

Ghost Town Street

SAMPLER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Honicknowle Book of the Dead*  
*A Long Weekend on the Sofa*  
*Love Letter to an Imaginary Girlfriend*

SAMPLER

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Ghost Town Street

SAMPLE

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*Glossary*

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# Friary House

1

The day before the letter arrives  
I go out walking  
keeping a distance  
a metre or two from my shadow  
which moves ahead  
but never far enough  
to detach itself and be free.  
I think of calling it back  
like one would call to a dog  
or throwing a stick to see if it runs.  
I wave and it waves back.

2

On the eve of moving into exile  
I discover a dozen benches  
along the Atlantic seafront  
where the dead sit with friends,  
sometimes strangers.  
I know this place  
this feeling of loss.

I make a telescope  
out of my writing hand  
gaze through a tunnel of ink stains  
see other shadows out walking  
in groups or pairs  
think about what breed of dog  
I'd like my shadow to be  
one that doesn't bark too much  
one that doesn't walk by itself.  
Only silence and rainfall

I conclude will come between us.  
Crossing Madeira Road I turn for home  
leaving the sunshine and the world  
of coughs and sneezes behind  
and unknown to me at this point,  
surrendering my freedom  
on the doorstep of number ten.

3

On the day the letter arrives  
telling me not to leave my home  
for eighty-four days  
I take George Orwell  
down from the bookshelf  
and we go walking  
through the kitchen together  
like two down and outs  
with nowhere else to go.  
The writer and the ghostwriter.  
Bretonside and Paris.  
Freedom Fields and Catalonia.

Restless for the Chatter of the crowd  
we skate across the 20/20 darkness  
but nothing moves  
out on the streets of the town.  
The city is as empty as a seashell.

If it were safe  
for George and I to leave here  
we'd go walking together  
along Ghost Town Street  
feeding hungry flocks of seagulls  
strutting for the surveillance cameras  
like extras in an Alfred Hitchcock remake.

All that's needed now  
is to slip into a reindeer jumper  
pop a bottle of champagne  
and glug glug glug  
we could play Santa Claus.  
Unwrapping freedom  
we could send a Christmas card  
to Patrick McGoochan in Portmeirion  
make make-believe rocket noises  
or fake a landing on the rooftop  
instead of hanging around here  
for eighty-four days  
listening to The Groundhogs.

4

After playing to the absent crowd  
I return to the kitchen  
drop a pyramid into hot water  
blink and a sequence of mirages occur.  
Camels on the cobbled back lane.  
Parking meters turning into Daleks  
Chasing drivers back to their cars.  
A golden palace pulled like a cardigan  
over the head of the barcode.  
Pyramid in hand I blink again  
head for the oasis of the sofa  
thoughtfully plonk myself down  
to read undercover, paperback in hand.

5

After reading a little bit of George  
I take a telephone call from his older brother

who calls fleetingly before vanishing  
like the last of the summer winos  
into the vaults of the underground.  
George's brother is a man of secrets  
a man of mystery, a man of red tape,  
another classified pedestrian  
on Threadneedle Street,  
a Cambridge graduate on a West End escalator  
the first in line to the family's portfolio  
hidden underneath a Swiss Cottage mattress.  
I imagine him travelling on the Northern Line  
between Camden Town and Belsize Park.  
I think of him now in that tin of sardines  
another newspaper reader in a pin-striped mask  
hanging off a two-hundred-year-old broadsheet line  
heading for the chandelier at the end of the tunnel.  
The train passes under the Roundhouse  
and the soundtracks of my bohemian youth.  
Within the hour George's older brother  
will be on the blower  
will be looking back at Westminster  
from the family home on Parliament Hill  
the corridors where he walked with Florence  
the little coffee shop on Berkeley Square.

## Meetings in April

I meet the nightingale  
out walking in April  
on the corner of Dorothy Ward Lane.  
We exchange greetings  
in Japanese and English.  
She points to a wildflower  
the white and yellow head of a daisy  
growing on this highway of footsteps  
its slender neck sticking up through  
a crack in the pavement.

I write her a haiku  
with too many lines

too many stanzas  
too many syllables.

I meet the waitress.  
She feeds me bars of so much delight  
and I meet the bubble car lady  
I've seen her twice now  
driving backwards through Speedwell City  
taking one last look at the sea.

## Missing You

I miss you and I miss the crowds  
my social life has dwindled  
to an island the size  
of a four-letter word.

