

Mucky Ann

Joanne Lee

This Sheffield bus route labours from the city centre to my home in Firth Park and beyond, slowly rising north-east through districts with diverse cultures. The world slides past the bus window. Hoardings, shop fronts and signs attempt to snag my gaze but I look down instead and sneakily read an article in my neighbour's Metro. When I know they've clocked me reading, I glance away quickly. I tune in my ears to eavesdrop a conversation behind me. Quite often the conversations I hear are in languages I don't understand: Arabic, Russian, Urdu. Others take place in the heavy patois of South Yorkshire or Jamaica, or a hybrid of the two. If I'm lucky, I'll find myself on the bus at the same time as the immaculately dressed evangelical Christian lady who regularly conducts a whole service in the time it takes me to return home. She includes hymns, prayers, a blessing and a sermon; it's quite a performance. She always wears a formal hat pinned with black feathers.

The young Pakistani lads hang out in their customised cars down at the local shops, their music percussive, the bass rattling the bodywork. The cars all have that blue glow from the lights fitted beneath their chassis. I like to imagine they'd be capable of space-age vertical take off, but they seem to make do with a bit of screechy wheel spinning instead. At home I get the sound of the sirens from ambulances serving the A&E unit at the neighbouring General Hospital, though after living here for three and a half years I'm so inured to their wailing that it now takes visitors to remark them to me. In the summer, heavy dub from outdoor parties in Burngreave drifts my way or elsewhere, depending on the wind and weather. Occasionally I'm woken in the night: taxis pull up, couples argue and push each other about a bit after returning home late from pubs and clubs and, once, I heard what sounded like a woman screaming. When I opened the curtains to investigate, a fox sitting on my next door neighbour's wall stared coolly back at me, then resumed its barking.

This city is clamorous. It demands my attention. It taps on my eyes and prods my eardrums. There's too much of it, but like most people, I don't notice the half of it. We learn to blank out or focus. We learn to cope. So I'm always curious about what we actually remark, what brings us up short, or pokes itself into our consciousness. What prompts our attention?

It was winter when I spotted the graffiti at a Sheffield bus stop. A red marker pen spelt out the words 'Mucky Ann' – each word capitalised for denunciatory effect. I probably didn't think much about it: after all, bus shelters are synonymous with graffiti and it's not unusual to see someone getting bad-mouthed. Days later, I'm at a different stop and register the same phrase, the same handwriting: 'Mucky Ann'. Over coming weeks I spot it again and again. Maybe I've got my eye out for it now. It's everywhere along the bus route into the city centre: bus stops, telephone boxes, advertising sites... I notice that when the bus shelters or phone boxes are cleaned and the graffiti erased, within days it has returned, re-written in the same slightly juvenile handwriting. Occasionally the simple phrase is amplified, Mucky Ann is paired with additional words: 'Mucky Ann Duncce', 'Mucky Ann Dirty Old Cunt', 'Mucky Ann Local Tramp'. The big yellow bin at the bottom of my street that contains grit for clearing winter roads gets an inscription: 'Mucky Ann Vickers Road Tart'. Vickers Road is just over the hill from here. I find myself wondering about this woman and the events that had prompted such a vendetta.

The campaign goes on over months. It persists into the hot summer drought, when a fire caught hold in the long grass that remained uncut on the steep bank side in Firth Park. The smell of scorch and char lingered for days, filling my mouth and nostrils as I took the path to the local shops. It's then that I notice the Park's

dog shit bin is graffitied too. It suggests 'Mucky Ann Duncie in here'. Another morning, I'm walking to catch my bus and pass another example on the white cover of an external gas meter. It's an awkward, blockier style of lettering though still obviously by the usual hand: perhaps the low position makes it hard to write as fluently as usual. My regular bus stop acquires the information: 'Mucky Ann Tramp All da street's laffin at her'. One day it's 'Me so mucky, long time mucky' and on another Mucky Ann is also now paired with Rita da Cocksucker. On one memorable occasion it demands 'Mucky Ann Repent'.

Using graffiti to slag off someone isn't particularly unusual, but I've never seen a campaign pursued over so very many months. I tried to imagine how on earth the woman coped with this relentless local assault on her reputation. I scrutinised the women with whom I queued at bus stops, considering if any of them might be Mucky Ann herself. And of course I wondered who was responsible for the actual graffiti; who walked the streets again and again with their marker pen? A jilted lover? A cuckolded husband? One day, however, the graffiti indicated that it was in fact the woman's son. Very strangely, I can't now recall the wording that gave this impression – and unlike other occasions, I didn't photograph the example as had become my habit. I can only remember my moment of realisation. Maybe I blanked it in some kind of psychological refusal, unable to figure the apparent hatred and cruelty. But I really shouldn't have been surprised that family feuds are often stronger and more persistent than any other kind: I know all too well my own family's propensity for such behaviour! These events typically unfold in private, behind closed doors, and most likely end up in a refusal to communicate, in silences that persist for lifetimes; it's unusual for a family saga to erupt into public space, as the Mucky Ann graffiti did so visibly. What at first I found amusing, I soon found disturbing. It echoed with the public shaming of adulteresses in past times, the red pen suggestive of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Even the unusual choice of the word 'repent' vibrated with the moral outrage of another era, one I'd imagined had long gone, even in this rather old-fashioned neighbourhood. This city and its occupants never fail to surprise.

*Joanne Lee is an artist and writer. She lived in Sheffield for 18 years, latterly undertaking a daily commute to Nottingham where she was course leader of B.A. Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University. Recently, having become exhausted with the M1, she headed south to Brighton where she encountered more juice bars than she could have believed existed. Sadly, she has yet to find a hot roast pork sandwich shop. She is taking her mind of it by working on a book that takes a rather improper approach to matters of aesthetic education.*