

Subsidence

R. M. Francis

Litter

Sometimes smashed glass,
scattered on asphalt
outside a pub,
is a constellation.



This poem is the final piece in my collection, *Subsidence* (Smokestack Books), it is a reminder to myself and hopefully others that our region, the Black Country, is a place of overlooked beauty and riches, despite its reputation. As the old proverb says, *Where There's Muck, There's Brass*, or as I put it in my poem *Pigeon*, "There is emerald in the slate".

The Black Country made its name and mark on the world because of this spirit of unearthing the gems in the filth – be it the practical and engineering beauties of limestone and coal, or the geological wonders of *Halysites* and *Calymene Blumenbachii*. Although much of our sense of place here is connected to our industrial heritage, it is the primordial and protean that brought this about. The glassmakers of Stourbridge and Brierley Hill followed alchemical traditions in forging fire with sand. The same can be said of the nailmakers and chainmakers of Netherton and Cradley Heath. It is a spirit of endeavour that

reaches right back to our Saxon ancestry and connects – like chains – from the early evolutionary steps of humankind, out across the globe and into our modern worlds. We still see the relics of this industriousness in places like Saltwells, Wren's Nest and Bumblehole. We still hear the haunting echoes of it in the cultures and communities that came out of this earth-working.

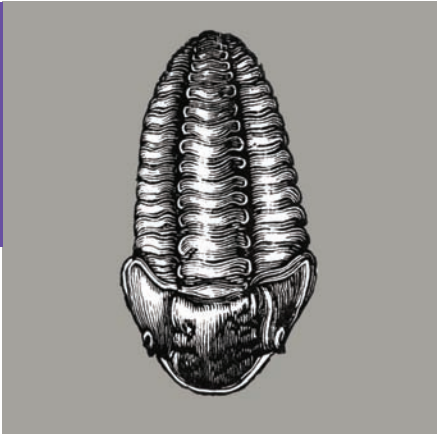


Halysites (meaning chain coral) is an extinct genus of tubular coral. Colonies range from less than one to tens of centimeters in diameter, and they fed upon plankton.

Calymene blumenbachii, is a species of trilobite discovered in the limestone quarries of the Wren's Nest in Dudley.

I'm suggesting something mythic and mystic in my work and thinking here. This is a land of blacksmiths. A simple flick through a few internet pages on this topic and one falls quite quickly into the folklore associated with that. We fall, like the legacy of subsidence around us, back into the earth and back into atavism and animism. The figure of the blacksmith in Saxon and European folklore is associated with taming the elements – wind, earth, water and fire – and using it to not only produce useful things, but also potions, talismans and spells. In our not too distant pasts they were as important for farming and baking as they were for metallurgy. Their charms and toil were the bedrock of community cohesion and function. Similar things can be said of the later industries and their influence on the region's social structure; steelworks (a new form of smithy) were central to the housing estates that housed pubs, social clubs, sports teams and religious buildings.

Black Countryness may well be a state of mind or an elusive spirit of place, but it is one deeply rooted to the dirt, the earth and our ancient pasts. It is, I think, an embodied knowledge – like arcane wayfinding skills, it tethers people to place. Even as 21st century cultures, we're aware of this echo and aware of our places in the past, present and future. In places like the Black



Country, this awareness is not just cultural and historic, it is topological. Liz Berry's Forward Prize winning poetry collection, *The Black Country*, and pamphlet *The Republic of Motherhood* (Chatto) explores her birth place in these terms, focussing on the interplay of place and growth, organic and machine; contemplating how identity, both individual and communal, can be seen as directly arising from the mineral rich and mucky grounds. Berry uses the region's industrial heritage, its borderlessness to create metaphors for sensuality, sexuality and for discussing ideas of coming in to being. Berry is preoccupied with the dark, filthy, liminal aspects of the Black Country and how she perceives these as connecting with sensuality and that place-specific embodied wisdom.

Roy McFarlane's poetry collections *Beginning With Your Last Breath* and *The Healing Next Time* (Nine Arches Press) have the cyclical at their heart as he explores familial, ethnic and regional identity as things that are constantly shifting or adapting. The shifts and adaptations

mirror the changing face of the region. For McFarlane, identity and the search for truth or being are incessant resurgences, as he explores passages and episodes that lead to transformation, and how in turn these bring about further need for change. It is a Christian ethic, following the example of Jesus' resurrection and seeing baptism as a form of re-birth. Much like Wieland the Smithy – McFarlane's pilgrimages seek out the light in the dark, the riches in the filth. The narrative arch of his poems lead the reader through what Victor Turner called Limen: experiences of moving away from one sense of being and becoming another. Importantly, it is in post-industrial sites such as Sedgley Beacon that this re-grounding takes place.

I take this idea as a point of departure in my poetry collection, *Subsidence* (Smokestack Books). The title takes its name from the Black Country's history of homes and buildings sinking into old mines - this stands as metaphor for the often overlooked and neglected environs of Dudley. Written one year prior to and one year after the 2016 Brexit referendum, these poems use the landscape, dialect and culture of the Black Country to examine post-industrial, working-class communities. Tracing cultural roots from the region's Mercian heritage up to the changes and upheavals of the present day, these poems act as both ode and lament for the borderless, strange and off-kilter. In this version of the Black Country the ground gives way, the walls crack and our foundations are laid bare, both physically and symbolically. I hope to reveal fragments of history, myth and memory we had forgotten once were ours. It's about the post-industrial Black Country landscape, where houses sink the present

collapses into the past beneath our feet. At heart, these poems are love songs to the dialect and culture of the Black Country, odes to working-class communities, where the focus is on the lay of the lands and the region's spirit of endeavour.

BIOGRAPHY

R. M. Francis is a lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of five poetry pamphlet collections. His novel, Bella, was published with Wild Pressed Books, and his poetry collection, Subsidence, is out with Smokestack Books. In 2019 he was the David Bradshaw Writer in Residence at the University of Oxford and is currently Poet in Residence for the Black Country Geological Society.

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