I miss your freckles  
the seeds that bloom into promises  
every time you smile.

I miss the traffic jams  
the bumper-to-bumper intimacies.  
I swing like a pendulum  
between solitude, loss  
and slipping into your arms.

I miss your company  
and I miss your kindness.  
You caught my eye  
and threw it back.

The sun is out  
and so is the rain.  
I haven't cried so much  
since the night you left.  
I must have swallowed a cloud  
or a broken heart.

Every day I go out walking  
but you're not there.

I take your photograph  
out of my memory  
pin it up all over the sky  
look for you amongst the masks.

## George and the Goldfish

After another landline conversation  
tails off like birdsong in the backyard  
I talk rubbish to the goldfish  
who I imagine spends all day  
swimming two metres  
or three seconds apart  
waiting for such stimulus

but then I realise  
there aren't any goldfish  
there isn't a tank  
then I wonder whether  
I'm having a flashback  
so I write a note to remind myself  
to stop talking to things  
that aren't there  
like George  
who isn't a goldfish  
remind myself to concentrate  
on important things  
like making shopping lists  
a Papermate pen  
a copy of *The Guardian*  
toilet rolls  
pasta  
a bottle of disinfectant  
a night out at the White House  
a couple thousand shares in Dettol  
a calendar  
something for the goldfish,  
some pork sausages for George.

In the meantime  
humming in the moonlight

the stock market crashes  
while the world plays pinball  
out on Ghost Town Street  
I sit here  
in my father's old armchair  
on Nightingale Gardens  
watching the sun set  
over the rim of a red bandana.

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## Thirteen Stars

You can't go travelling  
can't go to where  
you'd like to be  
the last flights have gone.  
You're standing in your imagination  
on the roundabout to somewhere else  
hitch-hiking at the end of April  
down to the Thirteen Stars  
where every key hanging off a hook  
opens a door to a different part of the world  
once guests have checked into the lobby  
they move from room to room.  
There's no borderlines here  
no luggage checks for contraband  
no trips across the sky.

In room thirteen you can send  
a postcard from Massachusetts.

In room four hundred  
you can go sailing on the Speedwell  
hangout on the Mayflower Steps  
be a pilgrim or a pothead.

Room number nine has bat-swing doors  
sometimes you just have to go in shooting  
once you step inside tell the bartender  
that you're here to see the dentist  
to walk the graveyard streets of Tombstone  
to dance with the widows of gunslingers  
in Arizona's silver dust.

In room nine hundred and ninety-nine  
you can spend the night

driving around London in a fire engine  
while thinking about smoking dope  
next door in Marrakesh  
or tripping in a bicycle shed across the corridor-  
an eight-hour psychedelic holiday  
somewhere in the Swiss Alps.

Take the lift or take the stairs  
up to the rooftop terrace  
to see the skyscrapers  
the mountain ranges of the world.  
Ski back down to sea level  
go underground – explore the basement  
meet the grandchildren of Jules Verne.  
Behind the door of room number six  
the architecture looks Italian  
but the dragon's Welsh.  
Spend the afternoon in Portmeirion  
face pressed against the window  
years after McGoon left town  
then spin the atlas  
when night falls to see  
where the Thirteen Stars takes you next –  
skinny dipping in St. Tropez  
calling room service in Mongolia  
or setting off in a snowstorm  
from North Road Station  
crossing Central Park  
getting lost in New York  
trying to find Outland Road.

## The Hands of the Rich and the Hands of the Poor

Last night down here  
on Ghost Town Street  
a mile or so from Friary House  
I heard the sound  
of many hands clapping  
out on the cobbled lane.  
Moving towards the window  
I leaned out over the kitchen sink  
saw neighbours clapping in backyards  
to a song I couldn't hear  
then I heard a whisper on the grapevine  
then my shadow quietly hummed  
the nightingale's song in my ear  
and we joined in with the applause.

Last night on cobbled lanes  
and cul-de-sacs all over the country  
the old and the young  
were banging saucepan lids  
with knives and forks and silver spoons  
the hands of the rich  
and the hands of the poor  
clapping for the doctors and the nurses  
clapping all the way back  
to nineteen forty-eight  
clapping on the doorsteps  
of Tredegar and Ebbw Vale  
clapping in Derriford and Freedom Fields  
clapping for the man who for me  
is the grandfather I never had  
the grandfather who gave my mother  
a place to sleep  
a place to give birth to three children

two girls and a boy  
one in March  
one in November  
one on Christmas Day.

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