

HONOR GAVIN

Honor Gavin was born in Birmingham in 1984 to a radio presenter and a retail assistant. To her three older siblings she owes her love of pop and *Back to the Future*. After her ambition of playing football for Aston Villa was jilted, she went on to study literature at the University of Oxford, where she also formed a band called How Can You. Architecturally, Hertford College's Bridge of Sighs had nothing on Birmingham's concrete skyways, prompting a fierce fondness for her home city that later became obsessive.

A writer, musician and academic, Gavin is a founding member of the whenwebuildagain.org collective, has written widely on subjects including Samuel Beckett, Buster Keaton, and Brutalism, and has been a contributor to zines such as *The Modernist* and *All That is Common*. After a period in Berlin, she currently teaches literature and film at the University of Sussex, and plays piano and guitar in a band called Textual.

MIDLAND

Honor Gavin

Penned in the Margins

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for

Thomas & James

It's not down in any map. True places never
are.

Herman Melville

~

I have never been very certain as to the value
of tangible links with the past.

Herbert Manzoni

MIDLAND

In the ground there are pins. Here, the ground is held together by pins. In the sandstone ridge the diggers dig through: nails. Tools, but not the ones the workers are using. A thick wire that skewers a corpse and then flaps madly around for America. From sculleries no longer of this world (from shadowy sculleries no longer enterable): ants, tins, spam cans. A chocolate wrapper, torn, scudding the earth. Impossible to tell whether it's been dug up or tossed just now, the wrapper breakdances across the ground but the colour of it is old. The branding is old. Throats, cracking. A pen pointing and the slit nib of it dripping ink onto a piece of foolscap paper. The foolscap describing a circle with a circumference of three point seven five miles in total. Coming into view now above the foolscap: a mass grave of metal skeletons, what the workers call the carcass. This metal grave not straight but bending. Leant over the foolscap: hardcaps and fag fire. The tools the workers are using. Greaseproofed sandwiches, unwrapped as soon as the bell sounded. A beer can with an inch of fizz in it and a way off, its severed ring pull. Another beer can. Another. A coin turning slow revolutions in the troposphere and stamped on it the fizzog of Caesar. Four eyes, anxiously watching. For a bench to sit on, eat greaseproofed sandwiches and snap beer back: a bomb that never has been and never will be detonated. Under foot always: crunched bone shards. A wolfwhistle. Nails capping two spread fingers. The inverse of victory. Throats, cracking. Thigh-flesh, throbbing. A galvanised bucket, swinging. The air it swings through sandy. Tugged buckles.

Jewellery jiggling and jewellery buried. Sand everywhere. Sand in joins and in the machinery and in an earhole. And in the sand: crunched bedsteads and gravestones. The carcass becoming a river. The river becoming a road: poured concrete. Slabs, slags, slurry. As if the grey sky has fallen and laid itself out, flat, on the ground. The road now running through sideless buildings: a parlour, with three walls like a room in a movie set. A mantelpiece. Half a bedroom. The road spooling like celluloid. The road running through tins, spam cans, shadowy pantries. The road raised on stilts and thrown over the cut, the canal. The road running through bricks, hinges, cat nip. On the road: motor cars. Inside the cars: coughs, tetchiness, toys. The road running through piss-a-beds, foxgloves, trash dunes. Then a screech and the road crushing a perambulator. Terroreyes. Heartshake. The road running: poured concrete. Across it, that chocolate wrapper breakdancing, its colour the same as the one the sky is now turning: purple, almost claret. Then grey moongob. Brick houses shivering, staring out at each other from cold shoulders. Between them now a hard and fast separation and no possibility of a quick pedal cycle. In their eyes: reflections of television screens. Thumbs. Hot rubber. Two figures stepping into the moongob, their hair green and their necks rusty. A screw. A screw. Red varnished nails, caressing. Red varnished nails, daggering. In the nails: half-moons. Thigh-flesh, throbbing. A slip road. Slipping fingers. Sheets of metal. The road running, curving, working itself into a circle. The road fastforwarding. The road rewinding.

Fastforwarding again. The road like tape in a cassette rewound by being twirled on a biro. The road crackling. The road cracking. The road murdering a perambulator. Heartshake. Under wheel always: toys and interred perambulators. Sand dunes and trash dunes and piss-a-beds poking up from them. Tear ducts. The road forming knots and nodules, aggregations, coiling flyovers. What the road rings now also a nodule: a dollop of matter not of its surroundings. Islands. The kind of constant screaming that eventually just sounds like silence. As if the sky has fallen. Barbed wire fences. Oil puddles. These, the murmuring heartlands. Because of the traffic the temperature rising. The asphalt burning. The world, ending. But then in moongob, the sputter of electric lamplight. Lamplight coming on like dominoes falling. For a circling curve of three point seven five miles in total, electric lamplight. And then on the barbed horizon something emerging: a UFO possibly, or a plane whose confused pilot has mistaken the lit road for an airport runway. A tossed coin that got caught in the stratosphere yonks ago and which is only now falling. A bomber. A bomb. An extraterrestrial. None of these. Instead: the skull of an elephant. The skull of an elephant landing on the road. A small girl emerging, locking it, and walking away from it. The skull of an elephant, cobwebbed. The tusks like the skis on a helicopter. The slit they lead to, the windshield. The skull of an elephant landing and a small girl walking away across concrete. A time machine. The skull of an elephant, silken with cobwebs. And beside it, a pink button hiccuping

in an early sunbeam.

