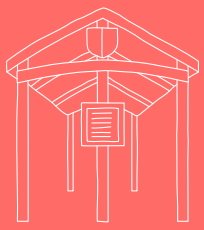
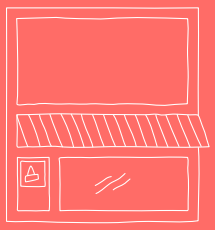
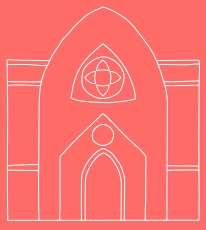
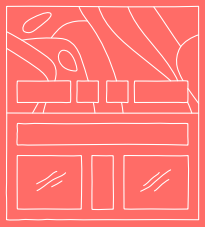
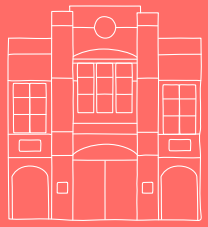
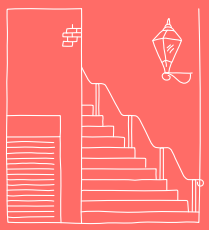
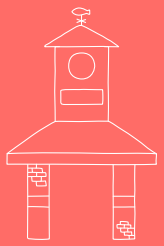
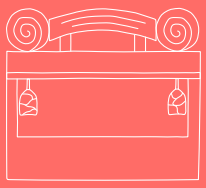





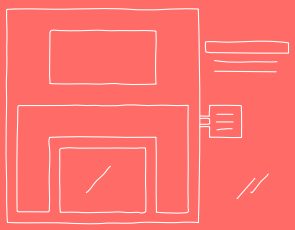
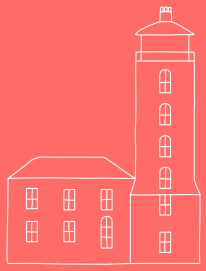
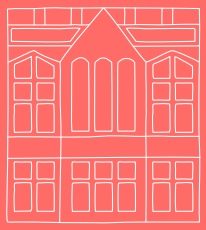



HIGH STREET TALES

Stories capturing the everyday magic of high streets

Celia Bryce **Rod Duncan** **Ligia Macedo** **Ellie McKinlay-Khojinian**
Robin Pridy **Rebecca Tantony** **Maria Whatton** **Merrie Joy Williams**
Introduction by Andy Miller

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New Writing North
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High Street Tales was commissioned by Historic England and produced by New Writing North working with the network of English writing development agencies: New Writing South (South East), National Centre for Writing (East), Spread the Word (London), Writing East Midlands (East Midlands), Writing West Midlands (West Midlands), Literature Works (South West).

HistoricEngland.org.uk/HighStreetTales

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About High Street Tales

Historic England commissioned New Writing North to lead a national creative partnership to produce a set of contemporary high street tales. These short stories uncover and celebrate the everyday magic of the high street, from hidden histories to urban legends, connecting past, present and future. The commission is part of the High Streets Heritage Action Zones Cultural Programme, led by Historic England, in partnership with Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

New Writing North worked with seven regional writing agencies, local writers and local communities to create seven modern high street tales, forming a national body of work that launched in this ebook and as new podcast series in February 2021.

The writing agencies and writers are: **Spread the Word**: Merrie Joy Williams (London); **National Centre for Writing**: Ellie McKinlay-Khojinian and Ligia Macedo (East); **Writing East Midlands**: Rod Duncan (East Midlands); **Literature Works**: Rebecca Tantony (South West); **New Writing North**: Celia Bryce (North East); **New Writing South**: Robin Pridy (South East); **Writing West Midlands**: Maria Whatton (West Midlands).

The commissioned stories have co-creation at their heart. The storytellers collected reflections, memories and stories from local people about their high street and what it means to them. Inspired by what they've found, they led story writing workshops with community groups to build the final tales – keeping local people at the centre of the authoring process.

Each story is a unique celebration of the heritage and communities of the seven high streets. We hope you have enjoyed these tales and are inspired to imagine the stories and see the magic of your high street.

You can listen to the podcast series by visiting HistoricEngland.org.uk/HighStreetTales

Welcome

Historic England commissioned New Writing North and our fellow writing agencies to create the High Street Tales project in autumn 2020. At the time we were some months past the original COVID-19 lockdown and different regions were experiencing varied levels of restrictions. As work began to recruit the writers and to plan engagement work with communities the situation changed rapidly, and it soon became clear that working with people face-to-face and engaging with busy high street crowds wouldn't be possible.

The project wasn't focused on the impact of the pandemic on our high streets but of course the retail sector has faced a very challenging time and many of our city centres will never be the same. We asked the writers involved to look to the past and to imagine the future; the work they have produced reflects combined thinking about both.

The writers commissioned for the project met with local community groups, talked to shoppers and shop owners and tried in their work to capture both a sense of time and a sense of the moment that we all (still) find ourselves in.

High Street Tales has been a real pleasure to work on, providing opportunities for the arts organisations and writers involved at was a difficult and uncertain time for everyone involved.

We hope that this collection of stories will be a pleasure to read now and may itself become an interesting historical artefact as the years pass, telling us much about our collective imagination at a very unusual point in time.

Claire Malcolm
New Writing North
February 2021

Introduction

Nearly 70 years ago, Philip Larkin wrote a poem called ‘I Remember, I Remember’ – you may remember it. On a journey by rail ‘in the cold new year’ of 1954, the train on which the poet is travelling makes an unscheduled stop. “Why, Coventry!” Larkin exclaims to his companion. “I was born here.” This leads to a rumination on the dreariness and boredom of provincial life, albeit one laced with Larkin’s characteristic gloomy humour, culminating in the poem’s famous closing line: ‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.’

Rereading ‘I Remember, I Remember’ in the cold new year of 2021 is an experience which feels somewhat more gloomy than humorous. In fact – and this is not something that commentators have said often about Larkin’s work – it seems almost decadent. Provincial towns and their high streets have been under siege for some years: first from out-of-town superstores and retail parks, then the rise of Internet shopping, then the squeeze on public spending that followed the financial crisis of 2008 and its effect on council budgets. And we all know what has occurred in these places, or what hasn’t, since March 2020. High streets may indeed have been poetically dreary in 1954 but hey, they were still thriving, populated, maintained and COVID-free. (I know it’s unfair of me to pick a fight with Philip Larkin here; after all, it’s not the poem’s fault.)

The stories in High Street Tales offer us different perspectives on a collection of towns all of which are smaller and further-flung than Larkin’s Coventry: Great Yarmouth, Hastings, Leicester, North Shields, Weston-super-Mare, Woolwich and Wednesbury. They are varied in style, voice and character. You will find ghosts haunting the market squares and public spaces depicted in these pages; you will find history and romance and dreams amidst the overflowing bins, charity shops and boarded-up churches. You will find human beings doing their best under difficult circumstances: lovers, artists, parents and children, the residents of care homes, the bereaved. You will travel backwards and forwards in time. You will almost certainly have fun.

So, eight different writers offering us seven different visions of what a high street can be. Reading them through, what all these stories share is a sense of community and continuity, regardless of the era in which the action may be set or whether the town is a seaside resort or a South London high street. We don't just live alongside one another in these places, we are in the company of all the people who came before us, the people who actually sold goods in the market squares or built the corn exchanges or went dancing in the ballrooms when they were still ballrooms, even if we can't see those people anymore. Most of our buildings are their buildings, our streets remain theirs. Together, we are the custodians of these spaces; and future generations will take them on and make them over and – let's hope – breathe new life into them.

Above all, and with due respect to Philip Larkin, the writers who have contributed their work to this little book demonstrate it's the reverse of the poet's verdict on such places that actually holds true: something, like nothing, happens anywhere.

Andy Miller

Andy Miller is a reader, editor and author of books, most recently 'The Year of Reading Dangerously' (4th Estate). He is also co-host of 'Backlisted', a literary podcast that gives new life to old books.

North Shields, photo credit Peter Robinson

Time and the Shoe Man

Celia Bryce

It's the dead of night in Bedford Street, everything sleepy under wide-awake street lamps and a spill of light from the moon. A fox comes silently by, trotting from shadow to shadow, bench to bench. She noses around the base of the white tower and its clock, presses her nose into doorways and against the night-time shutters of the Beacon Centre. She sniffs the air.

This is her place, she knows every inch of it: every incline to the low road and the river, every narrow stairway which plunges down the bankside, the angles and corners, the shadowy spots between the town on the plateau and the river below.

When the clock begins to chime a late hour the fox stops, alert as if hunted. The sound is wrong, odd. The hands on the clock begin to turn back, scraping away at the minutes till they're shed like sea foam, floating. The fox stands transfixed.

The earth is turning to a different melody and Time is all asway, so that the Beacon Centre fades, giving way to its Once-Upon-A-Time-ness: shops emerging all ghostly with corbels and capitals, pilasters and plinths. Canopies unfurl. A butcher stands at his doorway; a draper arranges bolts of cloth; the man who sells the oil lamps sets a taper to a wick. Trams trundle, horses clatter. There's coffee roasting. The light has turned to sepia.

*

At the foot of Pen Bal Crag appears a man; where he's come from is a mystery but it's clear that he's in a hurry. His hat's crumpled, as if a cat has slept in it. From a rope slung across his chest hang various shoe lasts, while from his belt swings a hammer and wrench, a bag of cinch nails, rivets, heel plates. Leather pieces dandle. On his back, a sack so heavy he curves. He has the look of a man seeking solace. He walks along the path that climbs up the bank from the sea and down again to meet the river. He passes the Black Middens where ships have foundered and lives have too. As he walks, the man fishes out a shoe from his sack, draws out another and another, glancing at each of them as if searching for the correct one. He discards them. Carries on walking.

*

Time has swayed and bobbed about so much that at the head of Pen Bal Crag, Tynemouth's Priory begins to grow from the stumps of its ruins, stone over stone, arch over arch. Glass, stained and beautiful, pours into its windows. A bell tolls where no bell has been for centuries; it echoes through the cloisters. Monks set aside their gardening tools, fold up their kitchen aprons, put down their pens. There are a hundred of them, maybe more, hoods pulled up against the wind which never ceases, the cold which never wavers. Their sandals scrape along the path. Soon the chanting begins in an old, old tongue.

*

The man with the sack hears the bell, the chanting, but he's not interested in the Hours that monks must keep to. He wends his way towards the great Pow Burn Valley whose steep sides enfold ancient trees and stinging bushes; where cows graze at edges, drink from rivulets. At the top lies the plateau, flat and green with a small scattering of windmills, their sails slowly drifting round. He could get there if he scrambled up the slopes, but the high ground isn't the place he's looking for. He must carry on along the Low Road till he finds it.

*

As he moves, Time has called for the monks to drain the marshy land at the bottom of the Pow Burn Valley, reclaim it from the greedy river and build shiels with wood and thatch and mud to seal the gaps. Shelters, they'll be, for the fishermen who provision the Priory. There'll be quays, too, for the mooring of their little fishing boats.

And in an instant, because Time is being tricksy, it is done, and already a small crowd of people, from their riverside dwellings, have gathered curious to see what's left after the monks have taken their share of fish. Perhaps there'll be some bits to take home, something for the stew pot. Seagulls fly about, hopeful for scraps.

*

Shedding shoes from his sack, the man carries on flinging them into the air, this way and that, not watching where they land, only knowing that he hasn't found the correct one yet. The cast-offs are like small beings, lying restless where they've landed, as if waiting for a reason to move. He walks past a shamble of houses crammed together against the bankside so that any natural light is leeched out, leaving only dark places where flickering lamps drop golden slivers into reeking gutters. Here, children spurt about on tough-skinned feet; they crawl up the scrubby bank behind their homes, yelping at each other as they escape from where the air swims with disease.

Mothers gossip as they hang tatters of wet clothes. Fisherman lost at sea? they

say. God Rest the poor soul. Whose man is he? How many bairns? They know that if it's not the coal mine takes the men, it's the sea.

On the opposite side of the thin path, more buildings: workshops, smoke houses, brew houses. They're tacked along the river's edge, with landings perched over the water and wooden supports pressed into the mud-bed below. The river slops around them.

*

At Pen Bal Crag, knavish Time has ravaged the Priory like a Dane seeking wealth, leaving only ruins and graves stones, brown as old teeth, under which lie the bones of ancient Kings. It has grown piers at the river mouth which stretch out as if in welcome; each bearing a lighthouse, whose patterns of flashes warn of treacherous places, of sand bars, and beyond those, the raggedness of rocks. Through the piers come Dutch luggers, French coasters, stately East Indiamen. They tie up at the quay, shoulder to shoulder with sculler boats and steamers. Jostling for space is a fleet of rust-coloured sails as the cobles come home from the fishing.

