

John Byrne Award Entry

The Working Class (a work in progress) by Matthew Knights

I

Who loves as powerfully as they seek success? If I meet that person I will form a united band of herald-of-the-future communists and live in a great new society within the old broken one, and build it so big eventually more and more will join and we'll have to expand and buy some of the surplus land the old society still owns (but put together we'll have enough money) and then we'll expand but not in an Israel type of way, instead we'll do it peacefully and all we'll tread on is a few people's crops. Ready for this England? Obviously not. Scotland? Not yet. Plus there will be a Third World War first. Shit. Seriously. It will start somewhere we in the West don't care about, like the East the South or the North. It will grow to somewhere else we don't care about and get bigger till it is again at the shore of Dunkirk and no Churchill figure will save us then. They will probably melt down all the heavy metal they can find and lob a big bust of Churchill at the nuclear climate apocalypse and expect that to work. Iron Maiden might play. There won't even be a real neo-Churchill. Nothing is real any more. By that point most of us will have had enough of living anyway. And that old bunker that's a museum under Fife will be reused to house the refugees and London underground stations will become again the salons of wasted Britain. This time I doubt that the motherland will be rebuilt. There will be a new dark age. The thing that saved the dark ages was Bede writing it down. After that we will need a new order. Fairer. Happier. A freeness from work and money. Utopia.

At what point in all this did the working class melt and disappear? At no point. It just got bigger and bigger until the next big opportunity to remake society falls in its lap and will it be organised then and ready or will it be full of disunity? I ask you all honestly. I speak as a scholar of history and a friend.

You're going off on one again. You're doing that thing you do when you don't let anyone else speak. Ok, ok, you're right. Speak then? [Blank space]

Exactly my point. Anyway, language was created to railroad other people into doing what we want. Or language is power, for short.

II

Who am I to speak? I feel like a broken down old engine. Stick me in the shed with the rusty lawnmower. It wouldn't even be interesting if I wasn't 35. 35? You're lucky to be alive. In the past many were dead at your age from war or scurvy or rotten tooth or rickets or cholera, plague or some other epidemic. You're lucky to be here, so put down your beer glass and don't even think about smashing it through the face of the guy over there who looked at you strange. He could be a good Samaritan, for all you know. Never fallen, never even tested. Pure as the driven snow. There we go. Didn't that feel good now. Stop being angry at your father, and your father's father.

And the guy who oppressed your father's father's father. It doesn't matter. So what if your grandad was a fishmonger. Thatcher's dad was a greengrocer, she still turned round and kicked the miners. Didn't want their lot in her shop, obviously. I'm left bereft, I've got nothing but death to complain about, and that's meaningless. Just feel like a hollowed-out boat. Put me to sea full of dead bodies and I'll capsize over the Antarctic and sink and be eaten by a whale. Whale stocks are recovering, what do you know. Ever since we stopped slaughtering them their position has remarkably improved. I'd be moved if I wasn't so disgusted.

Depression. Definition. When you stop believing. Disbelief, disorder and panic set in. It's not even individual any more, it's planetary. I couldn't even be a pair of ragged claws any more, scuttling across the floors of silent seas because the seas would be full of bleach or full of plastic or too far risen or vanished and I would just be the bones that might be left at the end of it all to be discovered by someone else. Someone better. Would have to be a different species, aliens or dolphins if they survive.

And now for the closing peroration
Eat your fucking popcorn and stop having a conversation
I may have gone off my rocker, left my station
Deserted my post, become a writer, a ghost
But what if it's fine to be someone who lives between other people's lives
That person on the bus, listening in
Most people are too vain to notice anyway
I might get away with this.

In certain places I observe
Though people may talk politely
They don't walk politely
They will charge around a corner
As if it was their corner
And they will narrowly avoid you
And they won't even look at you
And they will condemn you
And you won't even look at them.
Will this cycle never end?

I've got to get out of this place
I've got to run. I'd prefer to walk
Can I walk? "On you go son,
It's none of my business what you do
I just hold the keys then I lock up.
The machinations of the state machine
The deep state, the dark web,
Media spies, it's all Greek to me
I just lock up and set the alarm.
If I ever forget how to do that I'll know it's my time."

The thing that troubles me though is
What were we meant to be doing?

We can say of the PM and the deputy PM
And the head of X corporation
And the governor of what's it called
That they were meant to be doing something.
Whether they are actually doing it -
- But there's something else -
What about you, and me?
What are we here for?
Just doing jigsaws? (A good stress reliever but surely not
The reason God when he was alive let us set foot on this earth).
What are we worth?
Do you know what I mean?
What if it was all a dream?
Capitalism, the machine, the industrial revolution
What if we could all go back to the farm
The garden of Eden?
Pause.
That's it, I'm going travelling. I'm going to do a gap year, teach TESOL
Break the spell. Pause. Maybe not. But then what?
Help me out. I pray to the God of the calendar, the clock
The thermometer, the gas meter, the nuclear bomb, the meteor -
You can't? Well -

III

It's up to you then, isn't it? Whoever you are.
Since they abolished countries and flags
It just got even harder to see who they are
And work out
Why they are coming for us
And why we don't care
Until it's too late
Until the taxman
Dropeth the bill on your plate
Or the energy supplier
Or the unhappy relative
Or the undertaker
Or the door-to-door canvasser
Or pizza delivery person
Dropeth your pizza. Shit.
A boot stamping on the human face, forever
Not quite. We'll be alright
Until about 1984 – he said,
Then he died. 1984
When I was born
The monkeys had a war
The miners went down.
2024, I'll be forty
Forever poor, but rich in spirit.
Arrogant bastard.

Anyway amen 2019
Pick up a metaphorical gun for 2020
And down all other tools
It's a culture war
We've got to go in
Harder than before
It's an experiment
Called living now, rather than later
Working out who you are as you go along.
Follow me, culture warrior!
All we have to lose are our minds first
And our hearts, if we don't die fighting for them
Will persist. The end.