



**PROJECT**

**H**

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# PROJECT H



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# PROJECT H

Over the last year Alex, Astrid, Josh, Lydia, Owen and Zoe have been meeting with me and two grads of the Writing Squad - Katherine Horrex who grew up in Hull and Chaz Josephs who came here to study and has stayed to work.

We talked about the city, we walked round the city and we wrote about the city.

The Writing Squad exists to create the next generation of writers in the north of England - here we have the next generation of writers from Hull.

What excited me, apart from the quality of the writing, was the way their themes and subjects resonate. That's why we have not attributed the work, inviting you to read it as a single collage of Hull and the surrounding area. If you want to know who wrote what, you can find out at the end of the book.

We would like to thank Humber Mouth for giving us this opportunity, Hull City Council and Arts Council England for paying for it, and Hull Libraries, not just for hosting our meetings in the James Reckitt Reading Room, but for being one of the few libraries that still seems to know what a vital role they play in promoting new writing and new reading.

Cities, like libraries, depend on writers. Hull has a strong tradition, here is the future.

**Steve Dearden**

*Director, The Writing Squad*

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# REBRANDING THE TIGER

God made a creature with eyes of fire, claws sharper than the scythes of Death and a jaw so powerful it could crunch through bone. God was so pleased with this creature he had made that he gave him a coat of blazing amber and noble black and named him Tiger. God said “Tiger, you and your children and your children’s children shall be kings of the swamps and the grasslands and the rainforests” and so it was for millions of years.

But now we feel that the name ‘tiger’ has become... old hat. Our recent focus group found the name is now commonly associated with cartoon characters: Tigger, Tony the Frosties Tiger. We need something that conveys the majesty and strength of the tiger to a western market. Our survey found modern audiences associate terms like ‘majesty’ and ‘beauty’ with the arts, so we started thinking about a key figure or maybe a place where there’s a great deal of culture. Strength meanwhile evokes masculinity and sport, so we’re thinking popular sports, tennis, cricket, football, Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, etc.

We two combined these concepts to form what we strongly believe will be the name to bring the noble tiger into the 21st century... Hull City.

If you have ever walked around the city by foot  
you will know that distance is deceptive  
that streets are mostly safe  
that people are not as bad as they seem  
and graffiti and chewing gum  
can be charming.

# SIRENS

Did you hear that? I heard them. There's always sirens round here. I know we're on a busy road, but so there's usually loads of accidents round here. Usually some idiot teenager, and there's plenty of those. It makes getting on the bus a pain as well, all the queues they cause.

I guess it wouldn't hurt to go and have a look at what's happened this time though. Something's always happening in Hull, even though half the time, it's not usually that interesting. Occasionally you get the odd bar fight or broken leg but that's about it. You never know though, might be something juicy this time. A murder would be fun.

They're closer now; I can hear a couple of screams. That's usually a good sign. It's in the station, can't be a bus crash then. Ugh, it's just a heart attack, how boring. I wonder why someone was screaming. Oh well, back to normal then.

Ten pound fifty had been left on the bench outside the station  
and I had sat for thirty minutes.  
A figure sprinted towards me  
“Scuse me, miss,” he said, “’ave you seen some change anywhere ‘round  
‘ere, I fink I left it”  
I smiled and pointed to the seat beside me.  
“Here, mate.”  
He laughed.  
“Ta love. Keep a quid, I would ‘av lost all ‘o it if it wa’n’t for your decency.”

# **SORRY HULL**

I got off the train and at Poundland I turned left. It'd been a while since I'd come this far east, traipsed here from somewhere with wealth, aspiration and a TGI Friday (Leeds maybe or York) on a train that had almost given up. No buffet car, no first class, just one last glimpse of economic opulence before The End Of The Line. Selby, Howden, after Brough there's no escape, no hope, after Brough it's terminal.

I pulled into Paragon and got off because there's nowhere else to go. Austerity's made museums of Jameson Street, Victoria Square, White Friar Gate. That's where Textile Direct was. Used to be a Millets down that way. There's the old Pizza Hut, kids liked going there in the holidays. I followed the fish trail to nowhere in particular and saw the shopping centre with a dozen empty units grinning a toothless smile at a weary city. Stiff upper lip.

I walked down cobbles to a confused marina. Yachts like San Tropez, muddy water like Grimsby. What's the point? It's too polite to ask. I passed a fruitless fruit market and a cannon that pointed at nothing. I reached the empty water and looked back on a city holding its breath, a grave yard of failed regenerations and broken promises, and I was sorry. Sorry that I'd taken the fish out the sea. Sorry that that took the ships out the Quay, the trawlers out of work and the point out of Hull.

With that I got on the train and headed west to somewhere with wealth, aspiration, a TGI Friday and a sense of what you could have been.

Good luck Hull.