*

The man heeds none of this, still searching for that one shoe in among all the others. He throws away boots for miners, for sailors and ship builders; footwear for brewers, for bakers and tea sellers. Fancies for gentle-folk up on the heights, whose houses blossom in fresh-cut grass, and where the air is good, and light. As quickly as he sheds shoes from his sack, they are replaced, like porridge in a magic pot. But the one he needs can't be found, nor can the place he has to go. Something like despair creeps in while Time thunders on behind him. At the end of Liddle Street, he climbs the wooden bridge to cross the marshland near Dogger Letch. Time follows, and before the man can step into Clive Street, pipes are already capturing the fresh water running down the hill and the sicket running up, culverting and burying this watersmeet under hard surface and cobbles.

He has reached the Bull Ring, where Time has built Georgian houses and put in a thriving market. From out of the Sailor's Home nearby, young men tumble, released from their ships and bent on enjoyment for a brief spell, bringing with them a soup of languages. But flashing eyes and dancing, music and drinking are things they all understand. An accordion begins to play.

The man stops at the landing where the ferry boat crosses the river and knows he's come too far. The shifts in Time confuse him. He is anxious now and begins to walk back, all wearied, till he reaches the Wooden Bridge once more, only to see it vanish, along with the marsh below it, giving way to a sign which reads Bedford Street, with cobbles and businesses stretching all the way to the top, where Time has

ploughed the plateau into streets and roads, seeded it with houses and shops, and custom from beyond and beyond.

The man pauses. There's something familiar here, at the bottom of the street. Time has found him a small shop with a sign reading Boot & Shoe Company; and a bell which jangles when someone goes in. He remembers. This is his shop. It was his shop. It's just a shadow now but he can still see the walls inside, and that is all he needs.

And, in his sack, miraculously, is the shoe he's been searching for, as if it's been waiting to be called just at the right moment, in the right place. It's delicately made, the finest he ever produced, something he was inordinately proud of, though it broke his heart. It's a Typhoid shoe, a Cholera shoe; it's a Measles, a Scarlet Fever shoe. It's a shoe for every sickness that ever lived in the bad air, and for every child taken to its Maker. Including his own.

He begins to do what he should have done more than a century ago, almost two. He scrabbles a hole into the wall. Plaster falls away, too much for just one small thing. But he places it there, like a priest puts Chalice into Tabernacle. For this is something precious. It was made here, in this waterside town, and it speaks for all that is lost and gone before, and all that is to be found, in whatever form. Safely buried, wrapped in sacking along with the tools that fashioned it, perhaps it will keep away bad fortune or fearful malady.

Isn't that what they say?

He covers up the hole just in time. Everything begins to disappear, leaving just air, clear and fresh; and a crop of new spacious houses.

The man retraces his steps paying no heed to the swirl of Time about him, the movement of things back and forth. He's heading along the river to that great gash in the rocks where a high crag juts out, catching the wind and storms; where the Priory ruins ring with the story of monks, of fish and of shiels built for fishermen.

If anyone was to notice him, they'd see a character who walks with a jig in his step; a crumpled hat jaunty on his head, his back straight and tall. He reaches the river mouth and climbs up the steep bank and down the other side. At the base of Pen Bal Crag he fades, like sea foam blown away.

But it doesn't end there.

*

Along the river's edge, east and west, come an array of boots and shoes, as if summoned; each one searching for its mate and finding it.

Ignoring all the ways up to the top they dance in pairs along the Low Road where there is plenty of light, no bad air, and children's feet are shod. They collect at the bottom of Bedford Street where new houses sport gardens and cars and clear river

views. At the top of this now-tarmacked road is the Beacon Centre and its clock.

Up they go.

Waiting for them is a gathering of such footwear the man could never have imagined making. Shocking-pink platforms, white vinyl knee highs; wedge-heeled court shoes, gleaming jelly sandals. But they're here. With winkle pickers and beetle crushers; kitten heels, stiletto heels. There are trainers and Pods. And in the middle, a pair of ballet shoes, pirouetting.

They begin to dance. High heels teetering while hob nails crunch; Oxfords waltzing while gaiter-boots reel, needle-toes rock and rolling while graceful block-toes twirl. There's music matched to every step, instruments for every style, as if each one has brought along its own dance, its own musicians to celebrate this coming together.

The hands on the clock race forward as if to seize this moment, grasping the hours, the months and years, storing them in the Beacon's tower. Memories of those Once-Upon-A-Time days, those high days and holidays, those heydays and glory days, and the not so very hey or high, the not so glorious or holy but, like old photographs, wonderful in their variety and safe as a shoe in a wall, warding off bad fortune and fearful malady.

The spinning hands are slower now, more reasoned, more dignified; Time shifting back into place as if it never really left and never met the Shoe Man.

*

The clock finishes its late-hour chiming while the town waits sleepily for morning. The fox, emerging from her trance, begins to walk, meandering about the benches and waste bins; dandering between the Phone Shop, the Loan Shop, the Charity Shop, the Co-op. She dawdles by the Family Hub, the Pow Burn Pub, the Dentist and the Bargain Store.

She begins to trot, crossing Savile Street; she's at the lower end of Bedford Street now, approaching the river road, focused, all senses alert.

The air is clear. It's a fine night for hunting. And it's Time.

Weston-super-Mare, photo credit Heidi Burton

The Women of Number 11

Rebecca Tantony

1933

She knew she was ordinary because her boyfriend had told her so. Not with words, but with his eyes and how they'd flit across the room whenever another woman walked in. She'd meet him at the Winter Gardens and they'd practise a breathtaking foxtrot together, waltzing from one side of the room to another. On the dance floor, he knew how to hold her in place. Her heart always fluttered; sometimes it beat so fast she thought her entire body would take off. It was his hold of her that kept her feet landlocked, kept her close to his side, and she guessed that's how she wanted to be kept: below the chandelier, with his hands on her shoulders.

Walking across the beach together she told him about Number 11. There had been a sign in the window advertising for a model to showcase new dresses and although she didn't think of herself as beautiful, she certainly knew how to keep still. She had practised holding her breath at social gatherings and knew how to go unnoticed. He kissed her forehead firmly, then turned towards the water.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said with an assurance she found so hard to find within herself.

After the walk, she went to the high street to buy some meat for dinner. Opposite Number 11 was a wig shop and, perhaps in an attempt to be bold, she entered it.

"I would like to try something on," she said pointing to a mass of autumn-red curls. The woman behind the counter simply nodded, brought the wig down and handed it over to her. Placing it on, her face instantly changed. She was no longer ordinary.

Entering Number 11 she walked straight up to the counter and was greeted by a woman who had the name Mary pinned to her dress.

"I would like to apply for the role of model," she said in a voice she didn't know belonged to her. "I can be very still."

"Very well," Mary responded. "What about standing out? People will be looking at

you, after all."

"Well, that might take some time, but I will be less afraid wearing this," she said, starting to reach up to touch her new red curls, but Mary softly touched her hand, stopping her mid-action.

"Let me see you without it," Mary said and she gently pulled the wig off. A moment grew between them, both silent and busy with something unknown.

"Come as you are. But bring the wig and all the women you can be in it." Mary smiled. "See you tomorrow. At nine."

There was a Norwegian myth her mother used to tell her as a child. The story said every strand of hair on a human's head holds a memory in it. Most nights she would quietly count her strands, trying to recall each smell, every sound, person and place she had encountered that day. Her favourite part of the story was the song: "Run wind-strong, forever become more, let the ordinary reveal miracles, like the sea reveals the shore." That evening, brushing her soft brown hair, she thought about the walk, the firm kiss, the being held in place, the red wig, Number 11, her changing face, the woman's hand stopping her as she reached upwards. Then she thought about tomorrow and the many women she would become.

*

1986

I have become restless, The Grove is getting busy and the New Year countdown is only a couple of hours away.

"Pint?" I ask Bill, and he nods. Up at the bar, when reaching into my purse, I realise it is empty.

"Might need to hold back on the drink tonight," I say with a shrug.

"Tell you what –" Big Dave grins "– Drinks are on me if you can run to the Job Centre and back."

"Easy," I reply.

"Wearing my clothes." He adds. A few minutes later Big Dave is standing in a pair of tight Y-fronts and the entire pub is cheering. I pull his oversized trousers on top of my sequinned dress, button up his shirt, take my shoes off.

The high street is quiet. The shops are shut for the evening and the sun is fading; its thick light bounces off the front of buildings. I feel the day move through me as I run, as my feet pad along the concrete. Breathless, I reach the Job Centre and place a palm against it. Shut my eyes, inhale and exhale rapidly. Something vital and quick pulses through my heart, as if I have shot espresso from Carwardines or have fallen in love again. It's the simple feeling of being alive, I think.

I decide to walk back to The Grove. Not slowly, but not quickly either. I can't remember if Big Dave said running back was part of the dare or not, but I have forgotten about the beer anyway. There is something of this evening that has moved me, like I can no longer remember what came before this. I am not myself now; I am exploring life in another person's shoes. How Weston looks brand new in this light. I have been here for 20 years, but tonight it feels like I have only just found out where I'm standing.

As I pass the familiar shops I catch a glimpse of my reflection in Number 11's window. Big Dave's clothes are huge, falling off my body, and my face is lit up in the glow of the shop's light. It's been hard lately, but my friends always catch me. I like to believe the world is a generous place. Money will come and go, but it is my people who make me feel rich. I look past my reflection and see myself inside the shop, or someone who could be me, anyway, counting the daily takings from the till.

"Maybe I will open up a cafe one day. Repay those who've given me so much," I say, to no one in particular.

Back in the pub, everyone cheers when I enter and I blush shyly, feeling the familiarity of myself return. A few friends insist on getting me a beer that evening.

"I'm not wearing your clothes as well," I keep repeating, and each time they laugh louder. Around midnight is when the singing begins. At first everyone belts out their best Madonna and Michael Jackson, so the pub becomes a whir of rotating waists and strutting limbs. But by the early hours, when it's nearly closing time, everyone has worn out their best popstar impressions. So I improvise a song. Something of being still and being seen. Of flowing hair and of firm kisses. Of memory and miracles. Of sea and of shore. Although when I wake up the next morning, lightheaded and blurry-eyed, I have no idea where I found that song inside of me.

*

2020

Outside of herself is where she finds a feeling of hope, and it's the sunset she's most grateful for. She'd left this place before – the stretch of sand long as laughter, the suddenness of mud, a seagull stealing her patience – because there was always somewhere further than this to imagine.

Being a child here was fun, but her teenage years were spent trying to escape everything that seemed to hold her in place. Every other Tuesday her mum dragged her around the shops, picking up various gifts for distant relatives, and she would yawn and moan in turn. On weekends she would sleepover at her best friend's house because they were closer to town there. When dusk arrived, all purple and fading,

they would climb out of her lounge window just to be outside in the heart of it all. They began in the high street, gathering adventure wherever they could. Sometimes it would lead her into the arcade, losing herself to the dizzy promise of stuffed animals or a rush of two pence coins. On other evenings it was a pile of her friends sitting on the benches, smoking the night down to the bone.

When eighteen came, she finally left for university to study Art and Design. She thought she'd make it out in the bustle of this world, flitted between London and Manchester like a moth flits between the shadow and the light. She exhibited in galleries, where tight-lipped people would quietly look her work up and down before moving on with their lives. She kept looking for that 'missing bit' in the nightclubs with their sticky floors and neon drinks, in the quiet libraries she sat in, or through the boys who came and went. Although, she realises now, she never left Weston fully, so how could she have arrived anywhere?

It was when she returned one Christmas, walked along the sand and watched the sun slip over the water, she remembered them again - the missing parts of herself. She belonged to chips and mushy peas. To the Italian gardens, and huddling under bus shelters to dodge a downfall of rain. She was the charity shops and all the £1 gifts she had brought for her friends. She was the seagulls, the WH Smiths and the grey mud. She was made of her parents' house and all the memories it contained. So at age 26, she moved back home.

