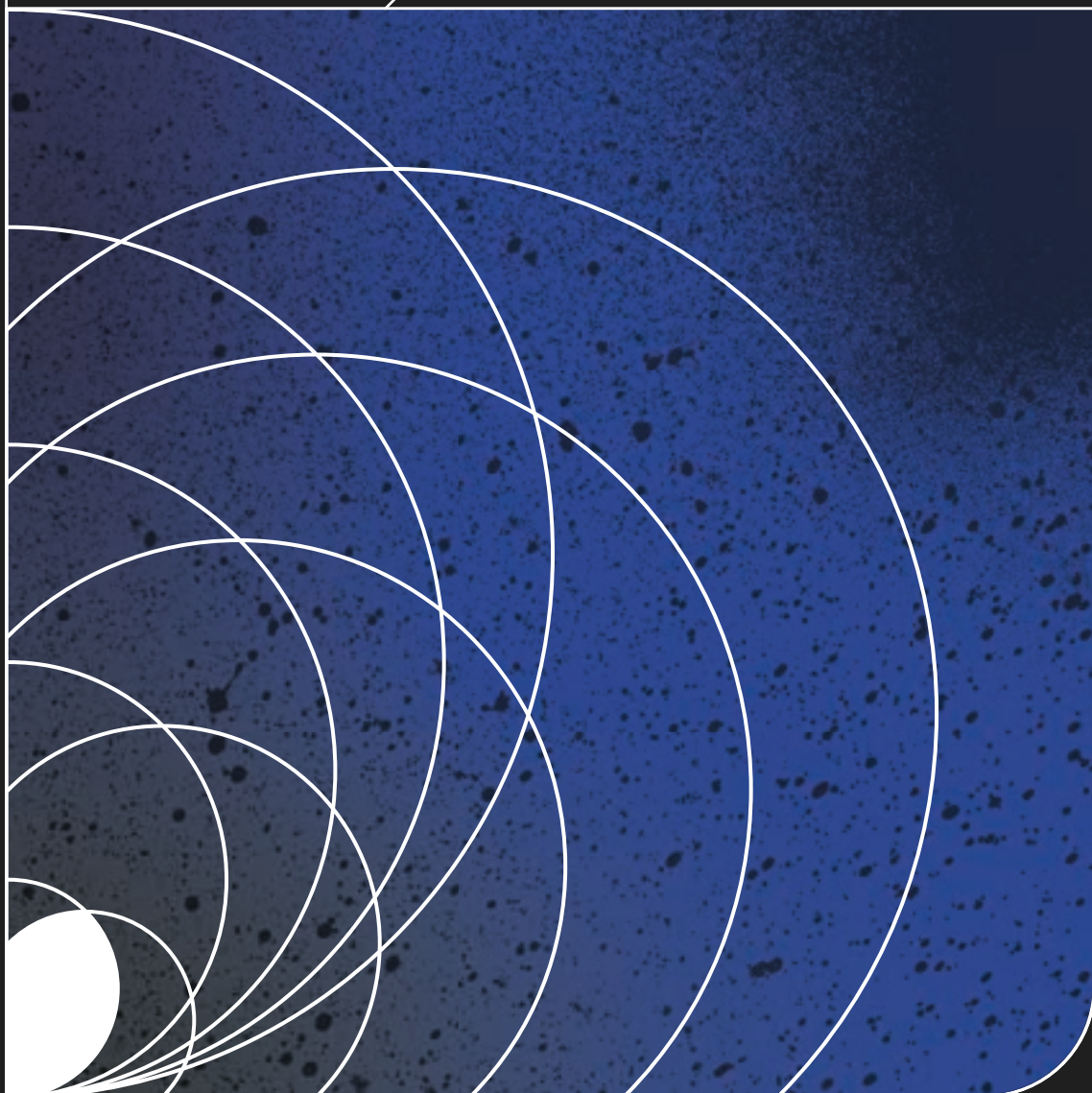


HIGH STREET MULTIVERSE

Five tales from universes unknown by Dumfries & Galloway writers, inspired by Dumfries High Street