# THERE ARE SNOW DROPS IN QUEENS GARDENS

under the blue bench  
next to empty fag packets and discarded crisp packets  
Looking at the pond with the plastic bottle ducks  
I see it all out the corner of my eye  
As his hand touches my back  
I turn and stare down at snow drops  
at the discarded chewing gum and broken kids toys  
at the sign telling people not to swim in the soupy water  
He kisses me  
I back away tell him it's too soon  
He insists  
We haven't thought this through I tell him it wont end well  
It will be fine he says  
So I kiss him back I wrap my arms around his shoulders and kiss him  
I stay there wrapped up in him  
I don't notice his stare over my shoulder  
Not at the snowdrops in the corner  
but the girl over there with the long fair hair  
I stay lips locked to his as he turns  
and with a I'm sorry  
leaves me with the crisp packets and fags and the wilted remains of snow drops

# BETWEEN US

What exists between us  
lives in shadows; in-between the gaps of doors  
that allow us to peer into a room –  
and invite us to glance  
early into our tombs.

It lives in the exchange of smirks;  
the dull pressure felt by close, clothed limbs –  
the meaningless, once empty phrases,  
now baubles on the pleasant Christmas tree  
of our conversation.

Something that can easily die  
as a result of an impatient sigh or the rolling of eyes;  
negative energies forcing me to believe  
that it was probably nothing anyway  
and why on earth would I want you to stay

when the future can only be made up of bliss,  
or the heart-reducing doubt of this.

# WIND FARMS

Pariahs on the hillside,  
rotors formidable, whether operative  
or still, and the wand like  
fibreglass frames  
unimaginably hollow

from the ground to the nacelle.  
Room in fact for a few people  
to travel up and down  
in a lift and inspect  
the generators in their humid cockpits.

Hard not to picture phantom warplanes  
stationary behind the giant propellers  
or those eerily synchronised mowers,  
sweeping scythes along crops  
under nineteenth century arable suns.

Dare I remember the footage of German women  
performing aerobics  
in pristine white tunics –  
far better to dream of dandelions  
reaching out for long flown spores,

a salutary tai chi class. Of course  
the turbines do not mean us harm.  
Milling the sky for our comfort with sails  
to marshal trains along the cross-country circuits  
they will one day power in full.



Dirty brown sludge against a  
grey sky.

(Raining, as usual.)

You can sit and watch  
the ferries as they escape  
to more exciting places;  
taste the salty, petrol breeze  
and listen to the combination  
of bridge traffic and seagulls.

## **SHE HADN'T ANY IDEA OF WHERE SHE WAS GOING.**

Unfamiliar fears for a four year old, beckoning her all at once. The tummy feeling like the big slide she went down that one time at the park. Dad's car going over bumps on the road – except usually everyone is laughing but this time there's no one else other than the grey fluffy clouds and the cold air and the feeling of cheeks being whooshed up by wind and water below not quite as clear as the water when it is bath time; perhaps more like the water you might expect mermaids like Ariel to live in if anything but still too brown.

Her face, trying to squint and clench itself out of defence as salt water invades her senses and her little baffled mind wonders whether it was an accident or if daddy did it on purpose.

# WHITTON ISLAND

Rivers muscle and quake  
round the almond  
dammed in its estuary crook.

I've come online  
for information  
or reference to a book,

some indicator  
as to the hows and whys  
of this particular nook

beyond its mapped  
and mud-girt shape,  
the look

of it, beyond pictures  
of a castle  
whose flags

were in thrall  
to the wind's tack,  
at Wressle.

For now there is little  
available. I dream  
of a kayak

bearing my watch  
of the visible  
water

falling  
when neap,  
ebb or slack.

# TED'S TRAIN TRACK

He stood right at the shore, letting the newly broken waves wash over his feet. The train had been running for a while now, but still left Ted speechless every time it accelerated over waves, defying the tide with its hovering track. He had no idea where the line started, but had taken over laying the track as it crossed the Newland Ave Bridge and made its way down the back of Ella Street.

Ted never thought the job would end up here; the creation of a train that skimmed waves instead of stations or platforms. The railway also brought him his house, a railway cottage just before St Ninian's walk.

He could see the trains daily from the bedroom window, but there they just passed rubble and trees. The magic is in the water, his granddaughter said to him. And perhaps it was. But Ted felt it in the track, built by labourers who knew nothing of magic or beauty or a time when dirt wasn't under your fingernails.

Here, at the shore, he could see that the track was a leader, a road that always made it to the sea, never stopped. The tide would be in, out, choppy, calm; yet the track never faltered, like Ted.

# THE HULL GIRAFFES

Hammering pellets of hail beat the ground, forcing the cluster of rogue, clumsy giraffes to detach from each other, every man for himself, hopelessly arching their necks to seek shelter under the high leaves of trees.

The apes, also finding their way up to the top of the trees, approach the giraffes, exchanging the stern understanding that once the rain has gone, the giraffes are gone. This is noted amongst almost all members of both species – apart from the rebellious chimps, who find it amusing to slide down and groove their way wildly back up the necks of the unluckiest giraffes one by one – claiming their territory.

East Park. One of the last remaining safe havens after world destruction and the near-annihilation of humanity – as if under a dome, trapped somehow in time.