She promises to find reasons to be grateful here and it mostly begins and ends with the sunset. There is something so ordinary yet magical about it. Something that lights up the day's triumphs and failures, and offers it back with a promise of another chance. She hasn't stopped searching for those parts – pebbles, wooden forks, a lost bracelet, driftwood. Anything the water has handed over, or the shore has held onto, she gathers it up, places it in her bag and promises to create something new from what was once disused. She makes miniature statues out of pebbles which she paints bright, brave colours. The driftwood, she has transformed into bathroom mirrors. The chipforks become mobiles that hang in hallways. The bracelets have been broken down and she now sticks beads and jewels onto photo frames, which sparkle and shine in the light. Every Tuesday she sits in Number 11, the new Art Space on the high street, and she sells what she makes. Sometimes she even creates there, too, and people come and watch her stick and mould, bend and shape. Tourists love what she does, because they can take a piece of Weston home with them. Locals love them too, tell her they have never seen something so every-day transcend into newness.

While she works she hums a tune. She thinks it's a song her mother sang when she was young. Or maybe it was something she heard on the radio. Something the

ocean offered over or the shore held on to. Something she collected on the beach. Or perhaps she made it up. Something of hair and miracles and keeping still. Something of running. Of becoming the people who hold you close and keep you rich. However it was discovered, it makes her feel brave when she sings it. As if with each word, she is finally returning to herself.

*

2038

Returning to work, I found a backlog of people waiting for their drinks. In the summer months, it had become busier; the tables were packed with customers who filled the air with loud conversation and the most extravagant parts of themselves. The cafe I worked in was one of the most popular places on the street and it seemed like everyone wanted to spend the long mornings there, watching the world unravel.

“One more please,” a man mouthed as I passed his table. He nodded towards his wife who was busy pressing the keypad on her phone, then he brought a finger to his lips.

“The same?” I mouthed back and he winked as I walked his secret away. They had been visiting Number 11 every day that week, on holiday, I presumed, renting one of the many pods along the high street.

When his wife got up to use the toilet, I brought the drink over.

“Why are you keeping your coffee a secret?” I asked, laughing.

“Well, I am going to die soon,” he replied, “and every day my wife tries to keep me alive. Less coffee, she says, more water. Less dancing, more rest. Eighteen tests, four monitors, countless withdrawals of blood from the body, seven increasingly hard conversations, a difficult letter to my half-brother, my wife’s damp face held up by her own hands instead of mine, one trip to the church to pray into silence, the care of eleven nurses, one doctor’s apology, my grandson’s oblivious visits. Then this moment in time, the way the light has secured this table right here into heaven, the pigeons flooding the sky with patterns, the distant water surging a truth, the couple kissing over there with their whole chests. My wife’s painted nails, the curl of her hair, how I know she will still find joy in the moments beyond me.” He smiled as I handed him his order. “And then we have this cappuccino,” he added, “bringing with it a moment of life.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this and as if by some kind of miracle, someone started singing just as I tried to. A makeshift stage had been assembled near Number 11 and that morning it was the pluck of guitar strings and a soulful voice that moved through us all. When his wife returned, the man held out his hand to her. Between the tables they stood up and began to dance together, her head rested on his shoulder,

him holding her in place. The song was beautiful. It spoke of running, of friends who raise you up when you fall apart, of sea and shore and stillness. It spoke of making something new out of the disused, of collecting and returning. Of becoming.

That evening I sang the same song as I prepared dinner, as I undressed for bed, as I dreamt. I hummed it over the days that followed, as I cleaned the tables of the cafe, as I met new strangers and heard their stories. It was the tune I moaned when my daughter was born and the one that led me down the aisle at my wedding. It was the note I held after my husband's death. It was the song I sang at the top of my lungs, when I walked across the beach, letting the wind push me forward.

*

2060

Pulling back the hair from her face, she takes a moment to stop and breathe. The wind feels different today, like it was brought from somewhere distant. Like it's passing through this town after collecting people and places on the way here. It reminds her of Norway and when she and Sammy had taken the Blink over for the first time. So strange to be somewhere so far in a moment. They even Blinked back because Sammy forgot her purse, and then Blinked over again. From Weston to Norway, and all in under thirty minutes.

They had tried the new shoes Sammy had made for the water, the ones with jet engines fuelled by the particles in Weston mud. They worked. Kept their feet warm and allowed them both to glide above the surface of the marina, zigzagging between boats and waving Norwegians who pointed and laughed. As they worked so well, she will start selling them in the shop today. This knowledge fills her with unwavering joy. If she were to describe 'love' it would be a moment like this – others finding adventure, using something Sammy has designed and that she has sold them. She has even started providing spacesuits, something she'd never imagined happening in her lifetime. A week back, a couple from Worle came in. They were planning a visit to Mars and she completely kitted them out. They had dropped her an image of them both in their suits – drinking vodka tonics, playing bingo on the soft rock.

Standing in front of Number 11, the detector scans her face and the glass doors slide open. A welcome of light begins to unfurl, until the shop is flooded in a luminous glow. The outside air has followed her inside. It is almost whistling around the shop now. It sounds like music. A tune ordinary, yet magical in turn. The music fills the room with buzz and surge, so quiet at first it only sounds like wind, but the more she listens, the more she hears voices. Some new kind of technology, she thinks, although this feels ancient, like it was born from the very start of time. At first she makes out just

one woman singing, but soon she can hear others too. Soft and high, then strong and low. It is a song of hair and of driftwood. Of running, and collision; of breathlessness and becoming. Of dance, and heartbeats; of strangers and of friends. It's a song of a street and a shop, which forever begins and starts over. Of lives that lead into themselves. The song rings around Number 11 as the different voices collide with each other, smashing and breaking and reforming again. She picks up a shell and captures the sound inside. I can play it to my grandchildren one day, she thinks. For now, she holds the shell to her ear and she listens to the future, as it sings the past on.

Woolwich, photo credit Hayley Madden

In Between Days

Merrie Joy Williams

1

Winter's icy face is pressed against his window. But Karim is raring to go. From their old tower block, between the newer, more affluent ones closer to its banks, he views the boats sailing along the Thames. Leaving a patch of wiped-clean glass, he zips up his coat, straps on his school bag.

"Bye Dad!" He holds the front door ajar with the toe of a boot. "I've taken money off the side for lunch."

A muffled yell strains over cascading shower water.

"I can't hear you," calls Karim.

The bathroom door opens. Without warning, Dad is there, no robe, trailing a towel, but in no particular rush to wrap it around himself. Karim sees: his father has made a mistaken assumption of some equality between them, based on shared gender – or at least shared genes.

"I said, pick up some chips on your way home. If it's still light, maybe we can have a kick about."

The boy is surprised at the sudden bulk of the man. The huge calves and biceps. The oxen-thick neck. Tiny black curls that run across the midriff and genitals, flecked with white at his chest. The lack of self-consciousness.

Subtly aware of some personal failure, Karim cannot look him in the eye. The body is too sure of itself, too present. The only thing to do is absent himself.

"Oh… Okay… I'll use the change from this tenner." Beneath his mahogany skin he feels himself flush.

He lets the front door slam shut, before Dad emerges to continue their encounter. To maybe say that the tenner is earmarked for something else. Like shopping. Or the giant credit card bill for Karim's mountain bike, helmet, cycling shorts, trainers… He isn't as physical as his father had hoped. Now the bike hangs on a hook on his bedroom wall, like a moth in a strange museum.

For this, Karim feels guilty. He doesn't love the bike like a year ago, when he first moved in, and his father, wanting to express good intentions, made this huge financial commitment. He remembers the awkward trip down the unfamiliar high street.

Looking in the sports shop window. His father's discreet peek inside his wallet, to check if he had enough. The feeling that if Karim didn't pick a pair of trainers, he was distancing himself from the offer of his father's love.

He was a Year 8, then. Now he is a Year 9. Or as Miss Johns, his tutor, says, That weird middle form, neither child nor adult, animal nor human. She smiles when she says it, but there's a hint of accusation in her eye.

Karim thinks of the tadpoles in the pond at his old infant school, kept in a small tank for observation. How he loved collecting the spawn. When he trailed his hand in the water, it was like clutching beads of light. The tiny brown dots inside – as if the earth had a million eyes. Then the glorious frogs they grew into. The shiny textured skin, their distinguished croaks. Just before their tails disappeared, they would sit on the twigs on the surface of the tank.

Once they were adults, he and his classmates would take them outside, release them back into the pond. Oh, their first leaps from lily to water, lush dives deep the algae. It was the stage in between he did not like. When the tadpoles grew tiny front legs, useless as yet, as if in limbo between sea and the land.

A lot can change in a year. Karim is a newcomer to puberty's overhyped party. Now his own body is leaner, if not quite slim; he's two inches taller, discovered cheekbones buried in his constantly flushed face – though this doesn't feel enough to him. He's begun to wear kohl around his eyes, a longer fringe so he can hide this from his dad. He draws endless pictures of androgynous figures in his notebooks at school, tucks them beneath his mattress like secrets.

It's the same place Mum hid the biopsy results until it was too late. By the time they were discovered, she had mere weeks left. Not long after, he was sent to live here: in Woolwich, with its many phone shops and pound shops. But also his guilty pleasure: the craft shop/stationers, its eternal closing down sale.

Karim doesn't want to play football. And he's already sold two computer games at the exchange store opposite, to buy a brand new art book and a pack of pristine fibre tips. He wants to be a frog like his father – free to leap wherever he wants, making beautiful art. Then he'd be happy, he is certain.

Once he's sixteen, if he hasn't run away by then, he's going to go to the new age shop by Primark, get a piercing in his brow.

***

He descends twelve floors in the lift with its permanent damp patch in one corner. The Cure blasting in his earbuds, he heads to the stop to let buses pass him by. A double-decker crammed with other pupils from his school. A single decker where already late adults argue about who should move further down, and who should get off, and who should shut their mouth: "It's a free country, love."

Coming to the bus stop is just a charade, to avoid the suspicion of any passing neighbour. Later, he'll go into the town centre for lunch, where – once he takes off his tie – no one will much notice that he should be in Maths. This is both the preciousness and the problem of the place. Working people too busy living from one set of needs to the other. The young professionals who live in the gated community unimpressed and unapproachable.

Karim runs his fingers over the bus stop frame, scarred with permanent souvenirs of passing emotional states:

#Woolwich Riots, 2011.

Girls suck. But never when you want them to.

Keely loves Paul 4eva.

Gouged in perspex with the tip of someone's compasses.

Karim finds the condensation on the window. Without thinking, he draws a tadpole with stubby front legs, writes 'MUM' surrounded by teardrops. Disembodied in a corner of the glass, he scrawls: 'SHAME'.

2

When they said Woolwich, he'd imagined fields full of sheep; shearing in the spring, and quaint women spinning yarn for lively village fêtes. In Saxon times he wouldn't have been far off. The commemorative arch leading to Beresford Square states this in old fashioned runes. Two centuries ago, when Woolwich was part of Kent, he would have found a focal point for picnicking families and conversing men by an inn named The Salutation, and a small church. Other pubs are here now, mostly used by regulars. No church, but a lone proselyte sets up a speaker by the British Heart Foundation, yelling loudly of Jesus.

In the early twentieth century there was a large fortified wall, fifteen feet high, to protect Britain's largest arsenal from prying eyes. All that is left of the wall is a gatehouse, conspicuous with its wrought metal gates, its green brass mortar perched on the West Pavilion. Karim knows none of this. To him the gatehouse is just an anomaly, another example of weird town planning. An eyesore amongst the hair shops, and halal butchers, fringing the square.

"A tray o' bananas a parnd!"

The fruit and veg men have begun to ply their wares. The scarf stall is all set up, the watch stall too, and the perfume stall – better than the originals: Just don't spray it on your skin, okay? The shiny metal food vans are opening their shutters, checking their stock. The nutty scent of Venezuelan churros, the peppery tang of Nepalese momos will saturate the air by lunch.

He walks away from the DLR station, away from the banks and pharmacies, towards the free ferry, for those who want to cross the Thames to North Woolwich.

The only ferry still working today, laden with lorries and cars and foot passengers, makes her incessant revolutions from one bank to the other, a stoic divorce lawyer managing a custody split. The Thames feels like a chaperone, keeping him at bay from the romantic world on the other side. City airport – its daily flights to faraway places. North London, its bookshops and trees.

But even on this side of the river, there are the prettier districts of Blackheath and Greenwich. Karim imagines that one day God turned his face towards Greenwich, admiring what he'd made there – its sweet dimpled meridian, creation of all time – when Woolwich sprung up in the dull grey void left by his inattentiveness.

Passers-by seem content to stay on this side though. A woman and identical twins – small fair-haired girls with gold-starry wellies, and Mickey Mouse bobble hats. A middle-aged cyclist who sighs deeply as he pedals by. Karim cannot tell if it's from exhaustion or ecstasy. Then three young men who pedal hard and fast and free, taking their hands off the bars as they coast down a slope away him.