the stove network





HIGH
STREET
MULTIVERSE



HIGH STREET MULTIVERSE

CAMERON PHILLIPS

Through The Stars

55.069896, -3.612129

JASMINE MCMILLAN

The Inbetween

55.069232, -3.610993

DAVEY PAYNE

Stitched Up: A Thread
Through Time

55.068816, -3.610626

KRIS HADDOW

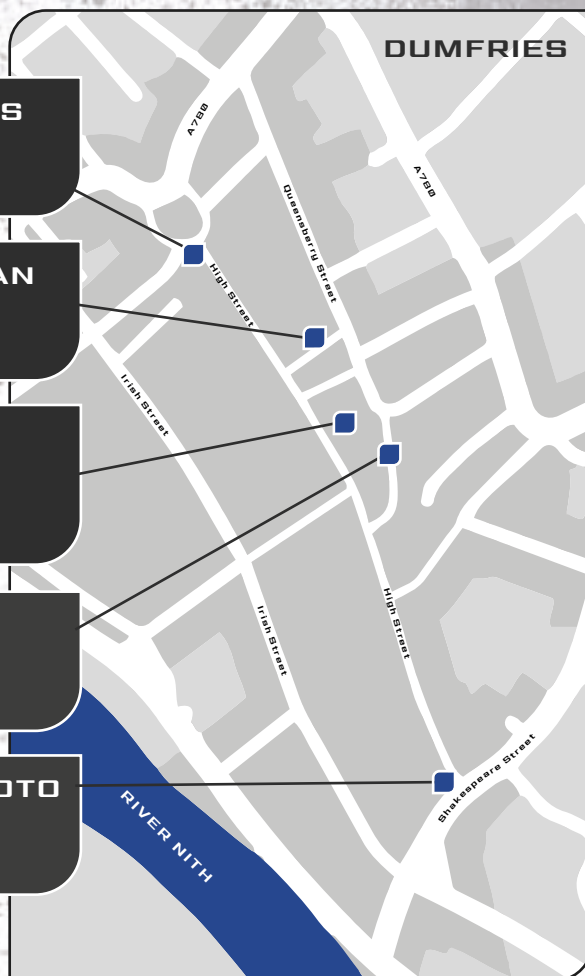
Reflections

55.068701, -3.610182

CAROLYN HASHIMOTO

Pennies From Heaven

55.066743, -3.609463



The **multiverse** is a hypothetical group of multiple universes. Together, these universes comprise everything that exists: the entirety of space, time, matter, energy, information, and the physical laws and constants that describe them. The different universes within the multiverse are called "parallel universes", "other universes", "alternate universes", or "many worlds".

Sonder — noun. the realization that each random passer-by is living a life as vivid and complex as your own — populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness — an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk. (via the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows)

WELCOME TO DUMFRIES
HIGH STREET

**In this place,
whole worlds
of stories
and sorrows,
memories and
hopes as vivid
and colourful
as your own,
exist within
each passer-by.**

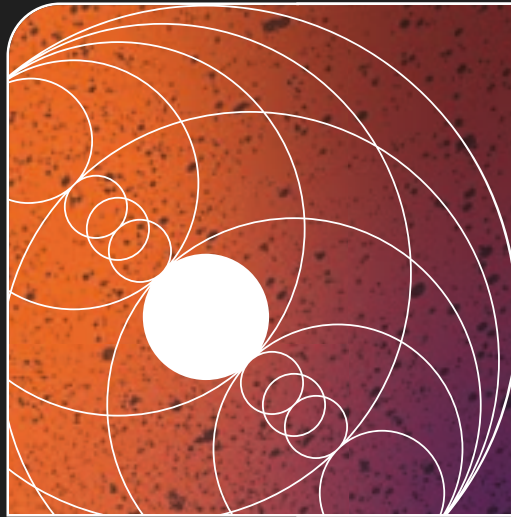
From dreaming streets hidden in the undergrowth, to a labyrinth of reflections lost in the spiral of time. A multiverse, an ever-growing web of realities sprawl and spin from the smallest encounter. New futures are written and re-written all at once, each stemming from the consequences of actions so subtle, they are barely felt. But the ripple of each of our choices resonates beyond now... and alters the realities we all share.

High Street Multiverse is a digital, public art project ran by the Stove Network, supported by Dumfries & Galloway Unlimited. Working with 5 emerging writers from the region, this unique initiative supported them to craft five individual audio stories, placed within the town centre of Dumfries, through a specially designed series of QR code sculptures, these immersive and imaginative works are the conclusion of 4 months of mentorship, workshops and creative sessions delivered in late 2021.

This publication contains the 5 final pieces from the commissioned writers, with an accompanying QR code to the works in audio form.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the team of professional writers involved in the project for their continued support, encouragement, and creativity: Karl Drinkwater, Karen Campbell, and Des Dillon along with Dumfries & Galloway Unlimited for their support.