With the sun's emergence from the murky clouds above, the hail becomes showers and then drizzle, a rainbow with its loud, high-pitched colours.

A great roar looms from a distance – not a natural, predatory roar like the one that exists south of the park where the lions reside but mechanical; so unfamiliar and malignant that the animals hesitate to notice it – as though it might disintegrate into imagination if they hope hard enough.

# THE ELEPHANTS OF EAST PARK

One day a fair while ago a travelling circus came.  
They took up shop in the field behind East Park,  
Its a housing estate now.  
They brought with them a tiger  
A mangy beast snarling in its cage  
But most excitingly four elephants,  
They used to stay there munching the grass,  
Tethered on ropes,  
So from my grandad's window you could look out  
And if you squinted and it wasn't raining  
You could pretend you were exploring on the savannah  
Not in blitz stricken Hull.

Every show my granddad and friends used to sit  
Outside the tent catching a glimpse of the acts  
Of the cat, the trapeze, the clowns  
And the elephants, the special elephants.

They made up their own show, acted it out.  
Four weeks passed, a long time when not quite ten,  
and it seemed that the elephants would never leave.  
Every day he would wake up and wave to them,  
imagine they were waving back,  
till one day the elephants weren't there  
and while he waited, hoped for many years,  
the elephants never returned,  
but like an elephant never forgets  
grandad never forgets the time East Park became the savannah.

# WALL

A wall like any other;  
battered and bruised by time,  
once white-washed  
but now creamed over  
and grimy, with black  
rain-like dust  
dripping from the top –  
cemented by dry conditions.  
Rectangular blocks  
as if there was once a sign here  
that has long since been ripped off.  
The blocks also have clear  
thick lines of dust between them,  
marking their neglect.  
There are patches of a darker shade  
somewhere between black and grey  
somehow shaping into countries  
joined together continentally from another world.  
Below this, sits a red sign  
slightly extended from the wall:  
a primary red with blue, italicised, bold,  
capitalised print reading TOP BRANDS/BETTER PRICES  
along with BARGAINS  
and spikes on the top and a lining of bricks to the right.  
And a shop laying below.



# SLANTED

June 23rd 2015

It's falling in the sea  
At least that's what they say  
Opposite Princes Quay  
They glance across in dismay.

None the less, business is booming  
The café full to the brim  
Outside, you see flowers blooming  
Yet, the skies above look very grim

August 12th 2045

Demolition squads at the ready  
Such a shame to see it go  
It never was quite steady  
They'd hoped they wouldn't see this low

Before long, they'll be something new  
The past well and truly forgot  
Memories stick to the mind like glue  
I remember what I did in this very spot

# KAYAKING

Sat in the boat beached on the pavement

Fish out of water

Trying to get the bloody spray deck on

Hands tugging, pulling at the rubber seal till all is set

Paddle battle flag in hand, cage over head

Peering into the turquoise abyss at the end of the boat

If you roll keep your mouth shut and try not to swim

Thats the advice always given as you plunge into the water

And the froth of competition

# RIVER

Umbra, fast shadows unavoidable  
till the break at Trent Falls,  
the sum of the tributary seawards and back  
to water's opacity, which gives rise to hearsay  
about bodies unveiled by low tide, upright in mud  
and as stunted as the wooden shoreline  
dividers cowed by the sea-change at Whitton,  
the river's burnt umber filtered,  
caught by the salt marsh thriving  
on what is, for us, undrinkable. Silt drawn  
into the stalks so that water can drain  
back out into ponds, soft contours pitted for wildfowl.

# **WATERSTONES**

Who hates Waterstones? Seriously, what is there not to love? I can't find a reason to detest the diamond of the British high-street. At the very least the best store on Jameson Street. As usual, I'm sat reading the first couple of pages of a book. If anyone asks, you're just browsing. All people seem to do is browse.

She doesn't look too happy. I guess we have been here a while. "One more book" I say. A few shelves away, I can see the strangest of books. I return my previous choice, it wasn't that great anyway, and go to investigate this book. I only spotted it because of its awkwardness. For starters, who wants an orange book? The cover feels like sandpaper and it's shorter than the others, it'd look awkward on my bookshelf.

I find myself reading it anyway, and soon I'm engrossed. I feel a presence staring at me, so I look up to see her angry face, before returning to the safety of reading. Above the book, I hear I say "I can't deal with you anymore, we're done." I hear her footsteps down the stairs, and maybe a sob too. I can't tear myself away from this book though, so I let another one leave me.

# HAVE YOU SEEN THE SERPENT THAT LIVES IN THE DEEP

in the tank full of sharks, if you are walking past quietly some day you will see the pale blue outline of him, a trick of the eye you say, but the serpent is really there coiled up at the bottom of the tank a relic of Viking invasions, the middle ages, of two world wars and trawlers, yet now he has left the Humber, with change a good thing they say, cleaned up and polished, they say increased tourism increased prosperity but the serpent lies there in the tank a lord of a lost kingdom looking out of the glass at our own fuzzy shapes and somewhere out on an island in the middle of the river you can, on a still day, hear the dragon roar as it pines for its lost mate and gradually turns into the mud and soup of the river from which it arose its once proud wings tattered and sooted from industrial success and from industrial failure, its once sharp claws blunted and withered, there it stands braying day by day and the serpent in the deep takes up the call of the future in the wake of the past

# THE WILSON

Half fancy, half budget.  
If you order a coke  
There's a strawberry on the glass.  
Order an ice-cream,  
You'll be down a fiver.