Karim thinks, If only I had friends, or a twin. I could ride with them far away. I'd cycle every day – I'm sure of it. I'd have so much fun. On the other side of the river.

3

The woman walks slowly behind the man. Despite appearances, it is she escorting him to the bench outside the pound shop, where he likes to sit and smoke a rollup. He isn't a man you can trust to pop out for milk. But he can go inside that shop, buy his filters and smoking papers. He'll bring her a giant Dairy Milk, and though it hasn't been her favourite for fifty years, it tastes like girlhood. Sometimes she rests her head on his shoulder, and he doesn't brush it away.

They call him The Rake, his old military friends. He has a brush of thick white hair, and is striking for his age. The lines on his face have shown reasonable restraint over his whitening moustache. Older women eye them, and she sometimes reads their thoughts: how unfair she walks with this man in this pair, for they are widowed and lonely. Once a fortnight, he goes to the Legion, and she knows she should take up a hobby. But she sits there by the phone – even though it's a mobile. Just in case.

Whilst he puffs, she looks around them. A young man chats to an older man in front the Asian grocers. Outside Smiths, young volunteers canvas for a children's charity. Further up the pedestrianised road, a group of women from the library have brought what looks like colourful knitted doilies, and hung them on the bollards for passers-by to admire. They laugh and take photos, pretending the doilies are hats. Women of different backgrounds: Nigerian, British, Chinese, Nepalese – many of the latter married to Gurkhas, who have settled in this military town.

One of the women, who she gathers is an artist, is talking to a man about the new set of workshops she's running in the library. "It's called 'What Woolwich Means

to Me'. You should come and take part. It's one giant communal table, and a mixture of paints, fabrics, sequins, objects, to express what's in here." She points to her heart.

The man is making a shy sort of listening face. "Oh, I don't know. I fancy being a Banksy, and I've visited that gallery in the cafe over there, but…"

The artist smiles. "Why not? You know why I started the project? Because the first time I stepped into Woolwich, I felt such a great vibe! There was this really unpretentious approach to life. And a vast array of colour and races – yet not really reaching across cultural lines. Now we have Pakistani, Chinese, British, Caribbean, and more; children, parents; tots, teens, the old – it would really blow your mind…"

The woman on the bench is thinking of going herself, when a young boy interrupts her thoughts.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Not at all," says the old man, moving a bag onto the floor. "I'd say it's got your name on it, that."

"So then you know that it's Karim," says the boy, with a smirk. Hunger has driven him away from the river, up Powis Street, to avail himself of a cheesy pastry from the cheap German supermarket. He just needs a place to sit and wolf it down.

"Whippersnapper," says the man, catching a cough in one hand. Karim notices there is a tremor in the other, currently extinguishing a fag. "Well, come on, sit down then, lad. You are a lad, aren't you?"

"Course he is!" says the woman. Then to Karim, "It'll be that kohl, and your long hair – I do try and tell him things have changed around here since he was a young man, back in the Stone Age."

"I was a soldier," says the old man. "Used to live in the barracks up the road."

Karim takes a seat at last. "Really?" he says.

"Oh aye," says the man. "Before I injured my leg in combat. I trained as a barber after that." He makes a lunge at Karim's fringe with invisible scissors.

"Would you like a mint?" The woman holds out a white tube, with a collar of green foil. Karim says no, for he feels like she is offering him more than just a sweet. A short cut to friendship, perhaps – a kind of adult trick wrapped up in the foil of pleasantries.

All the same, he feels himself slipping into helpless candour, a compulsion to share more than he should. There is a strange familiarity about the woman and man, an easiness.

"Not a bad place, Woolwich," says the woman, putting her mints away.

"Not like it used to be," says the man. "A good day out with wonderful places to eat."

"No," says the woman. "And not what it will be soon. But a wider spread of people make up the fabric of the place, who all belong here."

"Not me," says Karim, putting his pastry away. "I don't belong here. No one hardly notices I exist. And if I ran away, I wouldn't miss anyone – it'd be win-win."

“Are you sure?” says the lady. “What about that man in the shop over there you were chatting to earlier?”

“Oh,” says Karim, surprised to have been noticed before he’d even met these people. “Oh, Idris. I go there to buy spices for my dad. And mangoes in the summer. Big yellow, juicy ones that remind me of Mum – she passed last year. We used to sit there and eat them, till we were stuffed. Now I do it with my dad, instead.”

“To remember your mum, you mean? That’s lovely of your dad.”

Karim shrugs, but she is right. Why hasn’t he thought of this himself?

“Do you go there often?”

“All the time! We eat them up so quickly!”

The woman laughs. “That’s all life is – repetition. Going to the same shops. Sticking by the ones we love. Though they sometimes get on your very last wick.” She winks at the old man, who is rolling another cigarette with very shaky hands. “Careful – you’ll drop that tobacco.”

Karim feels it lifting – some dark cloud he doesn’t want to let go of yet.

“All the same, I don’t belong in Woolwich, with its Frankenstein buildings – half-modern, half-ruined.” He motions along the high street at the facades of a chemist, drug store, a fast food chain… Some of them are homelier than others. “I want to go to Paris or Berlin, and sketch the Arc de Triomphe, or The Brandenburg Gate! Then I might be happy – finally.”

The old man’s face is suddenly full of thunder. “If you believe that, boy, you’re a fool.” He points to the buildings above the store. “Look upwards. These aren’t just freaks of design, ruins. A lot of these buildings are Grade II–listed. Not to mention other fine sights from the arsenal days, and centuries before.”

He unleashes a scathing lecture, about the old Wall which shielded the former arsenal and the top secret missions that went on behind there: strangely frequent banana deliveries, hiding mortars and weaponry. Armament productions and tests, and white-capped women working on assembly lines during the war effort. The gatehouse which survived. “Not forgetting a certain Premier League team, which hailed from these parts.”

Karim should be chastened, but finds himself oddly fascinated. “All this round here? Nah!”

“Oh,” says the woman. “We had the first McDonalds in Britain. A wonderful market too, with meat and fish, chestnuts at Christmas. Great shops, including stylish department stores, like BHS and Cuffs. And you see them two churches at the end of the high street? They used to be cinemas. The Odeon and the Granada.”

She takes Karim back decades to the days when movies were a kind of religion, for which you wore your best clothes, on a Friday or Saturday. Of young women preening lacquered hair in Art Deco theatres, worshipping movie stars like gods. And young men who longed for their attentions, nuzzling necks with desperate lips when a

love scene got too hot. Cigarette smoke wafting across the screen like dry ice. Buttery popcorn purchased from ushers on portable trays.

A cinema, thinks Karim. We have none of those here now. If only I was older, I would have been happy in Woolwich then.

And yet there's some twinge of excitement, rising within, even now, since he's sat down on this bench.

***

It's summer, the next time he sees her. It's after school and he's lying on the grass in General Gordon Square thinking of sketching the old Woolwich Equitable Building. He's shown his sketches to an artist at the high street gallery; she's encouraged him to learn from Marvel comics – form, foreshortening, and, most of all, perspective. If he's not quite a frog yet, he's got back legs and front legs both, and not far to go.

It's nice here in the summer. Some people lie on the grass, watching the giant screen, whilst others sit on the stone steps or wooden benches, cadging cigarettes. Crossrail will open soon, and a huge leisure centre is being built across the road. There's an arts complex opening too, but he's not sure when. All he knows is Woolwich looks beautiful in sunshine. There's glitter in things.

He spots her sitting on a bench, alone goes to sit beside her. "What's happened to the old man?" he asks. "He isn't…?"

"Dad?" The woman laughs. "No, he isn't dead – though his dementia's worsening lately. I left him with my brother while I went to a workshop at the library. What do you think of my artwork?"

It's a collage of Powis Street with watercolour shops and fabric strips for people. It occurs to Karim that it's not the thing you look at, sometimes, but the way one looks at it. "It's beautiful," he says.

"You know, people always think my dad and I are husband and wife, because we look so happy together. My mum died ten years ago – I just think I'm just lucky to have him, and I make sure he knows."

"You are. We are," says Karim, thinking of his own father, the white hair that's begun to climb his temples. The next time he comes to the square, he thinks, to sketch the Equitable Building, he'll invite Dad with him, to sit in the sun. Maybe his father will be impressed, and won't care about the kohl around his eyes, his long hair, his new eyebrow piercing – or that they're not playing football.

Perhaps he will admire his drawing, the nuances and colours. Son, he will say, what a beautiful work of art you have made. Karim would be happy – extra, extra happy – then.

Leicester, photo credit Ambrose Musiyiwa

All the Secret Postcards

Rod Duncan

A fluorescent light is on, making dark mirrors of the windows. He must have forgotten to close the curtains last night.

“He pulled the alarm,” the carer says. “Told me he’d seen a ghost. Or it spoke to him or something.”

The daughter is all apologies for the bother of it, but the carer shrugs it off, says it is all part of the job.

“He was confused more than scared. But I thought you should know, in case it’s an infection or something.”

They have brought him a cup of tea. Somehow it is daytime. A blackbird is singing outside his care home window. The daughter and a doctor are talking near the sink, as if he won’t hear them from the other side of the room, or won’t understand.

“Memories are like postcards,” says the doctor. “You’ve got a box of them up here.” He taps the side of his head. “The thing is to keep the good ones to the top. Best not ask him about... the ghost.” The last words are whispered.

Now the doctor’s focus shifts to where he sits. “What nice things can you remember?”

They say his memory is going. But it seems to him the other way about. There are too many postcards. It’s the sorting of them that he can’t do. And knowing which are supposed to be secret.

“I remember the Coronation Buildings,” he says. “On High Street. Where the Singer company had their office. All those sewing machines. I saw them build the place.”

The daughter seems embarrassed. “Come on Dad, you never saw that. You read about it maybe. You’re not that old.”

She tucks the blanket around him, as if he were the child. He thinks about the pushchair they used for all their daughters. It had a yellow canopy over the top.

“Take him out on visits,” the doctor says. “Places with good associations. That’s the ticket.”

“Can we go into Leicester?” he asks.

He is a child, six years old and trying to keep balance as the tram rattles over the points in front of the train station, heading for the Clock Tower. All the seats are taken and there is an expectant buzz of conversations. Above his head the hand straps dance. He cannot reach them, but clings to his mother.

They are standing in a department store. His mother is exploring a display of pale pink cloth patterned with tiny roses. But it might not drape so well, she says, then pulls out the end of another roll, feeling it between thumb and finger. This one is blue. The flowers are white. There is a loose thread hanging from the edge.

He turns to look around. All the grown-ups have things to do. But there is a girl standing still, watching him. When he smiles, she steps closer. Her clothes are different from everyone else's. She wears a straw hat and a white dress, the pleated skirts hanging below her knees. One of her front teeth is missing.

"I'm Isabel," she says. "Will you be my friend?"

"Yes," he says. "I will." And it feels important.

His mother looks down but doesn't seem to see the girl. That is when he knows he is speaking to a ghost.

Memories are like postcards. You've got a box of them up here. The thing is to keep the good ones at the top. The doctor has been talking.

"What nice things can you remember?" he asks.

The daughter tucks the blanket snug around him. For a moment he thinks she is his mother. There are times when he knows he is confused and times when he forgets. But he doesn't think the things he sees are any less real than they were when he could sort out who was who and arrange the postcards of his life in order.

A woman brings him fish and chips and peas, calls him by his first name, touches his shoulder. He doesn't think he has seen her before. There is a thin slice of lemon on the plate, but no vinegar.

He is nine and the trams are all gone. Standing on the bus, he is just tall enough to reach the straps. He leans into the turn as they pass the station and start down Charles Street. His mother stands next to him. There is no handholding now.

He is waiting for her near the Clock Tower, scraping lines in the dirt with the heel of his shoe. A man hurrying past throws down the butt of a cigarette. It sparks as it lands and for a moment he is lost, watching the thread of smoke.

"Hello," says the ghost girl.

He looks up and sees her grinning. A new tooth has started to grow where there was a gap before.

"Hello," he says, not wondering that she has hardly aged; only that he forgot their last encounter.

“I didn’t know if you’d see me,” she says.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You might be too busy.”

“Who are you really?” he asks.

“I’m your friend.”

He is upset, and can’t remember why. The daughter is stroking his hand. There is tea with a chocolate biscuit in the saucer. He watches the chocolate melting where it touches the cup. All the crockery in the nursing home is the same pale green.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to make a fuss.”

“It’s all right Dad. Let’s think of something nice, shall we? Do you remember that place we went for beans on toast in the Silver Arcade?”

He does. It was right up at the top.

“And the old bookshop?” the daughter asks. “The Turkey Café?”

