

About this poem

This poem was written by nature writer Nicola Chester. She was invited to contribute a response to another item as part of 51 Voices. But the model threshing machine also resonated with her ideas and with her recent book *On Gallows Down*, so she kindly wrote a poem as well.



Side view of the model threshing machine (MERL 51/2)

And All The Hats Have Left The Village

Leaving the house for work that morning, the radio,
left on for the dog, on some sports review shrills;
‘And all the hats have left the village!’
Is that what they said?
Eitherway, I am haunted all day by images.

I imagine first, an outing; a day off from fieldwork and scrubbing,
a charabanc of people, like trailered sheep, all hats in the air,
waving to those not going.
But the image won’t settle.
Fades like the blotted, vintage hydrangea of a postcard.

Straw from tractored carts blows in through the sliding doors
as I open up the School Library,
and try to get the farm boys to read;
to imagine horizons, far from here.
Those that read, deny it. Hide their books behind copies of *The Farmers Weekly*.

A girl borrows a book, mentions a weekend ploughing match.
Will there be horses? I ask.
There's always horses, she says.
Making it all so slow and laboured,
but glossy as the polish on the body of the tractors.

I tell her, 'I have seen a tiny model threshing machine.
Onscreen. From 1847.
A horse-powered combine harvester, shown at The Great Exhibition.'
And the image comes again,
Glitches, buffers, is overlaid – those same faces perhaps, or characters like them,

Angry, yet resolved,
hats in the air and shouting now,
down the darkening November lanes,
calling each other out from the cottages.
'Are you with us? Or for them?'

The rents rising, the work cheap
and the iron ache of the hungry gap stretching before them;
tithes for a poor, cold, schoolroom resented,
when the work was warmer and all hands needed.
Masters' content and sated.

And that poor harvest of 1830, the last straw;
The lean gleanings, the strange aurora
firing the sky, firing the ricks of their indignation.
Working men, women, children,
marching on the town.

And the best of the hardest working, family men
Punished so harshly, that
All these generations later, children with the same names -
farmers, carters, rakemakers, smiths -
match those that broke the machines,

(swinging their unemployed arms
to batter other things than sheaves)
and live in the small town's council houses,
with cart wheels resting on concrete lintels, that pass for a porch.
On one house, a plough.

When I ask them to read,
They are full of mistrust and mischief -
wistful for the open air, hard graft and machinery.
And a hat pulled down hard on a head, and set, just so.

Nicola Chester, 2021