wi flashy dots  
doors wi fairy lights all round  
in each living room  
yer can see a tree, wi tinsel  
red and gold baubles  
an I think everyone feels bright  
cept me.

An I stop at the top of Byker Hill  
this one house, right, wins prizes  
raises cash for good causes  
it's amazin, Santy's swayin  
in his sleigh in the air  
there's a group of carol singers  
under a lamp on the grass  
three wise men and angels  
in the porch, all shiny  
and in the middle of the lawn  
a stable wi lambs  
a donkey, and a glowin mary  
holding a tiny doll.  
An I know it's only cheesy plastic  
that it's all 60 watt bulbs  
an that, but in a funny way  
it seems to say  
even babies born wi no walls around them  
in the middle of winter wi no proper dad  
are ok.

Nana has an idea for Sean

'Kill two birds with one stone, eh ?  
Maybe that's no the right way  
to put it, but I've spoken to them all  
Community Police, Brian,  
the Youth team, the YMCA.

It's about building trust and painting walls  
new links between us, and them.  
Fer you, it's proof  
that you can mend yer ways  
I know ye can, yer no a bad lad  
really.'

A chilly Saturday, spitting rain  
finds Sean in overalls, cans of paint  
in both hands, waiting  
by the padlocked Centre door.  
Brian says 'Y'alreet mate ?'  
wielding a big bunch of keys  
and gives a grin; across the road  
a small group hesitate  
Brian waves them in  
Mr Jayasinha's son among them,  
all come to decorate the precious space  
spared for the Refugees.  
Sean hopes no-one saw him going in.

The Young Mums 2B Group

Kylie sits on a big brown sofa  
trying to get comfortable;  
her baby is wriggling, she feels a foot  
kick out, she gasps quietly  
she will bear this in silence.

She looks around,  
three other girls  
with glum faces  
mugs of coffee  
and stomachs like drums,  
stare at one another  
non-committal, not sure why they've come.

A big woman in a T shirt with 'Rita' on the front  
and 'Great North Run', is busy on the phone,  
on the wall are posters:  
zero tolerance for domestic violence,  
smoking harms your baby  
drug information and pictures of contraceptives.  
One girl gets up: "I'm not stayin here,  
youse can all Fuck Off".  
All eyes swivel to Rita  
she smiles and puts down the phone  
'Come on Tracey, finish your coffee,  
give it a chance. Let's start  
with names.'

Kylie does a writing exercise

Tomorrow I will be shopping for a pram  
Next week I will be sixteen  
Next Year I will be a mam

I wish I had a million pounds  
I wish I hadn't messed about at school

With this group I hope to -  
do my exams  
learn how to manage

the last line is scribbled out  
but it says  
go to college

## A Meeting in JJ's

'The cafe in Byker opposite Kwiksave  
it's quiet on a Tuesday morning'  
whispers Scotty on his mobile  
'It'll be safe.'

Kylie waits in a corner, and watches;  
the sickly yellow walls are grubby  
the green/black carpet stained  
a heater is held to the wall  
with stretchy hooks, the melamine table  
is fixed to the floor.  
The chairs are second-hand office stock  
metal but comfier than they look  
the table hides her growing bump.

On the wall beside her is a print  
called April Love - a girl in blue  
stands in a leafy corner  
she has ringlets and a secret smile.  
Kylie stirs her mug of tea  
stares at a pale blue plastic high chair  
stacked in a corner, waiting for use.

Two men read papers with their breakfast buns  
three women chat, with their first tab of the day  
walnut faced, thin as wire, yet their coughs  
would rip a man apart, she thinks.  
A schoolboy loiters, shirt untucked  
tie loosely knotted, trying to show he's got a tab;  
she wishes she were somewhere else,  
her spirits sink, then the door opens  
and in slinks Scotty.

He smiles sheepishly, she grins back  
they start to talk.

Dad looks out the window of his cree

It's all about desire. Getting the birds to return.  
They'll hurry if they know there's a pretty dove  
waiting on their perch.

Across the river, I can see the new art gallery  
red brick, Baltic in big letters,  
I remember when it was a flour mill.  
Everything's changed, it's confusing,  
the look of things can fool you  
like us - married  
but it doesn't feel like we are.

There's the millennium bridge, smart folk  
walking up and down, looking for something  
art I suppose, a new feeling.  
We're in different worlds, different universe  
like an invisible wall between us:  
I don't belong there, and they  
never see me.  
It feels like that with her, too.  
Maybe she can't see a new use  
for me ?  
How is it I can get pigeons to come back  
but not my wife ?

## What Kylie Sees from her Hospital Bed

Dad's holdin it  
like it's a prize he's just won  
his face's a giant smiley  
says 'Hello, Pigeon' an kisses  
the soft fuzz of hair.  
Mam's watching Dad  
in a new way,  
but all she says is 'Haway,  
let the grandma have a turn'  
Dad looks at Mam  
gives her the bundle  
and out the window  
the sun is brilliant on the green leaves  
on the trees in the park.

Sean plays 5 a side with Brian

Hey, ye,  
baldy-headed bastard  
gorra smoke ?  
gorrany tack ?

are ye gannin te play or what  
pass,  
pass man, howay !  
nash on  
belter  
hey, ye'v knacked us man

bollicks - pass,  
gan on  
shoot, shoot,  
Yess  
Goal !

ha we got footy next week ?  
I divvent give a shit.  
givis five ye baldy git

Scotty does a fundraising gig for the Centre

MC Master

Going Underground

Yessa Yessa

Can you hear the sound

underground underground

addicted to the vynal

spinning round, spinning round

addiction that is final

Can you hear me people,

never mind the colour

Let me hear you people

let me hear you holler

Coming on strong, coming on coming on

bidda bidda bad boys after dark

let the music send you

jumping up jumping up

hot it up, it's pumping,

pump it up pump it up

## Journey of an Aberdeen Girl

I've seen changes.

Houses go up and down like the tide,

but the river still runs to the sea,

I know it's not far off.

I've watched the rolling moon

hidden by trees, rising above the sound

of water, cranes and metal.

The moon peeps, looking for my goats,

for a new world of boats, it rolls over a shrinking world.

We used to sing to the bairns

when we sat under sleepless stars

waiting for the fathers to return

from sea, from under the earth,

from the high spans or the bellies of ships.

Some never returned.

I visit the past as I walk

up and down the steep path through the trees

and bushes, remembering the touch

of hands and backs in woody couplings.

Ah, but life is a muddy confusion,

here's tall walls and cascades of ivy,

once it was back-to-back

and a waterfall of voices down these banks.

I lift the dark curtain of my past, to today's light.

And what do I find ?

The passing of feet, whose names I've forgotten

or never knew. A coming and a going.

Passing time, time passing me.

Every day I wake with that feeling.

I'm not ready to go,

there's something left,

unfinished.

## A Postcard Out of the Blue

What it says is:

Canterbury, June 2003

To whom it may concern

I am trying to trace a woman  
probably in her seventies now,  
name of Agatha or Aggie perhaps  
from Aberdeen, originally.

Last known address: Byker

and it's signed

Gregory

What Kylie can't see from her window  
is that the Wall is an ocean liner riding the waves,  
it rises in shades of blue and green  
following the contours of Byker Hill  
housing the generations,  
carrying their hopes and dreams  
for a better tomorrow.

13,769 words

3,092 lines