“Mr Wakerley’s a nice man,” he says.

The daughter seems confused. “Who’s that, then?”

“The architect. The Turkey Café is one of his. And the Coronation Buildings.”

The daughter grips his hand too tight.

This time, when he takes the ghost girl’s hand he is taller, more an older brother. But it is she who leads them between the Clock Tower pedestrians. He feels a tickle on his shoulder and it seems that instead of brushing past a woman in the crowd, he has gone through her, as if he is fading into the girl’s time, becoming a ghost himself. The girl pulls him out of the road as a horse-drawn carriage clatters by. The clack of horseshoes on cobbles is so loud that he wants to cover his ears.

His clothes are different to everyone else’s, but no one seems to notice. She gives his hand another squeeze and sets off once more. They dodge shoppers and workmen, making a game of their run. First they head down Silver Street, then dive back through the arcade, shops to either side, the echoes of their footsteps ringing back at them. And then they are out into the din of High Street. They are panting for breath by the time they reach the unfinished Coronation Buildings. Men are working high up, where the roof will be. In his own time, the soot of coal fires will cling to its brickwork. But here, all is fresh. The designs of the Union Flags high on the wall are bright. It is easier to read the names of the Empire: Africa, India, Canada, Australia. Above each flag and name is an animal. At first he thinks the ghost girl is pointing to the elephant above the name Burma. But when he crouches to look along her arm, he sees a man directing the builders.

“Mr Wakerley,” says the ghost girl. “My daddy works with him. He gives me chocolates.”

The daughter's smile is fixed and tight. "Dad?"

"I was remembering," he says.

Her smile relaxes. "What were you remembering?"

"Riding the electric tram. I couldn't reach the straps. And Lewis's on Humberstone Gate. The market. Beans on toast in the Silver Arcade."

"That was with me," says the daughter. "Up at the very top. I was always out of breath when we got there."

"And the girl," he says. "Isabel."

"Your girlfriend?"

He shakes his head. "No one else could see her."

"Then was she an imaginary friend?"

"A ghost."

The daughter frowns, trying to figure out whether the strange story that keeps surfacing is something from the fog of old age or the fog of early childhood. She opens her mouth, about to press the point, to pin it down. But what difference would it make?

"What was she like?" the daughter asks. "Where did you meet?"

He is twelve, awkward in company and too often lost in his imagination. Gym lessons will help turn him into a man, his father thinks. The real world doesn't wait for dreamers. On Saturdays he takes the bus to the Haymarket, walks half the High Street to get to the class. He used to look for Isabel among the crowds. But it has been three years. Once, he tried to tell his mother about his friend, but she scolded him, sent him to his room. He doesn't look for the ghost girl any more.

On this day, feet heavy, he slows in front of the Coronation Buildings. If he is late for the class, the gym master will shout at him. But the ordeal of it seems too much to bear: the cold changing room, the smell of sweat, being slower than all the other boys.

He stops, looks up at the Union Flags and the animals and the names of places, finds himself thinking of chocolates but doesn't know why.

Once, the ghost girl had been easy to see. But now he understands how his mother had looked straight through her. She is with him, and yet not with him, caught between times and possibilities. He closes his eyes, trying to blink her out of his vision, or fully into it. When he opens them again, she is more than a shadow. She smiles and he sees that the gap in her teeth has gone.

"Hello," he says.

There is relief in her face.

"Come," she says. "Quick now. We're just in time to see them go."

Feeling awkward, he doesn't take her hand. But he follows, dodging the cars and

buses, hurrying to keep up as they dip into an arcade, gym class forgotten, the shops of his own time fading into hers.

The streets behind seem strangely empty, but there is a sound ahead, like the sea. It is a crowd, a great gathering of people. Tens of thousands are standing in the market square. The sound is their whispering, their waiting expectation. All he can see is that ocean of people, and a banner held above their hats. Leicester's unemployed.

"They march to London to ask for work," says the girl. "They go to meet the King."

He should be watching the spectacle of history being made. But it was so hard to see her this time and suddenly he finds himself afraid.

"Will I see you again?" he asks.

"I never liked gym lessons," he says.

The daughter, who had seemed asleep next to the hospital bed, opens her eyes. "No one likes gym lessons."

"I skived off. Your grandad shouted at me."

"Come on, Dad. Let's think of happy things."

His smile is tired. But it warms the daughter's heart. There are so many things now surfacing that he never told her before. The box of postcards in his head is becoming more vivid as the world recedes. She'll never know which ones are real and which were a child's make-believe. But she wants to know them all.

"Did you really skive off school?" she asks.

But he has gone again, into that place of memories. She looks at the lines of his face, each one lovely, as he stares out of the ward bay. And just for a moment his eyes seem to find focus and he smiles once more, as if at an old friend standing in the hospital corridor.

Hastings, photo credit Alice Hepple

Borrowed Ground

Robin Pridy

Hastings, Spring, 1966

Jackie Brigham hurries home from a day's work at the typing pools. She's late to meet her old friend and downstairs neighbour, George Budd. She cuts down the neat seam of steps to Trinity Triangle, a shortcut almost invisible if you're not looking. Halfway down, and she can taste the salt on her lips. She smells fried fish, burnt and sweet, from an open window. Laundry, bright against the blue sky, is strung like bunting across the fire escapes.

At the bottom of the stairs, Claremont, Robertson Street, Trinity Street – the names themselves full of Victorian grandeur and industry – spread their fingers out to the sea, cover every spare inch of ground with brick, concrete and iron, with elegant swan-neck lamps and awnings, sandwich boards and elaborate window displays.

Jackie strides past the towering print works. It will chug and clank late into the night, tormenting the library and art school next door, shaking its esteemed Bath stone, its carved Gothic arches and Venetian plasterwork. She hears a bawdy song, not for the first time, ringing out from the machine-room floor, in a deep baritone: "Have you ever caught your bollocks in a rat trap…"

Jackie smirks, skips past Bert's greengrocers and swaps a shilling for a prickly pear. The tobacconist, the butcher, Jackie's old school outfitters, even the corset lady, she knows them all. They reel in their awnings, creak their doors shut for the day.

A couple of Plummer's department store waitresses, uniforms under their coats, wave and giggle through the window at French's to a batch of soused solicitors. The men are waiting for their kids to be asleep before they can trundle home, unbothered by domestic life – Jackie knows this because she's the one who types these men's letters and takes the calls from their wives.

Continuing down Claremont, Jackie smiles at the familiar tune floating its way out of number 10. She sings along, as George, the only piano tuner left at Denton's Instruments, bashes out 'On the Sunny Side of the Street' on his 1903 Bluthner. His blue door is slung wide open.

Jackie's heard this same piano all her twenty-five years, quivering up the floorboards to her family's maisonette. The key sticks on middle C, and the D next to

it is slightly flat, but George prefers it this way. It's how Jackie has come to like it as well. They play each Friday, late into the night.

Hunched at the piano, George is in his standard uniform of brown cords and tatty, buttoned-up cardigan. He beams up at her through his enormous spectacles. He can barely see now, but insists that ears are all he needs in his line of work. The tangy, spiced smell of Sun Wa's curry sauce fills the room and Jackie heads to his little kitchen for cutlery.

Everyone in the triangle knows George. He gets his meals at the various cafés and restaurants, in strict rotation, and they bring it to him if he doesn't show. Jackie asked him once about his family. "That last war," was all she got.

Jackie can't imagine being anywhere else. And next month, she'll be moving in with Eddie, just round the corner. His flat has all they need.

Eddie can't understand why Jackie would want to spend time with an old man. He hasn't smiled once at George when he's come to pick her up. But Jackie tries to overlook this. Eddie is the first boy she has liked who is taller than her. He loves her freckled brown skin, even the auburn streaks in her dark hair. And he never asks why she has an English accent.

Whenever they go back to his, Eddie folds both sets of their clothes before they even kiss. He sets them down neatly on his one small chair, his pink body like an unjacketed shrimp. Jackie likes his strange German ways, but her mum feels differently.

"You trust a German?" she says. Growing up in Poland will never change her mind about that.

"I trust everyone, until they show otherwise," says Jackie.

Her mum rolls her eyes. Jackie's dad huffs. He's on probation at work for punching a compositor in the head last week. The bloke – just turned up on a transfer – had asked if Jackie's dad had a tongue as black as his face.

But in George's place, Jackie can forget all about that.

"You'll never guess what my Eddie did," says Jackie, eyebrows raised, stuffing her face with an egg roll.

George, his fork of prawn chow mein poised, waits.

"He stole a Bible from the church."

George narrows his eyes. He may no longer attend Holy Trinity, but it still looms large, sat in the middle of the Triangle like a fat hen on a roost. George was its organist; Jackie at its Sunday school.

"It's just a borrow," says Jackie, still chewing. "There was a big pile of them at his lesson."

George has stopped eating. "Well, I do hope it is just a borrow and not a keep. Some things—" he coughs slightly, and points with his fork to the door, where Eddie skulks out front "—and people – are best as a borrow."

Jackie reddens and grabs her coat while Eddie waits, unsmiling. Jackie closes the door, not saying a word, as George returns to his piano.

Autumn, 1967

"Good morning to you on this wondrous dawn of a Saturday, Miss Jackie-Brigham-with-child!" booms a voice across the street.

Jackie looks up at number 12 Claremont. Leonard Mantlecross is leaning out the first-floor window, waving frantically. "Come up, come up! The piano awaits!" His bright white moustache ruffles in the wind and his teeth shine.

She's just spent an hour at the seafront, watching the sun come up on the shingle beach, the waves throwing themselves at the stones in despair. Her toes have gone numb in her old court shoes and her thin mac can barely cover her stomach. She stares back now at this same stretch of ocean, so calm from afar.

This whole place should be under water, thinks Jackie. The waves lapped up to the cliffs until the storm brought the shingle. And all those pebbles are still shifting beneath it. All this, she thinks, is just borrowed from the sea. On hot days, fluffy white lines bloom, like sea foam, across the brickwork of her building, the heat sucking the salt from the lime mortar. Jackie tasted it once. It was sea and cliff and nothing more.

She glances over at number 10, to her left. Upstairs, her mother and father are still unwilling to see her. And below them, George's shop has been empty five months now. Jackie found him, asleep in his bed, curled up. She hugged him, like a child. He wasn't even cold yet, and so small.

Eddie is gone, too. It turned out Jackie was the borrow. And the Bible was the keep, packed, quite carefully, she imagines, for Germany.

At the top of the stairs, Jackie smells burnt toast, hears the clink of teacups. She sees Leonard's new sign – All are welcome to the Spiritualist and Animalist Church of the Living and the Dead – and enters.

"Good morning, young Jackie—" Leonard spreads out his arm towards the window: "—and I see the sun is showering you with its splendificent rays and all those around you and with you."

Jackie frowns. Does he always have to talk like that? But Leonard has a point. The light is shining gloriously on George's piano in the corner. Leonard has allowed Jackie to house it here. In return, she plays a few songs at his services on a Sunday.

"Today, Jackie, we have a special guest, a veritable Dr Doolittle…"

The door opens and a small woman in black leather trousers and a long fur coat strides in. Her skin is dark brown, much darker than Jackie's, and her black hair sits in plaits that circle tight to her head. She can't be more than thirty.

Leonard begins to speak. The woman cuts him off: "My name is Celeste. My medium name is Feather." Celeste heads for the food table. "No snakes, or rabbits.

Too stupid," She grabs a hunk of toast and slathers it with jam. "And no humans. I do those, I lose days off my life." Her mouth full of toast, she adds, "I am from Hackney and nowhere else. Someone will ask. They always do." She sits down, licks her fingers free of jam, wipes them on her trousers.

She looks over at Jackie, who pipes up, "Jackie. From down the road. And they do always ask."

Swigging her black tea like beer, the woman laughs as though she's in the pub. She points at Jackie's stomach. "I hope they asked if you wanted that!"

It's a packed house. Feather is yelling, calling, smirking and wagging a hand. An old lady faints and is revived by her son. There's an odour no one wants to claim. The air is sodden. Tears and laments spring forth. Gasps and sighs. The room collectively shudders and creaks with disbelief at what they've been told – how can a terrier be so wise? Oh, but they are… and so on. Jackie goes into a jazzy rendition of 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' to help see everyone out.

Before Celeste leaves, she walks over to Jackie. She leans on the piano, speaks quietly, "Someone knows you well around here." She takes Jackie's hand. "He says, take it and go. Where the pedals are."

With Celeste gone and Leonard busy in the kitchen, Jackie opens the front panel of the piano, by the pedals. There is a Yorkshire Tea tin – rusted, red with green, and full of money.

