A Flight of Locks

We call it the Pink House, though it's really peach. The colour of the first swathes of sunrise on a winter's day. It looks like a house in Menton or Cassis, in France. Not perched on the banks of the Grand Union Canal, on the outskirts of Hemel Hempstead, England.

I haven't started here. It's not a start point, nor an end point, but merely a turning. That's the beauty of the canal. With its spine slicing 137 miles up the country, it's impossible to reach a destination. You have to give up, turn around, and return home.

This way is all downhill. I'm running down the towpath, knees bent, chalky stones tumbling beneath my trainers. In the spring, the blossom burns on the bushes lining the path. White, regal blackthorn blossom, with petals like snow droplets.

It's a pale-frosted morning, and the winter's breath makes the empty branches shiver. A garden is visible through the spidery arms, but the swing set is empty. A man lives here with two little girls. In the summer, he pushes them so hard on the swings that they land in the stars.

I don't know who they are. We've never spoken, only ever exchanging a brief, light nod. I'm just a passer-by - yet another walker, runner, cyclist. But somehow, we are bound together by the canal. A community of lock-lingerers, towpath-treaders and peace-searchers. Along this undulating stretch of manmade muck and water plants, we are linked inextricably to nature's hidden paradise.

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You wouldn't know from looking at it that this was once a major transport route between England's largest cities. The water here is a cool grey-green, curving towards the left, and the air hums with the faint yawns of birds. The towpath is a mosaic of rocks and stones, smothered in mud - and tripping over is a regular occurrence.

Like most things perceived distinctly British, the canal was an invention pinched from abroad. From the Chinese Grand Canal to the French Canal du Midi, these compartmentalised, man-made channels have provided easy trade and transport routes for centuries. In Britain, canal construction took off in the industrialised 18th century, with goods transported to and from northern factories.

Nowadays, we are a nation of canal networks. Not one, of course (that would be too easy!) but a cobweb of interlinking networks, spreading across the country. I'm walking along the Grand Union Canal, which, built in 1929, connects London to Birmingham.

I pass my favourite house along this stretch: large, white, with the best treehouse I've ever seen, balanced opposite the lock. It grows into the tree, melding with the branches until the two types of wood are indistinguishable. Unlike the lock gate's painted face, the treehouse makes no effort to hide its wrinkled, gnarled skin.

English canal locks are generally characterised by black-and-white paintwork, adding a corporate feel to the muted grey-and-green surroundings. But if you look closely, you can see the whorls and swirls of the wood peeking out beneath the black. For something trying to blend into its natural surroundings, black is rather an ironic choice of colour.

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There's something about the movement of a lock gate, opening and closing, that reminds me of Sisyphus, rolling his boulder up the hill. You have to push slowly, gently, struggling against the weight of the wood and water. Move the gate too quickly, and the water rushes out, bursting into the empty lock chamber like a miniature tsunami.

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Canals are, for all their beauty, extraordinary feats of urban engineering. Consisting of a series of channels and basins, divided into locks, the water is controlled by lock-gates. By filling and emptying the lock chamber, the water and its transport of boats, kayaks and geese can be moved from place to place.

But the most remarkable thing about canals is their ability to deceive.

Looking down from this lock at the water, twisting around the corner, you'd think it was a river. Of course, the width is more controlled, but the surface ripples, as if drawn downstream by a current. The banks have been left to erode naturally, grass tickling the water's skin. Unruly green hair, dangling down.

In an article for the Telegraph, Alys Fowler argues that the canals are 'testament to the power of nature over neglect.' In England's industrialised towns, she suggests, the old transport

waterways have been abandoned by humans, devoured by nature. In areas where smoke-choked air once struggled past factories of wood and steel, perhaps she's right. But what of these canals where the land was never fully urban? Where the fields and meadows stretch out on either side, like a patchwork blanket strung on a washing line?

This part of the canal is testament to that peri-urbanism. Here, the sunlight flickers through the wispy trees, casting small squares on the dun-green water. My shoes scuff along the ground, branches and twigs from the winter de-gowning crumbling beneath them. This stretch of canal never held booming factories or wharves. In the orchestral symphony of the waterways, this curve is the adagio movement: slow, soft, lyrical.

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I pass a sewage pipe spurting haphazardly into the water, like an old man on a bus trying to suppress his cough. In the summer, the smell of rising silt and grime is pungent, unbearable. The pipe is an urban extension - a hand stretching out the backways of the town, plunging waste into the water. This, to me, doesn't look like nature has reclaimed the canal, but rather the sewage pipe intruding into what was already natural. The first proto-canals, after all, built by the Romans, emulated the flow of the rivers.

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I reach the Red Bridge. It's a low-arched bridge, roughly marking four kilometres from my house. It was also the turning point on our school charity Fun Run (the most ironic use of that adjective in history!). I can still hear the gasps of children, trying to muster up energy to run home.

