Street Life

Picture this: Friday afternoon, the busiest street in your nearest city. Walking slowly, without real purpose, you move amongst the swinging paper bags and children traipsing behind sunburnt parents towards the river. A man yawns without covering his mouth; his foot, in yellow trainers, slung up against the wall beside the cashpoint. You stop and start beside the outdoor market and come across a greyhound waiting patiently outside Sainsbury's. The smell: pizza, oozing with garlic and oil from the nearby doors of an Italian restaurant, then the sharpness of petrol and the bready scent of beer. What else? Colliding sounds of competing brass bands and acoustic, strangled renditions of something you take to be Elvis, but could really be anything; the sudden red and purple of a stall selling flowers; a crush of people moving tightly, talking, laughing, arguing, holding hands and holding coffees.

I am in love with cities. I love how they make me feel. I love their sense of possibility, their dynamism, their capacity for surprise. I love the jolting rhythms found in any one street: the slowness of the elderly women talking beside the fruit and vegetable stalls, the languid clouds of smoke exhaled by the tattooed men outside their regular pubs, and the busy women walking briskly towards department stores. I love the unique identities of cities and the way that different areas of urban space are invested with unspoken meanings. I love the proximity of other lives, other experiences, other viewpoints. And I love exploring cities on foot.

I live in a suburb on the outskirts of my hometown, Newcastle upon Tyne. It's an easy distance on foot from my front door to the city centre and I spend much of my spare time in Newcastle. More often than not, that involves simply walking. I like walking the city streets early in the morning, or in the evening after it has been raining. I walk alongside the dark nightclubs on Mosley Street, with their upper floors lit from beneath like ghoulish figures telling ghost stories. I go to the cinema alone, and sit outside the adjoining café with a book beneath the outdoor heaters. I walk through Grainger Market, with its lugubrious yellow lighting; visceral, earthy smells; and eclectic mix of businesses old and new. And I wander through the crowds n sunny afternoons, when the entire city seems to shrug off its air-conditioned malaise and come on to the streets in a joyful, exuberant way that seems – improbably, incredibly, almost laughably – Mediterranean in spirit.

I know Newcastle intimately. I grew up here, and for most of my adult life I have lived here. Sometimes I think I know it better than myself. If only I could divide up my own mind as easily as I could differentiate the city thoroughfares. If only I could walk as simply from one part of my personality to another, avoiding my bad habits as if they were just a pub I'd never drink in, a pub called *Jealousy*, a bar named *Conceit*.

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I read a lot as a teenager, both as a means of escapism and because I feared being left behind. Buying books and reading them was a sort of desperate stab at an education I felt I was being denied at my secondary school, which was struggling under the legacy of a bad reputation and constant threats of closure. I picked up almost anything I could get my hands on and one day I found a second-hand translation of Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* in a bookshop in Keswick. That was where I discovered there is a name for people who love cities and who turn idly walking them into something of an art: the Flâneur. I was a girl from Gateshead: 16, shy, with bottle-bleached hair and a nose ring. I was not a flâneur. Or was I?

Lauren Elkin made a compelling and necessary case for the female flâneur – the *flâneuse* – in 2017. She is right, of course, that there are women in art and literature who have enjoyed and explored the city space and that they are there, in abundance, when you look for them. Whenever

I'm reading or watching a film and I come across one of these women, I smile: at Jean Seberg strolling coolly with her *New York Herald Tribune* in *A Bout de Souffle*; at Madeleine Bourdouxhe's *Marie* as she wanders aimlessly about the Right Bank in Paris; at Virginia Woolf and her London street haunting; or at Julie Christie's carefree city hopping as Liz in the 1963 film *Billy Liar*.

But still, these women have been largely excluded from the canon of urban walkers. Whilst the psychogeographers tramped across London armed with cord trousers, camera and obtuse critical framework, the way that these women walked – with Woolf as a notable exception – was rarely elevated or explored. And gender wasn't the only obstacle to a life of flânerie; there was also my location and social class: flâneurs didn't wear Primark ballet pumps, eat Pot Noodles or catch a Go North East double-decker through Gateshead on a Sunday. They didn't drink milkshakes outside Northumberland Street's HMV or down pints of Skittles in empty nightclubs in the afternoon. The Flâneur was bourgeois: a classifier of European crowds; a collector of faces; a man with the time and resources to spend all day loafing. He was confident and in control and the city, with all its noise and colour, moved about him.