She takes it. She goes.

Jackie cuts through the dim alley behind the church. With George's money, she can live again. But a sharp pain runs down her spine. She drops, then crawls on her knees, past the rubbish to a soggy, single mattress. The ground is soft and mossy. The light filters down in shards.

"You plonker." A voice strips through. "Lucky for you, your good friend was unwilling to let me leave." Celeste. She takes off her long fur coat and lays it over Jackie, who inhales its musky animal scent, presses her face against the soft down of the underfur.

"Can I keep this?" asks Jackie. She hears Celeste laugh again, loud and long.

Christmas Eve, 2001

Heading backside first down the thin crack of slippery steps, Jackie realises she may have chosen the wrong end of the cupboard. She walks awkwardly, backwardly, her line of sight obscured by badly painted wood. Celeste has taken the other, more civilised, end.

They're on their way to an old friend, of sorts. Thirty-four years Jackie and Celeste have spent in London, only to come back here. They have bought all of number 10 Claremont. It came up for auction and Jackie paid in full, didn't even ask Celeste, or Billie, who has his own family now.

They're nearly at the bottom of the stairs and Jackie pauses: children are singing carols. 'In the Bleak Midwinter' rings out and Jackie's heart begins to hurt.

But then her heel catches. Jackie falls down the last four steps, taking the cupboard and Celeste with her. She hears both of her ankles crack before she hits the pavement. Jackie lies crumpled, stuck beneath a pale blue cupboard, in front of a shop selling heavily discounted fireworks.

"You effing plonker," says a blurred outline, hauling the cupboard to the side. It's Celeste, her lip and forehead bleeding. "Up we come now…"

But Jackie's having none of it. She moans and resists, like a toddler.

Celeste gives up, yelling, "Your bloody mother and father are both here now, telling me off… I'm ringing the ambulance."

Jackie's left with a new, more rounded figure, who keeps tutting and holding Jackie's hand. It looks familiar. She tries to focus, but the figure is gone.

Celeste's voice rings out from inside the shop, "I know it's the effing day before Christmas…"

'Winter Wonderland' from the carollers floats closer as Jackie lies on the ice-cold pavement, refusing to move.

A large cart squeaks towards her, flanked by two sixty-year-old men in hardhats. "All right, Jackie?" It's John Tiller, from school. He smiles and winks. "You're in a state, aren't ya? Been doing up the old print works. Heard you from the fourth floor…"

The shops empty to see the ruckus. Terry the butcher shows up in his bloodied apron, trailed by a bow-tied bartender from French's. A couple of librarians stand, arms crossed, while the old men who spend their day round the fountain hover at the back, well topped-up with Christmas lager. The lad who strings the rackets upstairs at Wisdens looks down from his window.

Celeste, Terry and the rest of the blokes lift Jackie into the old cart. They cover her with a couple of musty horse blankets, her ankles poking out, askew. She is surrounded, lying on a dusty bed, like Jesus in the bloody nativity.

Terry brings Jackie two bags of ice and a string of beef jerky. Kitty the tattooist gives her two 'bit stronger than aspirin' pills. Another hand proffers a mini-Drambuie to chase it down. Jackie takes all these gifts like they are gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The carollers arrive. Bells shaking, they belt out 'Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer' before being shushed quiet. They are scrappy ten year olds, hands out for spare change, trying to see her ankles. And so many voices. She hears someone offer Celeste a Christmas dinner, help to unpack.

The boys take up their bells again, and begin to sing… "I saw three ships come

sailing in—" the whole crowd joins in now "—on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day…" Jackie closes her eyes.

In the distance, she is sure she can hear a piano. It sounds like an old friend… but she is out cold, asleep in her manger, before she can place it.

Summer, 2021

Was there ever a time Jackie wasn't here? No one can remember. She shuffles round the Triangle with her shopping trolley and her old woman ways. She pops in to all the new shops, has what she calls a 'foamy coffee', buys a magnet or a pencil or a succulent cactus.

Jackie tells all the bright young things – the vegetarians, the gallery types, the gamers and the hookah pipe sellers, the Bach men's choir, even – what their place used to be, what the clasps are actually for, how the awnings were just so. She points out the old cellars with gigs late into the night, and there was Paul McCartney's barber, don't you know, his fancy Merc blocked in by all the printers… And those machines, the metal drums rolling, so late…

Jackie has been telling Rosa at the off-license about tomorrow's big party in the street. After Celeste died, Jackie knew she didn't need the whole building. Her son Billie didn't want it either; he had his own money, more than Jackie had ever had. So she gave it to the local housing association. They want to celebrate and have her play a few songs from her front door.

She wonders what she will play, but knows it's not up to her. Tomorrow, her fingers will do what George tells them. It has been this way since she found his old piano, remarkably preserved by a very elderly Mr Mantlecross at number 12.

As she nears her door, Jackie sees a large brown parcel propped against the step. There is a return address for Berlin. She shakes her head. Of all the things to come back to her… this was not one that she expected.

Jackie opens the brown paper, smells the leather cover, touches the brass clips and swipes her hand along the thin, gilt pages. It is the Bible, which was never Eddie's to take, or even borrow. Nor was she. But she figured that out a long time ago, and has no use for gestures like this.

Will she give the address to her son? Probably. But they could have found Eddie before this. Perhaps it's too late for these sorts of things. But Jackie won't be doing any of this tonight. She's already made plans. Using the Bible, she props her blue door wide open to the pavement, and heads for her piano. She wants to test how the music will sound in the street.

She lights the candles and plays gently as the cool night air slips in. She skips her fingers over the flat D, pressing slightly on the middle C. It sounds just as it should. The music carries on, all around, though Jackie is no longer playing. She

stands and begins to sing, softly, swaying to the sound of each note. She holds out her arms.

Anyone peering in would see an old lady, dancing alone in candlelight, in silence.

But Jackie can feel a hand around her waist. Celeste's hand is in hers, and George is at the piano. She is not old. She can smell the sea, and a hot takeaway from Sun Wa's, her mum's fresh laundry, strung up on the fire escape. She is not alone here.

She never was. George was right. Some things – and people – are better as a borrow. But not her. And not this place.

Great Yarmouth, photo credit Ruben Cruz and Davide Almeida from Reprezent Project

Under the watchful eyes of seagulls

Ellie McKinlay-Khojinian and Ligia Macedo

Under the watchful eyes of seagulls, slowly, the town inhaled, stretched its arms and woke.

When I had first arrived here, I would curse those birds and their rude interruptions of my morning sleep but now they grounded me. They were home.

Pim! Pam! Tum! Crash! Pim! Pam! Tum! Bang!

Pim! Pam! Tum! Crash! Bang!

From my little window I could just about see to the end of the street where it fanned out into the square, where vans trundled back and forth and men and women with poles walked determinedly here and there. They were setting up the usual market. It seemed especially noisy today, though, and then I remembered: it was festival day.

If I wanted to get my morning dose of air and chat before the crowds I would have to move fast.

I left the flat, jogged down the stairs and pushed open the door, right onto the street. The shopkeeper opposite saw me emerge and raised a hand in greeting. I lifted mine back.

I skirted past the windows of the pub next door, avoiding the doorway that would still be drink-sticky and urine-soaked at this time of the morning, tapped on Bella's window and gave her a wave as she set up her wigs and mirrors for her own busy day. I dropped a coin in the worn Tupperware that perched on the sleeping bag of the homeless couple who had made the doorway of the old BHS, now Poundstretcher, their own for the night, and ducked into the Subway on the corner for my hot chocolate. It wasn't that I particularly rated chain-restaurant hot drinks, but this place occupied exactly the right just-in-the-middle location between home and the square.

By the time I made it to the bench – my bench, although I had no special claim to it, not really – he was already there, chuckling as he watched the seagulls fighting over scraps that he himself had thrown. Creating an avian gladiator ring for his own amusement. He would be unapologetic of course, but I scolded him anyway.

"James!"

He looked up.

"Those poor seagulls!"

“Poor seagulls?” He wasn’t having any of it. “Unpredictable and dangerous little buggers. Just look at them!”

James, with his tweed jacket and bucket hat, who every day would come and sit on this bench in the centre of the square and feed the birds. He was particular to the pigeons and yes, even the seagulls, although he’d never admit it. He would stay there until lunchtime when he would depart with a chill on his behind and a cone of chips from the green stall in the corner.

I sat down and we exchanged a smile, which meant it was time for our morning chat. I took a careful sip from my drink. Later I would get a proper bica from the Portuguese Café but for now this hit of sugar would do me fine.

“Morning!” I always began this way.

“Bom dia!” he replied.

I had taught him well and the pronunciation was almost perfect. We smiled again at one other and began. The weather – it was colder today, wasn’t it, than yesterday? And had you seen that Bargain Buys had shut down, after more than 50 years of trading? And what they’d said in the supermarket the other day, and on the news too, that Marine Parade and the high street were dying. How much better everything was before.

That was him. The better before bit. I personally would not say dying. I was not fixated on the past. On that before. My own before was so, so much worse. I preferred this present and I made do with what I had. Not everything was better before. Not here, and not there. I sipped my chocolate and listened to the old man’s ramblings. After a while, we would talk about the war – it was only a matter of time – about how hard life was back then, and about the bombs. How when they’d arrived home one day, only his father’s armchair still stood in its place, with the walls all crumbled around it. We knew our cues and performed them perfectly; there was some comfort in the ritual.

“Have you seen the plaque?” he would ask me for the hundredth time.

And I would dutifully nod my head, while he continued his tales.

I understood war and the heartbreak it caused, and I felt a sort of kinship with this old gentleman. I had told him my stories, too. I’d recounted my journey here, on the bus. The never-ending roads and the pit stops in Spain. How I’d travelled all through Europe to get to this point, this town. The most easterly point on the map. Or one of them at least. There had been the flat fields and green everywhere, in ten shades of dull; the cows grazing and me wondering at how animals looked the same, wherever you were in the world. We’d arrived at The Prince’s Hotel on Prince’s Road. How grand it had sounded, how grey it had looked. But there had been excitement too, tucked in around the edges of the uncertainty of leaping without seeing where I might land.

“Brave, brave girl,” James said to me, the first and every time I told my own tale,

with a shake of his head.

I would laugh then and reply, “Brave, brave man.”

Today wasn’t a day for my story though. I let him reel and yarn as he drifted in and out of the past, remembering the times when the town was full of fishermen, and the women that followed the herring boats down the coastline.

“The whole place stank of piss and brine,” he said, looking at me like I should remember. “But the girls. Those girls!”

And he would talk about the money he would earn during summertime when the well-heeled Londoners descended for the holidays and his mother would open their house to lodgers. James and his older brother, Patrick, would be waiting by the train station to help the tourists carry their bags.

“Those were Yarmouth’s golden days,” James would say.

I could disagree but I deferred to his memories. Who was I to argue with a man who’d lived the length of my life twice over? Besides, I enjoyed imagining the rose-tinted town that he conjured up.

The sound of a busker’s accordion, tuning up and stretching out just to our left, brought me back to the here and now. I looked at James, his knuckly, knobbly, liver-spotted hands clutching his stick. He was starting to tap in rhythm with the busker, a busker who would be hoping to make as much today – festival day – as he usually would in a month.

I stood up and got ready to go. I wasn’t in the mood for music. Not yet.

“Mr James… I mean… James. Are you busy today? I would like you to come with me for a walk. Maybe we could watch some of the festival together?”

Startled, but apparently not totally put off by the idea, James looked at me for a long moment, perhaps giving me the chance to change my mind if I wanted to.

“Come on, it will be fun! And you can finally taste pastel de nata. I want you to try our dishes. You will taste food from heaven and your chips from the market will be in the past! It’s on me, Mr James!” I winked.

That seemed to settle it and he stood up hesitantly, his walking stick preceding him, as always. This was where we usually said our goodbyes. But today I linked my arm with his and we began a slow walk back down the street, leaving the gulls to dance to the sound of the busker’s accordion.

I glanced at the ‘Closed’ signs on the doors as we passed by Palmers Department Store. It was a permanent closure.

“They’re turning into a library, you know.” James seemed quite cross at the idea.

“A cultural hub,” I corrected him.

“Cultural hub.” He shook his head. The words sounded funny and borrowed in his old-man’s mouth. “Palmers was the place to go when I was a young man. Scones and tea on a Saturday afternoon. My brother used to operate the lift in there.”

I didn’t try to convince him. I was excited about the hub but I knew already that

ideas around what might make the High Street, and the town, ‘Great’ again were controversial. You only had to lean into the chatter on local social media groups to find that out.