I wonder if that's what The Wilson was like  
As the ship's crew become our waiters,  
Walking across cobbles  
Just to wipe our tables.  
It's bumpy but brilliant,

Letting me live  
In a time that isn't mine.  
I can almost see The Wilson,  
Dancing along harbour,  
Preparing to dock.

There's no ship now but  
There is a sign.  
W, paired with its anchor –  
Whoever designed that,  
You're an absolute wanchor.

Though it's tart on my tongue,  
I'd swap my strawberry drizzle any day  
For the salt that laces  
The sea air.  
I want to be out there.

# THE FAKE MERMAID

A siren widens the blue net of its scream across the park. Dragged out, misshapen into something more guttural by the doppler effect of its journey towards the river. It makes me feel less isolated somehow. Less like I'm about to be jumped on by a gang from the shadows. So I start to follow the ambulance, running up Lowgate, past the empty lit college, past the magistrates court and over the iron bridge, into the archaic east side of the city. With fluid legs, I begin to think of myself as that distorted wail, warped into shapelessness across a growing distance. I must catch up with it. I have to hear it ring true again, or I'll stretch and fall into something unrecognisable.

I run down an alleyway to where the beacons are spinning but silent, sweeping the dock walls with their kingfisher blues and greens.

"Should we call the coastguard?" an officer yells down to his colleague in the mud by the river.

Standing chest high in the mud, is a figure.

"Bit late for that, we'll have her out now."

A fireman operates a rope and winch mechanism trying to haul the thing up onto the grass bank.

"Now!" he shouts to his colleague in the vehicle. "Move forward!"

After about three attempts the fire engine's pulleys turn and click and the body is lifted out slowly, slick and tangled as afterbirth. I can hear the gasp and grunt of thick wet mud as it puckers and eddies to fill the space where the figure stood sinking. Whooping and applause hails out from the road.

She gives out a low moan, lies panting on the bank like a heavy wet selkie.

I start to splutter and cough thanks to great wafts of raw sewage. I feel as though I shouldn't be here and am offended by the point-and-click ease with which some of the bystanders are taking photos. Two officers move out from the crowd, past the paramedic who has draped the creature in a shiny thermal blanket. They restrain the woman, securing her hands in glittering cuffs.

"I'm arresting you for breaching the court order issued to you on May the 8th of this year. You do not have to say anything and have the right to remain silent but anything you do say may be given in evidence"

They load her onto a stretcher. Sirens start up and the service convoy rolls out towards Holderness Road.

"Stupid cow" someone mutters. "Ten minutes later she'd have been dead"

It seems a strange thing to say. Whoever she was, she hadn't ended up in the mud by mistake. My mouth tastes bitter as brine. I look up into the sky for the moon above the tide but all I can see is a trawler and the glare from the refinery.



# SORRY THIEVING HARRY'S

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to start out by apologising for my actions in late February last year. Assuming you have received the parcel that accompanies this letter, you will know that I am referring to the bricks with 'Thieving Harry's' printed on the side which I stole from the centre of a wall during my trip to Hull. I was struck by the uniqueness and authenticity of the bricks, and in a moment, or rather few hours, of madness, I proceeded to steal several of these bricks from the building by chiselling at them in the early hours of one Thursday morning.

There are two things I would like to apologise for, starting with the theft itself. I am deeply sorry for taking a part of Hull's culture and heritage and removing it from its habitat; it has dawned on me since then that the bricks do not belong in my living room as I believed at the time. I hope the bricks can be reunited with the wall someday, but I am aware that this may be difficult, which brings me to the second part of my apology.

I understand that the bricks which I removed were not just of cultural importance, but also structural, and as the building collapsed as a result of the missing bricks, I feel I am somewhat to blame. I am terribly sorry for the part I played in the destruction of Thieving Harry's, and I hope that the building can be reconstructed, of course using the bricks that I have returned to you.

It would be appreciated if you could pass on my sincerest apologies to Thieving Harry himself as I am aware that it is his business, and life, that I have destroyed.

Once again, I am very sorry for stealing a part of your wonderful city, and I hope that you can take this as a compliment to the richness of your city's architecture.

Yours sincerely,

Alex

# HOMECOMING

He's coming back. From small beginnings comes a superstar.

Until recently, no-one had even heard of Hull. Most people still think you're talking about the bottom of a ship, but it's not as bad as before. Those who do know about the city, know it as the birthplace of the greatest actor of our time. Dave Crest, winner of three Oscars, hasn't returned to his hometown since his rise to fame, until today. He moved to Los Angeles five years ago. A huge parade is planned for him, a marching band, open top limousine, they're going all out to make today a success.

