

## Winged Docs

The sky is a familiar grey  
Clouded with the smog  
That rests on the rooftops  
Fairy dust highlighting  
The cracks in the windows of the corner shop.

I pay for my vanilla coke  
Caffeine will be necessary for the night ahead  
And I was late getting home  
So I was late to the bus  
Which meant no coffee from the town  
So coke it is –  
Compromises as per usual  
But as my mum says  
Compromises make the world go round.

It's a short walk  
From one side of the street to the next  
But even in those two peaceful minutes  
I am surrounded by a gallery of life.  
Neighbours chat over fences  
Kids play curby  
A man asks if I've got a lighter  
Or some change for the bus  
Or something else to that effect:  
A spider's web of souls  
Crossing like a cat's cradle  
Completely interwoven.

If I were to stop and take it in  
I would see it to be beautiful;  
I'd take a breath and know that all is well  
Because Stockton's heart still beats  
Despite my inadequate levels of caffeine –  
But I don't stop  
Except to check my phone  
And see that I am already two minutes late.

I swing open the door  
And my boss rolls his eyes  
But he is used to it by now  
I'd never claim to be organised.  
I hang my bag and shout a hello to the kitchen  
Textbooks positioned on one side of the counter  
And the order pad on the other.

Then for the next five hours  
I camp in my corner  
Briefly interrupted by the lives of customers  
Both separate and intertwined with my own  
The boarded-up windows are as normal to me  
As the painted glass in the college library  
But the comments I get on my 'posh' accent  
When I'm taking these orders at work,  
And the subtle switch in energy  
When I say I'd like to work for the BBC,  
Tell me that the men in the same uniform as my dad  
Don't see me as connected –  
I dropped my dad's Durham lilt  
When my mates said he spoke 'spesh'  
But now I sound weird to my family  
Stuck in No Man's Land  
Cast out by each trench.

I'm interrupted by the buzz of the door;  
I put down my school pen  
And pick up the order pen –  
They both have exactly the same ink  
But it would just seem odd to me  
If I wrote 'FR' for fried rice  
With my old Parker.  
It's like it's sacred to me:  
I've realised that I cling to it subconsciously  
Like a ticket  
Or a key.

This first woman orders 55 – Sweet and Sour Pork  
The next 45 – Chicken Fried Rice  
Then it's a study of Cameron's foreign policy  
Or German verb conjugation  
And a combination dish  
A quick catch-up about Sandra's kids  
Notes on Blanche's tragic downfall  
A convo about the fish tank  
Another phone call.

The driver arrives  
Armed with a new Facebook post  
And delivery bags she forgot to return  
My boss comes out with tea for a chat  
Before rush hour arrives.

And the night goes on in this way:  
Customers, conversation, Chow Mein

A flurry of deliveries and orders  
A rush of people and food  
Sparks of brief connection  
Over a central human tradition.

“You won’t remember,” he says –  
An elder around the town fire  
Fables from the past so the youth won’t forget  
Reading from the menu as if it’s a quest  
Refusing to wear his glasses  
Like his wife says  
The coal dust of his craft freckles his face  
Black constellations on tanned leather skin  
He asks whether I knew the girl I’d replaced  
“She was lovely,” he says with a smile. “She was Indian? Or maybe Muslim?”

“What have you got there?” she asks  
I cross the last ‘t’ on my politics essay  
She wants to know where I’m going after I’ve passed  
Hopefully uni, but definitely away  
Good on me for getting out, she says  
She talks of this town as if it’s a trap:  
A TS postcode wrapped around her wrists  
Council house curtains used as a gag  
Her foundation is thick, but I still spot the bruise  
“I look forward to seeing you out there on the news!”

“Another Friday night shift?” I ask  
Nine fifteen pm on the dot  
She’s armoured in scrubs and a smile  
Hair falling out of a top knot  
Hardworking and kind  
In the uniquely Northern way  
She stares at the fish tank for a bit  
Then after she pays  
She slumps on the bench:  
“Twelve hour shifts for the past three days.”

“Are you married yet?” he says, eyebrows raised,  
That’s apparently what he is always asked  
‘Gypsy’ is what I’ve heard him called  
My boss tells me to be cautious of him:  
He has scammed before and he might again  
But he seems canny, he’s chatty  
One of the only lads here that actually looks happy  
He smiles at everyone as they walk in  
And it’s nice to see, for once, a smile that’s genuine  
“My Ferrari’s outside,” he smirks. “I’ll see you again.”

We're nearing the end of the night  
My German essay is almost done  
A man stumbles in  
His face is all bruised  
His speech kind of slurred  
Except not with the usual manner of a drunk  
He winces as he mumbles that he's homeless  
Laying his life story out on the counter  
I try to weave it into a new code  
Alan Turing cracking the Enigma  
Of how to explain this man's request for free chips  
To my boss  
Through my nervous rambling  
In his second language.

Eventually the battle is won:  
The man walks away without starving  
Dunkirk across the channel of the corridor  
A fight against poverty  
Won by civilian intervention  
In what is supposedly the government's war.

I feel like an ancient messenger sometimes  
My Docs squeak on the tiles of the passageway  
As I run to deliver requests and replies  
From the counter to the kitchen  
A bridge between two lives  
The second coming of Hermes  
Interweaving stories  
To ensure the world turns smoothly  
So nobody screams my ear off  
If they get the wrong kind of curry.

The routine goes on  
Kids running past screaming racist chants  
Shouts of "Ew, Corona!"  
Or "Do you eat dog?"  
I've heard them so many times by now  
That I have a catalogue of retorts stored in my brain  
That I can't use because sarcasm to customers would lose me my job.

But for every ignorant kid  
There's an old woman calling them "hooligan youths"  
And for every angry blonde woman in my face  
There's a reassuring conversation about the news  
For every misguided comment about my boss's race  
There's a life behind that ignorance:

A missed opportunity for education  
A lack of funding for community organisations  
A stereotype that has never been corrected  
An economic block that leaves cultures disconnected.

I leave the shop  
And the next day I'm in college  
Recounting these stories to my friends  
Who have blue skies over their houses  
But fences like border walls  
And they can't compute  
They'll never know –  
They only see Stockton's people through the media's crystal ball.  
Their worlds are ships in the night  
Planes lost in the same storm  
A crash would be eventful  
And might do more good than harm.

"Yes, I'll get your Costa."  
I have become a bank for my friend  
Which is mad since she lives in a literal mansion  
And I was raised in council houses  
With my mum desperately working to find means to an end  
But we can still sit and chat  
Equals since primary school  
She never fully gets my stories  
I'll never really get her world view  
But we've never had a barrier  
I watched *Jurassic Park* in her snug  
She came for tea in my flat  
Differences aren't noticed when you're a kid –  
I wonder when we grew out of that.

As I got older, our finances shifted  
Hard times gave way to pure luck  
I now know the comforts of stability  
But I still remember when keeping a house was tough  
I'm still camping on my spot in No Man's Land  
Persephone crossing from Hades to Olympus  
Until the two sides connect –  
Until there is representation of every journey  
I'll keep chiselling at those border walls  
I'll continue to play Hermes.