We’d only got as far as the charity shop, James still tutting, when I was seized by the elbow and told bossily, but with an enthusiasm that was hard to dislike, to “Look up! Look up there!” The elbow-grabber was tall and slightly stooped, wearing a long coat that was not far off sweeping the cigarette butts off the pavement. His shoes were stacked heels, as if he needed the extra height, and he held a cigarette – no, a vaping device – between long, long fingers.

I did look up, of course, and James did too. We were obedient like that.

But there was nothing there other than the deep blue sky of an autumn morning.

“What?”

“Ah! You missed it.” The man was full of regret.

“Missed what?”

“The starlings. Leaving their roost.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure if I sounded disappointed. Or just confused.

“Never mind. The evening is better. Starling murmuration. One of nature’s most beautiful orchestrations.” At the word ‘orchestrations’ he swept his arms about above his head in swooping motions that had the seagulls staring and passers-by raising eyebrows.

The man seized my elbow again – it seemed to be his thing – and swept me along beside him as if we had always been companions. James trotted behind, unfussed by the intrusion.

“You’re Portuguese?” the newcomer asked, as if this was the natural next question, after starlings and murmurations.

How could he tell? My accent, I supposed. “Well, yes. Sort of. Portuguese and also African. Both. But I speak Portuguese. And you? You are...?”

“Not Portuguese!” he bellowed this out. “Scottish.” This with a strong accent that had been missing until now. By naming himself Scottish he became more Scottish. Perhaps we all do that. When we state our identity, we become that thing, that person. “I’ve come down from Scotland to see this place. My mother travelled down here every winter, you see. For the herrings.”

I nodded. So he wasn’t your average tourist. Not really. He wasn’t here for the festival but he wasn’t fish-and-chipping on the seafront or losing himself in the casino either. He was here on this street. With us. He was a home-grown sort of tourist, it seemed. One that was at home enough to grab locals on their own high street and implore them to look up.

“What’s your name?” I went first this time. I didn’t really need to know but at the same time, I did. I didn’t like to walk around with strangers.

“Alistair. You?”

“Maria.” He nodded.

“I’m James,” said James, from a few steps back. I turned to smile at him.

We walked a few paces, me on the outside, avoiding puddles; my two companions on the inside. A group of teenagers, taller than Alistair, louder than the three of us, dispersed around us as we walked, letting us through the middle. Street side manners.

James let out a loud whistle. “Phooey! Weed!” The teenagers turned to look at the old man who had smelled them out. They hurried off, embarrassed.

“I used to live there.” James had stopped and was pointing with his stick at the space between two buildings.

“Ah,” said Alistair. “The rows.”

“Yes,” agreed James. “The rows…”

“… destroyed in part by the war.” Alistair finished the sentence for him.

I could see James was impressed at this stranger’s knowledge of the history of his town.

“I lived here,” James said. “Row 94.”

“Cotman’s Row,” Alistair read the name from the restored sign that sat high on the bricks. “And my mother boarded at the next one, Kittywitches. Row 95.”

James gave me a wink at that. We both knew what people thought of that row.

We stopped and gazed down the remains of it for a moment. It was narrow, only 30 inches at points. Narrow enough that neighbours on opposite sides could reach out and shake hands, or pass something between them, should they want to.

Alistair broke the silence.

“Look.” He took both our elbows this time.

Again, we did.

Beamed onto the damp and birdshit-stained walls of the buildings behind us was a black-and-white image, a glamorous Hollywood sort. I didn’t know her name but most other people would. Alistair knew.

“Rita Hayworth.”

Another wink from James. “She was a corker.”

“A corker? What is that?” I asked the question but could guess the answer. I liked to tease sometimes.

We gazed a while at the image. No one else seemed to be looking. Our own private street cinema. I looked around. A wave from the window above signalled the projectionist, leaning out of his own window, seizing the opportunity of the festival crowds to show his best stills.

Alistair vaped hard and plumed a great smog of smoke out in front of him. I waved it away, more for show than anything. “You shouldn’t smoke. It’s not good for

you."

"Not good for me? Maria, I am not interested in what's good for me. I'm interested in what's... here for me." Here seemed to mean the street because once again Alistair swept his arms out, encompassing all it offered.

James chuckled. "You'd be hard-pushed to find anything here for you, fella."

Alistair looked pensive, as he vaped again. "I know what's here for me. My past, that's what. My mother boarded there – and my father… well, it was his house. But then she had to leave. Back to Scotland. In time for her husband's boat. You know?"

We did. There were stories in this man.

We hadn't made it a lot further down the street, waylaid as we had been by birds and boarding houses, street cinema and smoking. But we were standing now in front of a coffee shop. A Portuguese one. My favourite. I turned to Alistair and James.

"Coffee?" It wasn't every day that I invited strange men to drink coffee with me but today I'd asked two. I blamed the festival. Something in the air.

"Maria, I thought you'd never ask." Alistair doffed his hat, exposing a shiny baldness that gave him an air of vulnerability at odds with his circus-like ways, and gave a gentle bow.

Taking his cue, I entered the café first and let Alistair sweep in behind me, with James following. The door jangled, announcing our entrance to the few customers who sat, hunched over, looking at phones and sipping on drinks that steamed around them.

"Bom dia!" I said. And a chorus of "Bons dias" echoed back.

"What will you drink?" I asked my guests.

"A big mug of coffee with a dash of milk. Steaming hot. No sugar, please." That was James. I'd never imagined him to be so particular about his coffees, nor so polite, but there it was.

"Just a black coffee for me." That was Alistair. "And you? What will you have, Maria?" he wanted to know.

"I will have a bica." I said with a little smile.

"A what?"

"A bica."

"What is a bica, Maria?" Alistair was persistent in wanting to know. James, uninterested, had sat himself down, already riveted by the news on the Portuguese channel that he would not understand.

Ana, who was following our conversation, stepped in to show Alistair the difference between a coffee and a bica, putting on the counter a mug and, next to it, a tiny cup. The visual aid did it for him.

"Ha!" Alistair exclaimed. "It's just an espresso!"

An old Portuguese man sitting by himself at his table shook his head and in his heavily accented English, annoyed and amused in equal part, retorted, "No, no, no!

Not just. A bica is different from an espresso. Bica is better. It's Portuguese."

I smiled and moved closer to the counter, my eyes glued to the glass, scanning the goods. Alistair watched me watching the cakes and pastries. Decisions, decisions.

"What do you recommend?" he elbowed me gently.

"That will depend. What do you fancy? Sweet or savoury?"

"Uhm… Both… I am feeling quite adventurous today. And hungry. You choose."

From the table by the window James called out. "The nata for me, Maria dear. Don't forget my nata!" That was right. I'd promised him such.

"Ana, três pastéis de nata and três pastéis de bacalhau, por favor."

I took my purse out to pay, but Alistair was quicker and so I took the two larger coffees over to the table. He followed with my bica.

Outside the window a group of festival musicians had set up.

"Look," I pointed to them and my companions both looked. There was the accordion player from this morning. He wasn't a busker after all; he was part of the troupe. He rocked and swayed with his own melody.

Quite a crowd was gathering, people on the street, seagulls above on the shop signage.

A couple passed by, staggering slightly. It wasn't clear if they had started early or were still drunk from the night before. They bumped into the window as they passed, making us jump. The man caught our eye and saluted an apology with a grin. His T-shirt shouted its slogan: Choose Love! He pointed to it, and shouted it himself, although we couldn't hear him through the double-glazing. Choose love!

A man standing next to him told him quite matter-of-factly to eff-off. We could lipread those words through any window. The Choose Love man bowed and wound his way off down the street, bumping into everyone as he went.

"Indeed," said Alistair cheerfully, raising his cup. "Choose love!"

The elderly Portuguese man at the table behind ours shook his head into his coffee before raising his own cup: "Bem-vindos a Great Yarmouth!"

"Yes," grumbled James, joining the toast. "Welcome to bloody Yarmouth!"

We all raised our coffee cups then and laughed.

Wednesbury, photo credit Lee Allen

Flying

Maria Whatton

The dead were busy that day, their presence inferred in liminal tracks: cracks in the pavement, gaps in roof tiles, the sandy crumble between bricks. On the High Street people could sense something was different, but dismissed the peripheral shimmering sensations as impending migraines, the tang of metal in their mouths as no more than a brand of coffee they wouldn't choose again. It was the end of February and the sun was a compact snowball thrown high, straining the bleached clouds with its dense weight.

There was only Lily May paying attention. Everyone else was far too busy taking slippery notes from the cash machines, shopping for groceries, nearly new ladies wear or strings of sausages from the butchers. It was 4pm. Lily May was on her way to the mobile phone repair shop. After that she would be heading to the Arts Studio for her cheerleading class.

That morning mom's phone had slipped from her grasp. Splash. Straight into the sink brimming with soapy water. Lily May and her little brother Ollie had stared as she rummaged between the breakfast bowls. Even though she'd acted quickly, burying it in a heap of dry rice, an hour later it still sounded like she was speaking under water when she used it.

Ow no! said mom. I think the camera's wrecked too.

Before Lily May left for school mom handed her her lunch box (the same one from when she was in primary school, which she loathed because it was covered with pictures of pink ponies), and the phone.

Dow forget to take it sweetheart. Oim lost without tha phowen.

Lily May shoved them into her school bag.

I'll remember. I wo' be back til late mom, I got cheerleading.

Mom was no longer paying attention; she was too preoccupied with cramming a triangle of toast into her mouth with one hand while helping Ollie squeeze his head through the top of his T-shirt with the other. Lily May's 'See ya!' was eclipsed by the slam of the front door as she left.

* * *

Most days after school she dawdled along the High Street with Gaz and Yatin who she'd been mates with since primary school. Gaz would meet his great nan, who went to the bric-a-brac market on Tuesdays and Morrison's on Mondays and Thursdays. She was ninety-three. They'd wait for her on the war memorial bench next to the clock tower. She'd always say the same thing when she saw them:

Ow look ai it only the three stooges!

Lily May never knew what she was on about but she liked her. Gaz's great nan was whippet thin with white, frizzy hair and eyes like apple seeds. She always gave Gaz a big hug and he hugged her back with no embarrassment. Lily May liked that about him. The other great thing about Gaz was that he noticed things that she and Yatin didn't, like the straggled fingers of plants that twisted free from the awnings of rooves or reached out from the clock tower.

Mebbee Wednesbury's spawning some new flora and fauna. It may help the world find the cure for cancer, Gaz said.

Yatin was the entertainer. Only yesterday he'd become animated about a festival that he and his family celebrated called Holi where everyone showered bags of coloured dust over each other.

It's the festival of love at the beginning of spring, he said, everyone goes crazy, everyone's happy.

He began to dance, waving his hands about. Gaz joined in. Lily May wanted to but was too shy. Some people gave them funny looks but Gaz and Yatin weren't bothered. Lily May wished she could be like them but she was too self-conscious. She hated people looking at her. She wasn't as pretty as the popular girls at school. On their Instagram posts they all looked like models. It was clear they had amazing lives. She was shorter than everyone else. She was in Year 10 but looked like a Year 7.

She had only taken up cheerleading because her mom had signed her up. The young woman who ran it was her mom's friend's daughter. It was convenient because it occupied Lily May while mom took Ollie to his swimming class. She could have him home and dry, tea made by the time Lily May got back.

Ye'll have fun sweetheart, she'd said. Debbie who runs it – 'ers lovely.

And to her own great surprise she did have fun. Debbie was dead nice. Lily May learned all of the basic moves quickly. There were no silly pom poms. It was pure gymnastics. She practised the splits in her bedroom, and cartwheeled in the garden

when no one else was about. Her cheerleading team could form a pyramid with ease. Soon, though, they'd be moving on to doing stunts. Debbie had suggested Lily May would make a good 'flyer' – the cheerleader thrown into the air then caught by the troupe.

You've a talent for this Lily May, Debbie said, you have poise.

But what if they had to perform in front of an audience? She was bound to fall and make a fool of herself. Lily May decided she would have to quit.

Yesterday she had watched Gaz and Yatin, carefree, twisting round each other past the Polski shop, synchronising steps towards the clock tower, as she looked on in awe. She wished she had their confidence. As they danced, she imagined Gaz and Yatin covered in coloured rainbow dust, their happy faces dripping in scarlet, yellow, lunchbox pink and summer-sky blue.

* * *

But today wasn't most days; today was different. She was alone. There was a strange taste on her tongue. Shadows twisted and blinked along the edge of the pavement, the pointing between bricks crackled silver like electricity. Was she ill? Or was it nerves? Something odd was going on that was difficult to pinpoint, but everyone else seemed oblivious.

