

The Tattie Hawker

For Stephen Fry

Fed from the power-take-off, a steel picker
disgorged potatoes onto the rolling rack.
So each potato I examined as they jiggled
and bounced on the belt. The fetid
always burst under slightest pressure,
exploded into a squelch of stinking
milk that soured my face, stained
my hands, and called the crows to dive.
It was revolting work, for the rotten
and the good looked alike.

That was the summer I barely existed
beyond Katherine Scanlon's gaze,
remained silent, preferring to watch
mud spatter her freckled face as it sprayed
from the steel-wheels in the rain,
observe clouds of dust choke her throat,
matt her dark hair, and dry in Henna
rivulets in the sweat of her pale skin.

Conversation was futile, the endless
clanking, grinding, and whining ringing
riotous in our ears. But even children
try to make themselves heard, and take
a chance at joy. So the day Katherine
lightened her hair with household bleach,
after the rainsoak, in an airless heat,
I asked *d'you wanna walk the footparf*
'ome togevah, along the edge o'
Linney's field, I'll push yer bike...

And trapped in her eye I caught sight of
the small, spuds that lay unearthed,
pale and saturated in the sodden rows,
exposed by the last of the running torrents,
before she mounted her bike, statue-stiff,
brimming, clutching her rosary,
to pound wearily home, to bath and bed.

Lee Keylock