When it rains, the water swells over the bank and floods the underside of the bridge. If you need any proof for who really owns the canals, there it is. Nature might have been battered and bruised by the construction of the waterways, but it has always held control.

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The canal begins to widen, slipping east, as if anticipating the full rising of the sun. The hedgerows are fatter, with tendrils of ivy twisting between other naked branches.

It's strange to think that this little slip of paradise - hidden away from the crowds, and the

bustle of the city - is also a place people call home. I call it home, as a long, gentle ribbon winding between the towns of my childhood. But for others, it's far more than that.

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The naming of a narrowboat might seem insignificant, but the name has to fit the character.

Clover, Philipalia, Amelia Rose. On the tongue, they could be the names of private school children, uttered in a tentative breath. They are mystical words, swirled onto the side of boats with intricate detail. These aren't small, triangular floats, but homes, houses, and personalities.

I pass under a white bridge, shivering in the shadows. It's damp and dark, but opens back onto the path, a gateway into paradise. A seemingly straight stretch of water slips into the distance, boats lining the edges. In the warm months, the shutters are flung wide, and the boats cajole and shove each other, trying to get the best spot. This morning they are sleepy and peaceful, against the water.

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My favourite boat name: *The Lady Edwina*. I conjure her up as a Victorian woman, dressed in a drab brown gown, with white embroidery at the hem. She sits, quite composedly, on my side of the canal, nodding at the brighter-painted homes opposite her.

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What is it like, I wonder, to live your life in constant movement? Shuttling from one mooring spot to the next, and then, in two weeks, moving again? A whisper of smoke rises from *Tiami*, a peacock-blue boat decorated with safari animals. In a way, narrowboats capture the essence of home perfectly. It's not a fixed location, but rather several different places, making an imprint upon your life. The inhabitants of *Tiami* may stare out at a rusted trolley and a lopsided washing line, but in their mind's eye they might be on the vast plains of the Serengeti. They might push their boat along the Grand Union, but in their imagination, they could be home, sailing across the eternal blue of Lake Manyara.

I'm just a walker. A *flaneuse*, actually. It's rare to see a walker walking with purpose along here, unless they're a middle-aged woman wearing Lycra, clutching a doughnut-shaped water

bottle. According to Michel de Certeau - scholar, philosopher, wanderer - in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, walking is to lack a place. It's a process of absence, a process of going *somewhere*. Perhaps in the city, this is true, but here, I don't agree. The canal - the individual stretches; the woven threads and ribbons wreathing the country - is as much a place as any. Most of us don't walk along the towpath to reach a destination, but to amble across memories and voices hidden in the dust.

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I stop at the next lock gates and sit upon the edge. I was enrolled into the Girl Guides here, along with my best friend. We swore our oath to God, Queen and Country and were rewarded with shiny badges and a custard cream. This, to me, is a place of great significance. I've always thought that lock is an odd choice of word: connoting closure, entrapment, oppression. The canal locks, as gates, and the site of my enrolment, are *openings*. Openings into new spaces, places and the future.

A blackbird flies overhead, an ink blot against the paper sky. Pink and orange daubs of acrylic are pressed into the grey-blue, the first hints of sunrise. A tinge of frost against the tongue. Three geese waddle across the towpath, waggling their feathers with arrogance. I hesitate, uncertain whether it is my land, or theirs.

A faint splash, as they enter the water, neither shirking nor shuddering from the iciness. The air is calm, peace hanging from its strings, but then there's a scream of noise and the growl of an engine. The silence drops into the water, dissolving immediately.

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The Winkwell bridge commands all attention. White, with thinly-sliced railings. Though it's no more unnatural than the canal itself, I feel as if somebody has pulled me out of a fairy-tale landscape, back into harsh reality. Another car rumbles over the concrete, scaring the geese.

The Winkwell pub dates back to 1535, proudly displaying its age on the wall. But, with its fresh white paint and calligraphic sign, it could date to yesterday. The pub used to boast a forge, where horses, pulling the boats, were reshod. It was a working place; a resting place. I associate it with pints of lemonade, thick-cut chips, and the scent of summer on the night air.

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Crossing the bridge provokes a transition to a dull, industrial landscape, as if I've just walked out of a painting. There's a whistling whirlpool of air as a train shoots past on the hillside, with flashes of artificial green jarring with the deep, nuanced tones by the water. Below the next lock rests a party of boats, moored permanently. Some of them have never left this graveyard in their lives.

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There's a misconception that canals are straight bodies of water, constructed as lines. Here, the towpath begins to curve to the right, disappearing behind the railway bridge. In front, there's a sign.

Winding Hole.

Just like the Winkwell, it's a strange, magical name. I picture hidden currents with malicious intent, sucking a boat down by the stern. A moorhen, bobbing its head, pushes closer, and I hold my breath. It sails straight into the broken weeds of the shallows, oblivious, and then turns around, using the hole just as boats do.