Whatever it was, electricity cables gone caput, or nuclear power surge, this afternoon she had to get to class and come clean with Debbie. She practised the speech in her head. She was very sorry, she would say, but exams come first. That was an argument no adult she had ever known would argue with.

First things first. She had to take mom's phone to the repair shop. She made her way to the armistice bench next to the clock tower and began to fumble around in her school bag. She fished it out. Mom was a technophobe. Lily May tried mom's camera, randomly tapping it. No. Mom was right. Dead as a doornail. Lily May shivered. It was suddenly bitterly cold. And there was something else: a hushed quiet. No buses, no chatter, no men yelling while unloading vans. The birds had stopped singing. Then she was being pelted by what felt like millions of small hard grains of rice. It was hail storming. Everyone on the High Street vanished. Lily May stayed put.

You alright Lily May?

It was Gaz's great nan. She had an umbrella, which she held over Lily May's head.

No, she said. I've gotta take this to be repaired. It's not working. Camera's broken.

She waved mom's phone in her hand.

Gi it ere, said the old lady with a gentle smile. You off to your dance class?

Cheerleading, Lily May corrected.

Yes, that's it. You go and git out o this storm, she said. I'll drop this round to your mom when eets fixed. No worries.

Lily May handed the phone to her in a trance and watched her disappear into the swarm of white rice. She looked up. Through the haze of hail, she could see time standing still. Twenty past six. The four clock faces at the top of the tower had been stopped at that moment for as long as she remembered. White beads of ice settled on her hair and jacket. The hail rapped against the pavement like thousands of impatient finger nails.

The ice around her neck and wrists was melting. She was getting damp. She needed shelter. She noticed that the small door at the foot of the tower was slightly open. She pushed. The door swung wide. She stepped inside. It creaked shut. She could smell damp, and rust. There was the insistent percussion of water dripping.

It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust. A pale structure was floating in the darkness. A ladder stretching upwards. It must be what they used to reach the internal workings of the clocks. She moved closer to it. Each rung was made of bone, polished and gleaming. What she first thought was rope was the thick twine of plant stems. Vines speckled with snow-white flowers covered the inner walls like embroideries. Was this real? Lily May touched one of the rungs. Smooth beneath her fingers. Solid.

Wha the Hell? said Lily May into the darkness.

Or the Heaven? answered a voice.

It was a woman wearing a grubby apron over a long dress. Around her shoulders was a pale shawl that trembled, then flapped like wings. The woman's face was smeared with soot. She grinned. Her teeth reminded Lily May of a very sweet pet rabbit she'd once had.

Who are you?

Yesterday, replied the woman with a soft voice that rang like water over stone. Want to see what's up there?

She pointed towards the rafters. Lily May nodded. She was not afraid. Adapting to the peculiarity of her new situation was astonishingly easy. Other people might

have seized the moment and started taking selfies, thinking of the number of views they'd get on Snapchat but Lily May had no appetite for that. She was intrigued. She wanted to be guided by this woman, angel, ghost – whatever she was.

The climb required agility. Tendrils of foliage tickled Lily May's face. The ladder jerked and flexed as they ascended. Finally, they reached a square landing inside the dome. The four clock faces were set in frames. They were semi-transparent like portholes. The mechanics of their workings were compact, no bigger than a child's fist. Lily May looked down through the hole in the landing. She could see the bone ladder swinging. She felt the thrill of the height, the giddy pleasure of the mountaineer.

Are you ready? asked Yesterday.

For wha?

To see wha you aint seen before because you were born too late but belongs to you.

Is this a riddle?

Time is the riddle, said Yesterday. It stretches long then shrinks fast. If you want to glimpse what's gone, choose one of the clocks!

This one! said Lily May.

Yesterday pushed open the clock face like a window. A belch of brassy fumes blew Lily May's hair away from her face as she crept forward and peered out at a great sulking cloud of soot. It hovered over hills of waste and sediment a long way below on the ground. In coal-black valleys red fires flamed. Machines groaned and clanked. Chimneys steamed.

Is this Hell?

No, said Yesterday, it's Wednesbury.

The window began to close, forcing her back inside. There were so many things she wanted to ask.

Which one now? said Yesterday.

Lily May responded, touching the pane in front of her. It flew open. Lily May was looking down over Market Square. There were hundreds of men wearing peaked caps. From this airy view they looked like a field of mushrooms that had bloomed overnight. They were packed together, straining to hear a woman on a soap box giving an impassioned speech.

Together, she was saying, we will stand shoulder to shoulder…

Well, they're doin tha alright ai they? You couldn't squeeze a fag paper between em.

The crowds were hanging on the speaker's every word.

Who's tha? asked Lily May.

That's Julia Varley – a Trade Unionist, said Yesterday.

What's a Trade Unionist and why's they're so many people?

They're standing up for their selves, wench, replied Yesterday.

Lily May was puzzled. What was this all about? Yesterday was moving on, offering her the choice of the two remaining clock face windows.

This one, then this! Lily May jabbed her finger decisively to the right, then behind her.

The third clock face opened. A night sky swollen with sticky mist. Quiet. Then out of the gloom a monstrous lozenge-shaped balloon glided into view.

Wha's tha?

A Zeppelin, said Yesterday. It came from Germany in the First World War.

Wha for?

Yesterday didn't answer. She lowered her head.

Did people die?

Thirteen. Five of them children.

Lily May felt sadness shiver through her but she had no time to dwell on it. The final clock face was opening. She heard a tinny transistor radio playing The Beatles – her grandad's favourite band from the old days. Oh blah di oh blah dah life goes on! It was threading itself through the chatter of voices, the shouts of the market traders. She looked down. The Square was buzzing. There were masses of tarpaulin-covered stalls. Women wore short dresses, young men had long hair. There was a profusion of smells drifting towards her: hot pork and stuffing, chips, sweet perfume, bread baking.

Cor that bread smells good, said Lily May.

Hickinbottoms, said Yesterday. Ya corr beat Hickinbottoms bread.

Her voice was quicksilver. She beamed, showing large yellow teeth.

Lily May could not remember the climb down the ladder. She was aware that her feet were on solid ground again and Yesterday was ushering her back to the small door as though it was as normal as having been round her auntie's house for tea.

Wait a minute, said Lily May, this is really weird, yeh? I wanna know what's just appened? I wanna know, why you chose me? Why did I get to see all that stuff from the owd days, not Gaz or Yatin or anybody?

Why not you? said Yesterday. It's your past as much as anyone else's.

The door opened. Lily May was on the ridge between two worlds. Motionless. She watched as all of the beings that had slipped and snooped and sneaked around the High Street that day rolled past her, back into the clock tower like serpents of fog.

Then she was back out on Market Square. The storm had passed. The pavement was dry. People were bustling around in and out of shops. The door at the bottom of the clock tower was snug shut behind her. Lily May looked up at the clock tower. Time was still stuck at twenty past six. A no. 41 bus to West Bromwich whizzed by, lifting her fringe from her face, and she remembered: before this unearthly interlude she had been on her way to cheerleading to tell her teacher she wouldn't be coming to class any more.

***

How dyer get on wi yer gym class? shouted mom from the kitchen when Lily May got home that night. Ollie was in his pyjamas in the living room, playing with his toys on the rug in front of the telly. Lily May gave him a kiss on the head. He offered her his favourite toy giraffe and she kissed that on the head too.

It's cheerleading mom, corrected Lily May.

Mom appeared in the doorway of the living room.

Tea won't be long, she said. Have you had a good day sweetheart?

Lily May could have said that she had been sucked into some kind of magical realm in the middle of the High Street, travelled through different time zones spanning 200 years, and made friends with a ghost, or an angel or something, but she didn't. She said:

I learned to fly tonight mom.

Yer wha?

Cheerleading. My teacher chose me to be the one my team throws into the air and then catches.

Ooh Lily May, ai that dangerous?

A bit, said Lily May. I was thinking of giving up cheerleading but I've changed my mind. We did the stunt three times tonight, and I did it mom, I did it.

When she had been launched by her team it was as though she had an army of spirits holding her up. Of course, she didn't want to say that. Her mom would have thought she'd lost the plot.

Well ai tha gud, said mom. I'm proud of you. How about this Saturday me and you spend a bit of time together? Av a stroll, git sum suck from Teddy Gray's?

Rocks and fudge, said Lily May.

I'll drop Ollie at Aunty Jan's.

Nice one, said Lily May, and mebbee we could get a new lunch box too? I've had that pink one since I was ten.

Course, said mom smiling. Her daughter was growing up.

By the way, thanks for taking my phowen. Gaz's great nan dropped it back to me. She said she'd met you and you'd had a chat. I tell you wha, that repair shop's brilliant. The sound is as clear as bell. I reckon you could call me from Mars and I'd still hear everything.

She sat down on the arm of the settee.

The other thing is, they've put some kind of special app on the camera because all those photographs you took are brilliant. I might get some of these enlarged and framed.

Lily May was puzzled. She looked at her mom's phone.

There was an image of the clock tower radiant in rainbow colours, a vibrant sky of purples, pinks and reds. Another image: The High Street – crammed with people smiling, waving, stopping to gossip. The old buildings with arched windows shimmered gold like icons in a cathedral. There were musicians, murals, market stalls. The place was alive. And there was a final picture. It was Lily May's favourite.

A close-up of a sparrow settled on the crown of a chimney top, waiting.

About the Writers

Rod Duncan is the author of eleven books. His novel ‘The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter’ was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award. His writing and research are informed by the practice of photography and by his dyslexia, aphantasia and ADHD. He is a lecturer in creative writing at De Montfort University.

Maria Whatton is a fiction author and multi-award-winning storyteller who tours nationally and internationally telling ancient legends and folk tales. Maria has been the chair of an international literary prize for fiction and lectures and performs in theatres, festivals and educational establishments. She curates and hosts the ‘Seeing Stories’ podcast.

Robin Pridy is a journalist, editor and writer who lives in East Sussex with her husband, three children and unimpressed cat. She grew up on Canada’s west coast before moving to the UK. She has recently completed a novel, ‘Everything Beautiful is Far Away’, and is working on a set of linked short stories.

Ellie McKinlay-Khojinian was selected for the Escalator writer development scheme through the National Centre for Writing. Ellie has delivered creative writing workshops to members of the migrant community and continues to work on her novel-in-progress, set in Iran. She lives in Norwich with her Iranian husband and young family.

Ligia Macedo was born in Mozambique and works in community projects in Great Yarmouth. She writes poetry and fiction under the pen name Gia Mawusi. Her short story, ‘My Land’ featured in ‘Field Work New Nature Writing from East Anglia’, and her poems in the collection ‘No Relevance’, Red Herring Press.

Celia Bryce is a singer-songwriter and author. She has won awards for short stories and radio drama, while her YA novel, ‘Anthem for Jackson Dawes’, was nominated for the Carnegie Medal. She has an MA in Creative Writing and has just released an album of original songs, ‘Here Before’.

Merrie Joy Williams was a winner in the Poetry Archive's 'Wordview 2020', and was shortlisted for the 2020 Bridport Prize. She is the recipient of Arts Council England funding and a London Writers Award, and Obsidian and Hawthornden fellowships. Her collection, 'Open Windows', was published by Waterloo Press. She teaches writing, and edits prose and poetry anthologies.

Rebecca Tantony is the author of three collections. She has taught Creative Writing at Bath Spa University and Wits University, Johannesburg and has read her work in numerous venues, including the Royal Albert Hall, the Natural History Museum, Southbank Centre and in Romania, Turkey, Sweden, South Africa and America.

Further Information

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About High Streets Heritage Action Zones

High Streets Heritage Action Zones is a £95 million government-funded initiative led by Historic England and designed to secure lasting improvements to our historic high streets for the communities who use them.

HistoricEngland.org.uk/HighStreets

About the Cultural Programme

The High Streets Heritage Action Zones scheme includes £7.4 million to fund four years of cultural activities across the country to engage communities with their local high streets, from 2020-2024. Historic England is leading the Cultural Programme in partnership with Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Its aim is to help make high streets more attractive, engaging and vibrant places for people to live, work and spend time.

Other national commissions include a large-scale outdoor celebration of the high street, happening across multiple regions and high streets in summer 2023, and a four-year photography project to creatively document the changing face of the nation's high street, coming to a conclusion in 2024.

HistoricEngland.org.uk/HighStreetCulture

HM Government

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High Street Tales is a commission by Historic England, part of the High Streets Heritage Action Zones Cultural Programme led by Historic England, in partnership with Arts Council England and The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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