REDEVELOPMENT

B3

In the littery shittiness of a construction site in the regrettably English mid-century Midlands, this is where it begins. Between two churning cement mixers, on a cusp of crunched bricks, is where our young woman now stands. She's damp. Her head is a veritable skip. Bobbed, what old novels would describe as 'plain', she's barely out of the grammar school for girls down the road from Lozells. Lozells is where the shopkeepers astroturf their tabletops and hang up skinny chickens by the chickens' webbed feet. This young woman is as skinny as a skinny chicken herself. For such a whip of a thing, though, her biceps are remarkably pert: they pop out like Pop Eye's from under her overalls' blue sleeves. At night before sleeping she tenses her muscles, taps them, and then, satisfied, nods off, smiling. Her upper-body strength is the one solid thing she considers she has. The clouds make skid-marks in the sky above her. A whoosh of air flips back her fringe.

It's not that she needs the money. That isn't the reason why she's here, now, stood between cement mixers. It's not that she needs money. What would she need money for? She's a young woman. She lives at home still, and home, down the other road from Lozells, so that Lozells was what she crossed on her way everyday to school – home for this young woman

has until recently been totally homely, as squeaky as the wheels of a homemade tea trolley. She was good in school to boot. Had she wanted to, she could easily have gone on to university. Or being as she is a woman, she could have gone to the secretarial college, whose buildings she has just now seen being demolished.

Her brain is much brighter than the slump of sky she lives under.

This is why she is here. Two main things.

First, it turned out that she was not begotten by whom she thought: her parents were not her parents. Second, she became the unbeloved of a young man who called himself Zero. After these two things became cumulative, this young woman came to the point where the best she could do was think of herself as an empty crisp packet adrift in a puddle. Or as a beer can's snapped and abandoned ring-pull. That at least was how she put her situation to herself in the pages of her inevitable diary. To begin with she cried a bit. Tears sat fatly in her dimples. The tips of her fingers gave off precisely quantified shivers. But very quickly she realised that the only thing for it was to embrace the grimness, inhabit it, and so off she went to get herself some work on this construction site.

That is the short if not the long of it.

Sometimes this young woman forgets she is *such* a young woman.

Sometimes this young woman forgets she is a young woman.

Her muscles are becoming more muscly. Her palms have stopped shivering and are rapidly toughening. There is something about the neck of a crane and the hook that hangs from it that she finds compelling, calming yet portentous. The thrill that comes from being wolf-whistled whilst wearing oversized overalls and cooking concrete — that too has something to do with why she's standing here, now, stamping rocks into gravel, her eyes stinging from the grit.

The dust rolls towards her in giant mothballs from the space where the secretarial college was. She coughs.

In all seriousness: this young woman here considers herself a teleported *Trümmerfrau*. She reckons herself a rubble woman transported from smashed Berlin, a city to which she's never been, to this shoddy city here, a city which also happens to have a name that begins with a 'b', a name that in certain circles and industries means *counterfeit, cheap, showy*. Used as an adjective, the name of this city of hers turns something valuable into something bogus. Apart from bogusness, however, words such as *cheap* and *showy* don't much match with what our young woman now sees before her, because what she sees now before her is many crumpled walls in her immediate vicinity, a wrecking ball in the middle of everything, and in the distance a bleary mess of disgusting Victorian buildings. Either side of her like nauseous stomachs the cement mixers churn. The sky lurches. Everything around her is literally rubbish. This city is not Berlin and this young woman here is only a *Trümmerfrau* in her crummy *Traüme*.

She breathes.

After grammar school was over, one of her classmates went to work in a village in southern Africa. To our young woman that option seemed more a cop-out than it was laudable. To remain amongst the crisp packets and puddles – to *be* a crisp packet in a puddle, watching as the wrecking balls wrought their pendulous damage on a place that's a wreck already anyroad – staying put, to her way of thinking, was the better endeavour. To stay put was heroic in its foregoing of heroism. It was inconsequential. It was a thorough plunge into *thoughtlessness*, a word she and Zero had had many debates about. Legging it to Africa may have been what that French poet with a name pronounced 'Rambo' had done, but staying put as a misplaced *Trümmerfrau* was better.

So here she is, stood in a dump. Call her Stig.

Back when she herself was shoddily begotten, the wrecking balls were bombs, like they were in Berlin.

All before her lies an expanse of littered listlessness. Amongst the aghast and battered, amongst those who have never *geträumt* a crummy *Traum*, amongst those who can't even boast of a German O-Level – in this city that begins with a 'b', is where she will be.

On her big toe rests the plate of a spade. Beneath the toe rests the skeleton of an old road, and the carcass of a new one.

But the thing is, there's also this: there's still a bit of this skinny strong smart stubborn young woman that wishes

she wasn't here. To that itch she has to admit. There's a bit of her that would rather not be another pained fizzog traipsing home along acorned pavements, all be her a pained fizzog who spends her days decked out in overalls, poised between cement mixers, eclipsed by great cranes. The tiny but shiny difference between remaining here in this shoddy city out of laziness or wastedness and staying here in a state of blessedness because of a decision — that difference can be difficult to see. Zero, in his way, did his best to point out this out to her. He tried. It's true. And what Zero said to this bold burly bobbed young woman when eventually he gave up on her, shrugged, and alone went away — what he said to her then is what now prods at her as she stands in the littery shittiness of a construction site in the regrettably English mid-century Midlands:

"Yower out of time, bab."