For much of my teens and early 20s, I felt as though I had fallen through the cracks of what a young woman was supposed to be. Gangs of skaters and goths hung around Grey's Monument on a Saturday, finding camaraderie in one another's stoned company. I tried my best to fit in, sitting on the fringes of lots of different social groups, but a lot of the time I felt passive: an observer, haunting the city streets, never quite doing all the things I was meant to be doing. Walking was a constant for me then, as it is now: it was a means of making sense of things, working through thoughts as the landscape moved about me. I began to imagine that I felt out of place because of the city where I lived. In songs, books and films, people left the North for London, to lose themselves and to find themselves again: smarter, richer, better-looking, happier. There you could be broken down and reassembled into someone entirely different. Stripped down like a paper doll, you could put on new clothes and become someone else, and for a young person dissatisfied with life, this was an intoxicating idea. At 18, I was involved in a youth project with the BBC. I was funded to travel to Broadcast Centre, alone, several times over the course of a year. I had felt drowned in London: drunk with anonymity, lost on vibrant streets filled with bakeries and coffee shops and bars and bookshops, blooming on street corners like bunches of flowers.

I found myself split. On the one hand, I had a lot of pride in my heritage and a fascination with the working-class art and literature of the North. On the other, I was frustrated. Deep down, somewhere dark and shameful, I wanted to be the sort of person who visited London theatres and the Fringe; the sort of person who spoke six languages, watched Russian cinema and knew how to make – God forbid – a tabbouleh. I dreamed about living in Paris, bought travel guides for solo travellers and imagined it was inevitable that one day I'd end up squatting in Simone de Beauvoir's old flat.

How is it, I would think, *that there are so many millions of people in Paris, and I'm not even just* one *of them?*

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I wanted to know what it was like to live in, and to walk in, another city and so in my mid-20s I moved to Glasgow. Glasgow, I thought, was a city with a clear identity: synonymous with art, with left-wing politics, live music, comedy and bands. For two years, I lived on the first floor of an austere tenement block in Shawlands, on the Southside. There was no yard and no garden, and I couldn't walk from my flat to the city centre. I didn't need to: more or less everything I needed

was within ten minutes of my front door. I discovered that small areas of Glasgow are contained within themselves. They are almost like tiny cities within a city, each with the diversity, the character, the life and the bustle of Glasgow, but with their own unique characters to explore. I returned to Newcastle every few months, for birthdays and Christmases, and marvelled at how small things seemed when I stepped off the train at Central Station. While I was away, blocks of student flats sprung up about the city and the old Odeon cinema on Pilgrim Street was knocked down and replaced with the STACK shipping container village, meant to evoke something of the bustling markets of Camden. I walked about, pulling my suitcase behind me. The containers were painted uniformly grey and were too small to be comfortably browsed: many of them were closed or empty and in the others, people sat with their arms folded behind silent counters. In the centre of the containers was a stage, where men with acoustic guitars sang covers of Oasis songs, and long tables of people drank beneath precarious patio heaters. Upstairs, an uneven wooden walkway was covered with a sheet of clear plastic, which fluttered in the breeze. A puddle gathered where the floorboards met.

I found the whole thing depressing. Again, it felt like a crisis of identity, an attempt at the urban cool of London, done all wrong. I thought about the cinema that had stood there before, with its ambience of shady downtown New York, and I fantasised that it had been turned into an arts space: the cinema restored; a bookshop; a bar; a music venue. I sat opposite STACK, in the sun, and watched people coming and going. Men in checked shirts stood smoking at the doors, whilst women with barrel-waved hair and bodycon dresses smiled and posed for Instagram selfies behind them. I felt it again: a sense of never having quite fit, a sense of being always on the outside, looking in.

There was no way that you could imagine those shipping containers being there in ten years, in twenty. To look at them was to wonder what was next. It felt like a lack of confidence on the part of the city. I thought about the years I'd spent feeling uncertain about myself and it occurred to me that much of that had been mirrored in the environments I'd found myself in. I was glad to have left, then, and yet the longer I lived away, the more I found myself thinking about Newcastle and the years I'd spent wandering about its streets. Many things about the city frustrated me, but it was the sort of frustration you feel towards an old friend or a sibling. In Glasgow, I had found a city where I could walk for hours and still not reach the limits, but Newcastle city centre could be walked comfortably in an afternoon. Newcastle was a city made for walking. It was both large enough that a person could be simply a face in a crowd, and small enough to retain an intimacy. I didn't feel lost. True, I felt the weight of association of the many thousands of times I had walked those streets before – and that was heavy and uncomfortable sometimes, yes. But it also had a neglected beauty in itself. In many ways, it felt *more* exciting to me, then, to live in a city where everything was so central, where lives rubbed alongside one another more closely and the social and cultural experience of the city centre was so concentrated, yet so diverse.