"All this for a poncey film star, his last film was rubbish anyway."

He's being given the key to the city, which seems a strange gift for someone who chose to leave the city for pastures new. But still, it's a day out, so people are coming out, especially as it's free.

After taking a tour of the city, the Lord Mayor is waiting at City Hall to give Dave the undeserved award. Adults and children pack out Queen Victoria Square to try and catch a glimpse of the 'superstar'. He finally arrives, almost putting an end to all this nonsense. He waves to all his fans before shaking hands with the mayor. From below, everyone is recording the scene on the balcony, their lenses fixed on Dave. He approaches the microphone and prepares to speak. The roar of a bullet pierces the air, hitting him straight in the chest.

The smell of cold air, oil and chips reminded me of just  
how many things I had missed,  
and it's funny,  
the things you miss when before,  
all you could think about was getting away.

There were things I thought I would not miss like  
being groped by drunk men in tracksuits  
as I stop to savour the air at the dock  
There are things that I thought would make me want to leave  
and turn right back around,  
like seeing men in uniform,  
watching them as they clock me and decide:  
do they hate me enough to arrest me just for standing on the street corner?

But it's true,  
I missed the shabby buildings  
(In a way)  
I missed the people  
and somehow  
all of it put together  
I only know I'm home when I pick up  
the bus timetable,  
sit on the bench in the night air,  
and decide where to go next.

# THE BULL THAT GOT INTO THE POLY

No one knows why one day in the fifties a young bull turned up in Hull Polytechnic.

Came from the abattoir next door was the popular opinion, but opinion popular or not didn't change the fact there was a bull running down the corridor.

It ran into the workshopping rooms, men scattering and running trying to get away from the horns. Everyone barricaded themselves in the classrooms except for the secretary, she was much too scary for even a bull to mess with.

Two of the students, who specialised in agriculture and together had the same muscle of all the teachers combined, fashioned a lasso out of two belts and a length of string and took the bull back outside.

And that is the last you hear about the bull that got into the poly.

# SOCK

Sitting on the sand  
beyond the walls and  
pebbles of Hornsea beach,  
the royal match to  
what I hold in my hand.

I remember when you lost it,  
returning home with only  
one foot clothed,  
thinking it was gone,  
like everything else.

I see your face  
and how, with this sock,  
I could complete you,  
walk into your fresh start  
and present it to you.

This sock is not odd,  
but half of a pair.  
Now that I have found it,  
Perhaps we could make a match again.

## HULL ON TINDER

All the other lads, they're starting with a quote. Leeds has got the first verse of Champagne Supernova, trying to sound all hipster. York went for Chaucer, making out he's the sensitive reading type. You won't catch me starting with a quote, I aren't a pretentious sod.

Surprised you're bothering to read this if I'm honest. Most people take one look and swipe left. Been told I aren't bad looking, in the right light, and I don't smell so bad anymore but I am a bit on the scruffy side, more Oxfam than Topman. There's a few empty shops here and there, a Poundland by the station and that old Co-op building seemed like a good idea at the time but we've all got regrets from the '60s. Don't go thinking you can change me, make me over because I've heard it all before. Multi million pound regeneration, swing bridges ... I am what I am, a working class lad and if you're looking a beard and boat shoes you can piss off to Cambridge.

Interests? I like my football and my rugby, league mind I aren't a union pansy and I can get rowdy after a few pints but there again I do like my theatre. Yeah I know, embarrassing int it? I've had a lot of stick off the lads for it and all but I can be a cultured bugger when I want to be. That dunt mean I'm a 'lets go for long walks and talk about our feelings' type, don't pretend to be, but I'm an alright bloke, sound like and dependable.

All the other lads, they're ending with a chat up line. Sheffield's is 'you know what this steel's made from? Boyfriend material,' sappy bastard. Leicester went for 'Walkers' crisps are my second favourite thing to eat in bed,' the pervert. You wouldn't catch me ending with a chat up line, I aren't an arsehole.

But I guess, if you're after northern bloke, one that likes a drink and knows his Bennett from his Godber then er, swipe right for Hull.

# LET'S GO OUT TONIGHT

We'll try on clothes 'til we look hipster  
Then put a load of selfies on Insta  
We'll drink our weight in Tesco vodka  
Let's go out tonight

We'll fork out a tenner for a taxi  
Then go back home to get your ID  
We'll get turned away that bouncer's moody  
Let's go out tonight

We'll spend half the night in the queue  
Then find out shots aren't 3 for 2  
We'll make loads of new friends in the loo  
Lets go out tonight

We'll go mental for that Vaccines song  
Sing even though the words are wrong  
We'll pick a fight with someone strong  
Let's go out tonight

We'll wake up in bed with a traffic cone  
Then find out some twat nicked your phone  
This is the best way to spend our student loan  
Let's go out tonight

The scent of last night's cigarettes  
still linger in the air  
It is cold and dark  
just like every other day  
my knuckles are bruised  
because a drunk started on me  
and now  
I just want to go home.



