

petrol station

I took a job at a petrol station
I needed a job
I'll stay for six months, I said

four years of ill-feeling later
I left

you'd think
a job like that
where time was measured
by all those thousands of interactions
that the poems would flow

but they didn't
they wouldn't
no matter how hard I tried

there were very few stories
in all those dead eyes
and seldom a poetic line
from all those loose mouths

there was nothing to say about the functional drunk
who fashioned a habit out of interrupting
my cigarette break
who'd lecture me on the unethical practice
of selling booze from a petrol station

it's the oil industry, mate
I'd say
as soon as we step foot on the forecourt
we're on morally shaky ground

he'd pretend not to hear me
and make a big production
out of paying for his generic vodka
with a credit card
which, without exception
never failed to decline

he'd reach inside his jacket
rummage around in there
pull out half-smoked cigarettes
betting slips
loose matches
a well-used handkerchief
and finally a five and change
all of which he'd put in a pile
and invite me to extract the necessary funds

I thought, perhaps the beggar
the one I slung a quid to on occasion
might do or say something of note

the one who came into the shop late one night
looked at the price of confectionary
called me a cunt
paid for a 75p bar of chocolate with a score
picked up his change with fussy fingers
muttering under his breath about,
this cunt's ripping me off

I thought I might get a poem or two
out of the school boy in uniform

a handsome young fellow
whose eyes bulged at the sugary treats
I was sure I'd get a page or two out of his greed
and how I related to it
something about the early stages of addiction
and the unfortunate path he had started on
but I was wrong

there was however
something to be said
about the chronic alcoholic
big old piss-patch on his trousers
and fear in his voice
a good man but easily distracted
kept threatening to bring on over a batch of his short stories
and read them to me, out loud, right there in the shop

and maybe
if I'm lucky
at some point
I'll get a few stanzas out of the chef
who always stank of spilt wine
yet never appeared drunk
he told me he couldn't cook for shit
but knew how to gamble and drink

there was always Cathy, though
she was an open book
from which I willfully stole
line after line
poem after poem

and some of those poems were picked up
by small-time publishers
placed in magazines
and a handful of people

read all about Cathy

they read about her true smile
and her rotten teeth
about her undeniable freedom
in spite of her obvious bounds

and the dirt on her eyelids
and her worn down heels
and the sadness of screaming failure
and her girlish innocence
of which she had no legitimate claim

and in other poems
which weren't picked up
they didn't read
about her fascination with fire
about the burns and soot-stained skin

they didn't read about the bruises
all over her neck
how she told me,
my friend grabbed me there
and tried to twist my head

nor did they read
about the time she told me,
I love you
she hadn't meant to say that

she'd come into the station
to tell me she didn't have any cigarettes
knowing full well I'd roll her one of my own
which I did
as she left, she said it, she said
I love you

all in a flush of red she retracted
I mean, I like you
I mean, you're a good man
I mean, thank you

I wanted to say
I know
but I just stood there
with dumb-grinning eyes
and watched her leave

the first time I met her
she approached the point of service
with two pockets of jingling change
she dug deep in there

and spilled all those one and two pence pieces
over the counter

I counted up the money
and swapped it for
a five pound note
a 50p
a 10p
and a 5p
and she smiled

and the smile cracked the grime on her face
from the corners of her thin mouth
all the way up to her deep crow's feet

when she left
the manager, with a smug sense of self, said
I have a theory about her
I think she's the local prostitute

any half-idiot could see
she was no type of scrubber
for sure, desperate times
demand desperate measures
and she may well have knelt down
given some head
but that didn't make her a part of the oldest profession

the manager, however
was a whole idiot
and couldn't see much of anything at all

a year or so later
at the end of a night shift
when the morning people
were fueling up
buying newspapers
cigarettes
sandwiches
coffee and the like

I stared out of the big glass window
and watched Cathy saunter up the street
she stopped at a bin and rifled through it
discarding the rubbish on the floor
at her feet

once she was satisfied
that the bin held nothing of worth
she picked up the litter she had dropped
and put it back into the bin

there was a delicacy to her movements
she was the crippled ballerina

a regular customer
nodded in Cathy's direction
crack head, he said
sorry? I said
she's a crack head, he said
oh, yeah, I said
adding,
it's ravished her body
but is yet to chew through her soul

the regular customer looked at me
as though I'd shit on the counter between us
paid for his coffee and got out

sometimes when walking to work
or walking home
or just walking the city with neither plan nor purpose
I would see Cathy asking people for change

and when she saw me
and saw that I'd seen her
she'd wave bashfully
and I could see she was ashamed
so I'd pretend not to have noticed her
and I'd walk the other way

Cathy was the only line of poetry
in that box of artificial light
built on a foundation of greed and illegal practice
there was nothing else to say

working at the petrol station
suicide was often on my mind
I was often bored
more often depressed
and more often than not,
disabled by a raging sense of anxiety

I realised early on
that the general public's common stupidity
was symptomatic of lots and lots of
individual selfishness
and their anxiety was contagious;
the human condition is a terminal illness

they were all in a rush
wanted to be first
wanted to win a fight that didn't exist

the factories and the warehouses
put me in good stead for the boredom
and depression is a waiting game
but anxiety is a wild and unpredictable beast

occasionally, customers would stand waiting
at an abandoned till
while I hid in the storeroom
with the Coca-Cola and crisps
and tried, with limited success
to stop crying

I longed for a fire
a big fuck-off forecourt explosion
or a gun-point robbery
or an honest-to-goodness lunatic
who'd tie me up in back
and subject me to prolonged acts of obscenity
anything other than the dead line of repeated routine

but I was a coward
stuck in a rut
too scared to move on
yet petrified of living out my days
activating pumps
and printing VAT receipts

I learnt
not too long ago
through a mutual acquaintance of ours
that they'd finally come along
and taken Cathy away

she's in the mad house
he said
she got herself a nice wee flat
he said
and she burnt it to the ground

what hospital is she in?
I asked
don't know and don't care
he answered

I could have easily found out
gone for a visit
taken her some cigarettes and flowers
seen about that true-smile of hers

but I didn't
and I won't
because I've left the petrol station

and I've exhausted its poems
so the next line
will have to come
from somewhere else

smile thief

I used to like watching Saturday cartoons
my feet dangling and bumping the sofa
the horrors of school, distant and far removed

then one such Saturday I broke my gaze
and searched the room for the voice I'd heard, demanding

and there was nobody
and the piano we all used to play sat idle
and the doorway held an empty space
and the emptiness was sickly and quiet

so who the hell had told me I had no right to smile?
I wiped that silly bastard from my face
and hid it under the cushions
deep inside the furniture on which I sat

years later I went back
grimly determined
hell-bent on finding it

I cut that cunt of a sofa
and tore out its fluff and flesh

but the cartoons didn't quite cut it
and the piano was well and truly out of tune
and the sadness bowed the door frame
and the taunting teachers
and the grief of it all
and the empty echoes of childish prayers
and the years of binging
and the fucking painkillers
and the heroin
and the booze
all looked back at me and laughed

I remember my last day of school
a buddy kept talking about
how we would remember each other for ever
I told him
I just want to forget

he seemed hurt
and he told me to fuck off

doubled over in that sofa
searching for my smile
and that demanding voice and my youth
I saw my friend and heard his rebuke
but my smile was nowhere to be seen