No one, I realised, can live in any city entirely at random. We carve out routes that reflect us. During my time in Glasgow, I had mapped out small areas for myself: if I was in the city centre, there were certain bars and certain cafes and certain places that I tended to visit. I was subconsciously creating a smaller city within the urban sprawl. We are, I think, always reaching out for the edges of ourselves, looking for the places that we overlap with our environments. How we use the city becomes a way of asserting our own cultural identity, a code of complex cultural identifiers, a world of subtle meaning. I drink coffee at this café because I am this kind

of person; I shop here because I want to be another. The city is a language and by living there you learn to read it.

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Picture a street in your nearest city. The same street, that same Friday afternoon: but this time it is silent. There are no people. The shutters are pulled down. A delivery cyclist flies down the road in a perfectly straight line, a scarf pulled over the lower half of his face. A helicopter hangs overhead like a spider. The sun is in the same place in the sky, but there's no greyhound, no brass band, no pizza oozing garlic and oil. The arterial structures of the city are as they always have been, but nothing moves within them. Once, we might have found this absurd to imagine. But as the COVID-19 crisis swept across the world, images were shared online of just that. We were a world of haunted cities.

While many commentators took comfort in the sudden lack of congestion in city spaces, I found it profoundly sad. The city is often depicted as a place to be escaped, but to me it is a place to escape *to*. Cities live. They breathe, they grow old. They go on living. A city is a physical representation of the continuity of time in a way that a rural environment cannot be. Newcastle is over 1,000 years old as a settlement: Hadrian's Wall stretches beneath streets where burrito bars and cigar shops rub alongside churches and libraries. Things get jumbled. Our lives are in constant overlap with one another and the past is always present. Buildings go up and buildings go down. Each age offers something to us, a way of looking at the world.

I visited Newcastle city centre once during lockdown in early May 2020. It was VE Day, a hot day at the beginning of May, and there were Union Jacks draped in the streets of Gosforth, rainbows pasted on high windows. People stood out in the street, the sun shining on gleaming, tattooed arms, talking to neighbours. Families were out walking over the Town Moor and I made my own path over the long, uneven grass, away from people. When I finally arrived at Haymarket, I stood beside the Cathedral in the silence and tried to picture what it would usually be like on a warm Spring day. I could hear the birds singing. A drunk man saluted a passing ambulance, spilling tins from his plastic bag onto the road. I felt sad standing there, alone, surrounded by empty buildings. It felt like I was looking back on empty monuments to a world that could no longer exist.

'It's almost sort of, like… Ozymandian,' I typed into Messenger. *Jesus*, I thought, *get over yourself. You can't send that.* But it was true: there I was, standing at the apex of all of those 1,000 years, all of those different eras built upon one another, a city constantly growing and moving, right up until that moment. It all seemed wrong. It was the in-between spaces that I couldn't wait to return to, but without people, those in-between spaces didn't exist. I missed the places that have an accidental quality, the places where things come together. I missed the smells of food, and the sounds of buskers, and the red and purple of a flower stall, there, in a city built for walking.

I walked on, slowly. There were a handful of people scattered about on the high street looking shellshocked. A digital sign flickered: *We <3 NHS*. I made my way down Grey Street, thinking about how Rebecca Solnit had written about the sadness of the colour blue. The whole street appeared blue to me: a neon sky and the absence of people and traffic simply an azure, empty space stretching away to a deserted river. I looped back around the silent nightclubs where I'd spent so much time as a teenager, and then up the Bigg Market where hastily typed pieces of A4 paper pasted on scruffy windows announced indefinite closure. I noticed for the first time that, high up on the wall above a Greek restaurant, there were lettered tiles that spelled out the words *Sunlight Chambers*. I perched on the edge of a bench and I felt overwhelmed by something: a

sort of grief, a sort of dull hope, a sort of comfort in being back in the city, even as it unsettled me. I'd brought a notebook with me, and I tried to write my thoughts down, thinking that in years to come I'd want to read back over them. A bell was ringing, somewhere, solemnly. I sat there for a long time. I wrote down those two words and underlined them: <u>Sunlight Chambers</u>. And then I walked home.