## 02:15 TUESDAY

3 hours ago I took 200 selfies in the bathroom mirror. In 3 hours time I'll wake up covered in sick and remember nothing. But now it's 2:15 on Tuesday at that time in the morning when all drinks are £1 (as long you want tequila) and everyone's too drunk to remember to be cool. Indie rockers are losing their shit over Crazy In Love and you've just walked into Sugar Mill.

If you came up to me I'd ask you if you're real or some celestial image the vodka dreamt up, you'd laugh and I'd complement the way your dress traces your waist and your hips and do you do make up professionally? You'd try to look embarrassed but I'd have made you feel great and a really good song would come on, Arctic Monkeys or The Strokes. You'd be impressed that I know all the words but as the chorus comes round I'd catch the longing in your eyes and stop singing, we'd come together like we were magnets and we wouldn't hear Alex Turner or a dance floor shouting about Bloody Mary's and tabasco, there'd be nothing but the sound of our hearts beating in synch. We'd hold out for as long as we could but the passion would overcome us and our lips would meet and we'd kiss. I'd take you outside, we'd go down past Nando's to the marina and the moon would lighten up the water making Hull look like Amsterdam. I'd tell you that this is my place, that I've taken so many girls down here but you're so beautiful that moonlight and the water don't look special anymore. You'd ask to go back to mine and I'd be like, you're sure that's what you want? You'd say you couldn't stop yourself even if you wanted to and we'd go back to my room and you'd throw me down on the bed and we'd have sex and it would be amazing. In the morning you'd tell me this is how you want to wake up every day for the rest of your life and I'd say give me your number and I'll call you but I wouldn't. Come over. Please. Why don't you come over? I'd give you the night of your effing life why don't you just...?

And then you do come over. You say hi and I say hi but there isn't really anything else to say so I don't say anything. For ages. You ask if I want to dance but they're playing One Direction. I can't dance to One Direction. I'm way too cool for One Direction so I say no... To be honest it was you. You aren't so attractive up close. Your dress is a bit tight and make up is smudged. So I don't ask you to go outside past Nando's to the Marina. Just sit there 'till you went away. Next Tuesday there'll be a girl, she'll walk into Sugar Mill at 2:15 and I'll give her the night of her life. Next Tuesday...

# HOME

It'll hit me in the heart,  
Triggering a sense of recognition,  
Even after dark when the lights are on  
And the legs are out.

Maybe it'll be Old Town,  
Holding memories of gigs and friends  
And getting spat on by a delightful enemy.  
Or maybe it'll be me, feet shadowing  
The long walks home after a night out.

It could be my street,  
The coloured doors and yummy mummies,  
The hippies and unmissable stench of weed.  
That feels like home.

But I walk past all that to my spot  
Behind the houses, overgrown grass  
And a mini sofa of mud just for me.  
It gives me the silence that I need, as  
Coming home is what sets me free.

This is not like home.  
This is exotic trees and  
colourful birds swooping  
over your head  
chirping with sounds that  
are not heard in  
the grey landscapes of  
Yorkshire

This is not like home.  
Even the graffiti clad streets  
with rickety buildings  
and overgrown lawns  
are not the same.  
I went to a suburb  
looking for something  
familiar but instead  
I found nothing  
the same.

This is not like home.

# DEAR HULL

I've been feeling this way for a while and, I know it's hard, after 19 years and all but... I'm leaving you. I'm moving on and there's nothing you can do about it.

I'm not going to be like 'it's me' because it's definitely you. And I'm not going to make out it's because you've changed that we've grown apart, because you haven't. At all. You're still run down and dull and, let's face it, a bit on the chavvy side and I just... I hate that. And I hate that your fashion sense is years out of date, like the rest of the world gave up on Ugg boots in 2008, and four mediocre nightclubs is not the TripAdvisor definition of 'a nightlife.' You don't have a shred of class, not even a TGI Friday, and all this 'look at me, I've got the world's only submariium' bullshit? It's just an aquarium, a glorified Scarborough Sealife Centre. I'm sorry it just... it had to be said.

I don't mean... I mean you're not all bad. You've got a shopping centre on stilts, and the only team in the football league whose name doesn't have any letters you can colour in. You know I've always found that sexy. And I suppose there's the fair and your bridges are a bit of a turn on. And to be honest I'm terrified that I won't be able to get patties or chip spice or a £1 coffee. And what am I going to do without Humber Street Sesh, Humber Mouth Festival, Heads Up Festival, Jazz Festival, Assemble Festival and... oh my God... Freedom Festival? Fuck what am I doing? How can I...?

But I've got to stay strong because I look around here and I know that I need to see more of the world. And though this is breaking my heart, I can't sit round here wondering, 'what if?' Just don't think it's because I don't love you because I do, a lot, but this is something I must do. There's

a whole planet out there just waiting to be explored and I need to broaden my horizons. I've got a long journey ahead of me and, yeah, I know this is going to be hard for you but I'm... you see the truth is I'm... I'm moving to... Sheffield.

