

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.