Any hint of danger from the sign and the unnerving, blackening depths vanishes.

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The skew-arch bridge looms ahead, exposing its insides like the ribcage of a whale. It's emaciated and weary, stretching over slimy water. What would happen if someone painted it bright blue? Would the boats in the graveyard come alive again, yearning to push through to the other side?

A sprinkling of water falls from the arch onto the eroded towpath. It almost looks like the bridge is crying.

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Canals grieve, like us all. They are echoing chambers of mourning, with lives submerged in their depths. In Northern France, the Sambre Canal holds the memories of those who didn't quite make it to the end of the war. 'Before the last sea and the hapless stars', wrote the English poet Wilfred Owen, the soldiers were 'immune' to 'the eternal reciprocity of tears.' They were battle-hardened, desensitized, devoid of emotion.

In November 1918, the Sambre Canal became Owen's 'last sea', where he was killed trying to cross on a raft. We mourn for his life, our grief slipping from the pale banks into the silvered water. The canal mourns too, remembering the day it cradled men too young to die.

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The Grand Union Canal was never involved in the war, yet it grieves, nonetheless. We mourn not human lives, here, but rather the earth.

There's a 2l Pepsi Max bottle in front of me, bobbing forlornly against the bank. A plastic cup around the next corner, stuck upon a branch like a ceremonial spear.

Around 95% of canal water in the UK is considered contaminated, and the tragic thing is that we just accept it. When I was younger, the thought of being pushed into the canal was terrifying. If you didn't die from cholera or rat disease, you could be impaled on the broken handle of a trolley, or caught in the spokes of a bike wheel.

I was brought up on those beliefs, because that was how the canal was, and nobody thought to change it. It was easier to teach children that water should be polluted and that a town should naturally hold that odour of decay. That whisper of deterioration.

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A big problem with canal pollution is, at certain angles, it's very easy to forget. I often think of the canal like a set of those distorted mirrors at a funfair. You might catch a glimpse of reality from a shadowy reflection in the corner, but all too soon the light flickers, demanding your attention elsewhere.

When I turn the corner, the sun bursts through a cloud, water glistening beneath. Any trace of waste vanishes.

This is the mirror where you have to look twice, to make sure it's real. The water is a silvery-blue paint, brushed across the canvas of the canal. It's oil-smudged, impressionist, like Monet's lily-pond, before it dapples and clears slightly. Turner's Grand Canal, in Venice, with houseboats and a heron in the foreground.

The heron regards me, hunched over, as if it's been sitting at a desk for too long. It lifts one leg and then the other in a slow, stalk-like movement. It makes me think of sneaking out the

kitchen at night, after raiding the fridge.

Why should animals be domesticated, personified into human terms? Why is my understanding of his movement any clearer than the squeaks of grass beneath his feet, or the sky-song as he launches into the air?

They understand this creature far better than I ever will. But that's the thing about humans. We take over everything, melting and melding and shaping the earth until it suits our lives.

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It's the kind of sunlight that sits on your eyelashes and tries to press warmth into your skin, but it's too young and weak, in the winter months. In Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, all visitors to the Emerald City must wear spectacles, otherwise 'the brightness and the glory' would blind them. Really, it's to hide the fraud beneath.

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As I enter Hemel Hempstead, there's no such brightness. Nothing is concealed here. From the canal, I see cars for the first time. The shorn willow trees, cut down for cricket bats. An advert for Disney+, stuck outside the station.

Hemel Hempstead is a New Town, built to solve London's overpopulation. It has a brutalist town centre, which devoured surrounding villages to strengthen its stark, concrete bones.

The Kodak tower tears into the sky. The light reflects off the glass sides, flashing like a camera - the very product created by the Kodak corporation, before they moved into the tower in 1971.

Hemel was named the 'Ugliest Town in Britain', but I think that's unfair. As the canal ventures into Boxmoor, my village, I wonder if the judges had walked along this path. With fields clustered around the River Bulbourne, cutting beneath the canal, Boxmoor still retains a sense of its Tudor past, when the shores were thick with water-cress beds and the air smelt of apple-tang from the orchards. Can anyone call this ugly?

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My grandma's house is on the other side of the canal. I can see her bedroom window from

here, behind her garden arch, where roses bloom in the summer. I linger, hoping to see her silhouette.

She’s part of this canal, my grandma - another puzzle piece, binding it to my idea of home. It’s a place shaped with my own memories, and the shifting secrets of the past.

I turn back to the towpath, looking forwards. I might have to go the long way around, to get a cup of tea and a biscuit, but I don’t mind. It’s just another part of the journey - a journey, which, like the sweeping, slender canals, will never end.

Just beyond the houses, peering into the canal looking-glass, the willow-tree sighs in peace.