I'm sorry and I really hope, maybe in the future, that we can be friends.

Lydia

# TURNING BACK

As you turn a corner  
Of the fading street  
The light explodes  
In front of you,  
Illuminating the next chapter.

You stagger backward,  
Unaware that the end  
Had come so soon.  
Your eyes strain, leak,  
Fighting against the blindness it offers you.

But you are not ready yet.  
Shield your eyes  
And turn away.  
You are guaranteed to return  
On your final day.

# WILLOW

If Willow waits just a little longer, she will be able to make it in and out of Tesco Express in no time.

She glances at the crowd of rioters who are making their way up Newland Avenue. Her eyes skim across what she can see of their angry faces, half covered by the grey gas masks they wear. They wave the banners, the spades and bats while she ducks further behind the wall. She recognises her brother, Alder, by the banner he's been working on all night. SAY NO 2 OXYGEN TAX! He shouts along with the crowd and waves the banner in both hands.

Willow shakes her head. That pillow case cost much more than the tax increase. She doesn't want to think about the cost of the paint. Taking a deep breath, she redirects her attention to the glass door. Now that the mob is close enough, she makes her move.

She rushes across the concrete, not only because she doesn't want to be seen, but also because the hot ground is melting the bottom of her pumps. The door slides open and she is hit by the coolness of the room. The shopkeeper behind the counter clears his throat and points at the sign. FIVE minutes per customer ONLY.

This annoys her. Why should the shopkeeper have a full day of cool, fresh air, when the rest of them have to wear masks in order to avoid lung damage?

She unclips her mask and brushes grimy hair from her face. To waste time, she reties it into a ponytail, tilting her head back so that the cool air washes over her face. She looks directly at the cameras, knowing that it will read her skin tone and eye colour wrong; she has spent hours rubbing her hair in oil and laying dirt over her skin until she is well disguised.

Another irritated snort from the shopkeeper sends her wandering the aisles. His eyes stay on her, burning into her back as she trundles up and down the aisles, pretending to look interested in each and every item. She glances up and catches the shopkeeper's cold, green eyes on her. They sparkle with suspicion. He is right to be suspicious; Willow knows exactly



what she needs, and exactly where it is.

“Ya gotta minute,” the shopkeeper says, glancing at his watch.

Willow grunts. What a prick. She turns down another aisle and peaks at the window. The crowd hasn’t quite reached the shop yet. She fidgets with the strap on her mask as she pulls it tight over her shoulder. Had she misjudged the crowd? If she has made an error, she and Alder will die within the next few days.

She inches towards the right aisle. Sweat pricks her forehead, even though this aisle is cooler than the others. The machines buzz, as does the aching in her head. Her eyes drop to the nearest crate. It isn’t the fullest, but it will do.

“Don’t touch what you can’t pay fo’,” the shopkeeper sneers.

She picks up the crate and tucks it under one arm, jingles her purse. He raises his eyebrows, clearly surprised that this street rat is carrying money. Again, he is right; the purse is filled with nuts and bolts she found while rummaging the tip.

As she approaches the till, beads of sweat trickle down her back and soak into her t-shirt.

“You work?” the shopkeeper asks as he rings up the total. Willow nods, but doesn’t elaborate. He waits, then continues, “Where at?” She says nothing. “On t’construction sites?”

She nods, but still doesn’t speak. Last month, Holly was sent to one of the camps for theft. The only evidence a recording of her voice. Willow eyes the drones on the walls, which will be released within seconds of her grab. One floats above the door, and will make quick work of her if she doesn’t move quickly.

A loud bang startles both her and the shopkeeper. They turn to the window, where the mob approach. A man throws a spade. Another bang against the window. The spade bounces off, leaving not even a scratch on the glass.

The shopkeeper reaches for the lock-in button. This is Willow's only chance. She snatches the crate and runs for the door.

"Ey up!"

There is a buzz as the lock comes down, but she is already halfway out. The drones fly at her, but the door closes just in time. With a click, it locks, and the drones bounce around the inside of the shop like tennis balls.

Willow hopes that the shopkeeper will open the doors for the drones, but she knows he is not that stupid. With the mob right outside, he cannot risk his entire stock for the sake of half a crate.

There is a moment of silence as all eyes descend on her. Her, and her crate. The mob are still, their eyes stone. She's the first to move. Darting to the end of the street, she turns right onto Cottingham Road. The crowd scream and follow. In her peripheral vision, she catches Alder tripping some of the men with a large shovel, before racing after her. She can almost hear his thoughts. How could she be so stupid? She's going to get herself killed.

She keeps running, past the dilapidated houses and the abandoned Lidl. She runs straight over the cross road that hasn't seen traffic since before she was born, and past the slums that have been slowly cleared out over the last decade. Her legs burn. This is what she trains every morning for. Despite the throbbing in her head, she keeps going. The air is thick as she breathes, but she doesn't have chance to reclip her mask. Her lungs scream in agony.

The crate weighs heavy against her arm, but she doesn't let go. The end of a spade grazes her back, but she keeps going until she reaches the bridge over the dry River Hull. She picks a low spot by the bank, then launches herself from it. She tumbles onto the dusty ground, dropping the crate. To her horror, there is a smash, but she doesn't have time to investigate.

A searing pain jolts through her leg as she stands. She grabs the crate and takes off again. The quickest members of the mob are clambering

down the bank, giving her an extra few seconds.

Cool liquid seeps onto her hands, making the crate slippery. She readjusts it, but still can't grip it the way she wants to. Her hands smart from clinging onto the crate so tightly.

A man screams behind, she turns to see Alder holding a shovel above the nearest man. When the shovel comes down, the man crumples to the ground, and Alder is left wheezing over the body. One man tackles Alder, another delivers kicks to his stomach and chest.

Willow slows, her stomach churning. She should turn back, hand over the goods. What's the point in any of this if Alder will die either way?

"Ger off!" Alder screams between kicks and punches.

Willow hesitates. More men are coming down the banks, and she sees some women preparing to try the jump from the bridge.

She yanks a bottle from the crate.

"Oi, tosspots!" She holds up the bottle, then places it on the parched ground in front of her. Condensation drips down the glass and forms a small pool at its base, before evaporating almost immediately.

Willow spins on her heels and takes off. When she is about sixty metres away, she looks back. There is a pile-on for the bottle, and her brother is limping away up the bank, but he does not look at her.

A few of the mob are still chasing her, but she knows she is safe; she was born and bred on the dusty banks of the River Hull, and there is only one person who knows its curves and dips better than she does.

Finally, she comes to the old docks, where a chain link fence separates the city from the poisonous Humber River. She rattles her hands against the links until she finds the weak spot beside one of the poles. All she can hear is her own heavy breathing as she begins to pull herself through. She thinks she has lost her pursuers until she hears shouts and footsteps heading in her direction.

Her heart leaps. Her hands are slippery against the metal, and no matter how hard she pulls, she can't seem to get her whole body through. A burning works itself up from her stomach to her chest. She bashes against the chains despite the noise she is making. There is another shout. They have spotted her. If she doesn't get out, she's dead.

She lets the crate clatter to the ground. Broken glass clinks inside. Within seconds, she is through, but she still cannot get the crate through the fence so reaches down and pulls out two bottles, thrusts them into her deep pockets before reaching for another. Broken glass bites into her hand, and she drops a broken bottle before snatching a whole one.

By now, the others are too close. She abandons the rest, and sprints towards the black river.

It's an hour before she feels safe enough to stop running. She made the awful mistake of letting the others know where the weak spot in the fence is. She can never be sure of safety again.

She wipes a bloody hand on her jacket, then inspects the wound for more glass. Nothing as far as she can see, but the cut still stings as though something is stabbing her. Now that she's stopped running, her leg aches. She pulls her mask over her face and takes the biggest breath she can manage.

A coughing fit forces her to sit, then lay down, then close her eyes and pray that the pain in her chest and eyes will stop.

She takes the easy route home, a small brick hut that used to be a bus stop. It's a long walk, and she stops at the side of the river to skim some stones. Even though it's black, the silky lapping sound of the waves is tempting. She aches to peel her clothes off and dive in, but she holds herself back. Everyone she knows has burns from the chemical water. Alder's are the worst; he's missing three toes from when he paddled along the shore as a child.

She cringes and looks across the river, where there is nothing but a faint glow in the distance. The bridge was destroyed years ago to break up the Humber Union. Scunthorpe and Grimsby were bombed to craters. Hull was lucky to be left intact, even if it was a wasteland.

Willow kicks a rock and wipes the sweat from her forehead. Maybe there is something out there. She and Alder will have to leave soon, now that their riverside is no longer safe. Couldn't they look for more? Something swells in her chest: hope or dread, she doesn't know the difference.

By the time she gets home, the sun has to set. Alder is waiting at the entrance with his arms crossed over his chest. When she first comes into view, his expression softens with relief, but as she comes closer it hardens like the concrete he spends every day pouring, and his eyes shine with fury.

"You daft twonk," he mutters as she steps inside. "Almost got yasen killed."

He pulls the bin-liner door closed, and follows her into the centre of the room.

She sits down and places the four bottles on the ground, each containing 750ml of life. She breaks the cap of the closest, takes a small sip, then offers it to Alder.

He stares at it, eyebrows furrowed, and drops to his knees. Willow senses that he's debating between accepting it and showing was right from wrong. She shouldn't steal. She shouldn't put herself in such dangerous situations. She should find a job laying concrete like the rest of humanity.

But after a moment, he gives in. He takes a long gulp, then sets the bottle back down. They both stare at it, the most expensive thing in the world, sitting right there on their shack floor.

"Water," he says. "It tops owt."

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Who stole all the fish?  
Where do the Hull Giraffes gather?  
Where do the sirens go?  
Why are there trains and cows on the Humber?  
Who was the fake mermaid?  
Whose is that sock?  
We know, that was our mission, to find out.



New writing from the Writing Squad for Humber Mouth