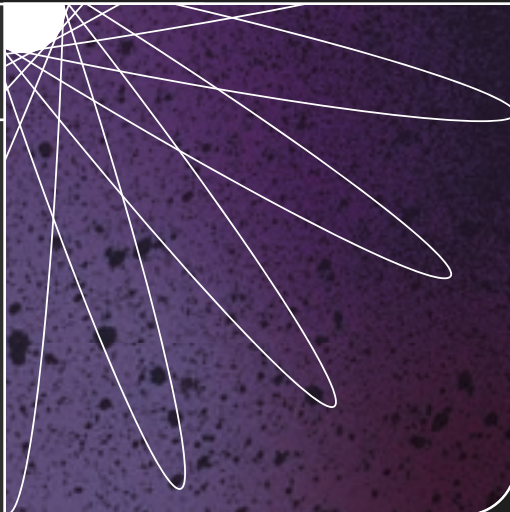
THE WRITERS

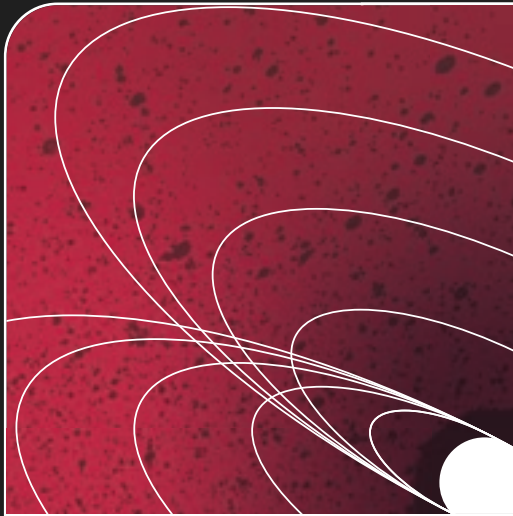

**CAROLYN
HASHIMOTO**

Carolyn Hashimoto is a graduate of MLitt in Creative Writing, University of Glasgow. Her first poetry collection *Cow* will be published by Osmosis Press in April 2022. She is the founder and editor of *Skirting Around* – an online journal which explores the politics of women's clothing through writing and art.

**KRIS
HADDOW**

Kris is a playwright, poet and performer who was born in Dumfries and raised in Upper Nithsdale. He has won awards for his poetry and prose written in Scots dialect, including his poem *On Times Austere*. This was engraved in glass and installed at The Globe Inn, Dumfries after winning *Windows for Burns Night* in 2012, and can still be visited today. In 2011, *Ronnie's Story* won the national short fiction contest run by 'see me' Scotland.





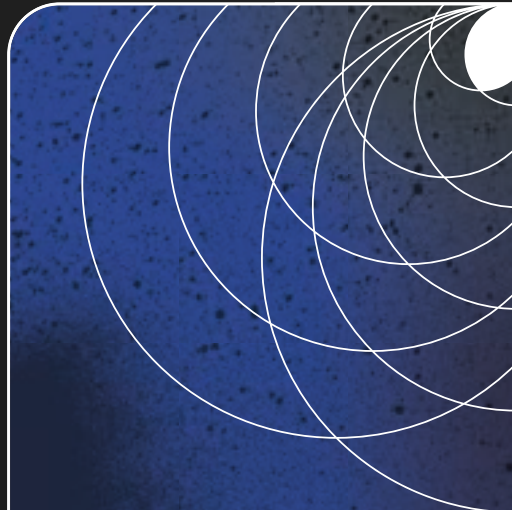
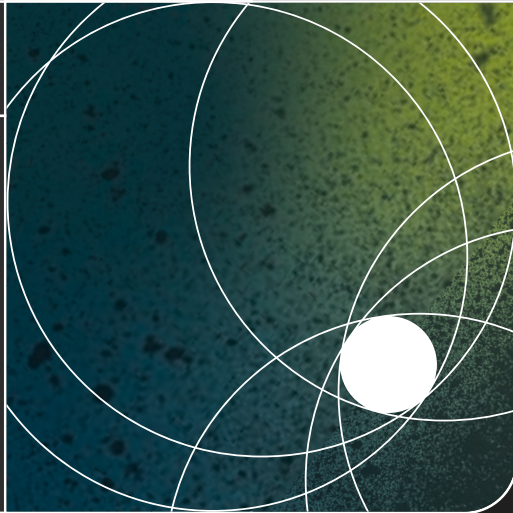
**DAVEY
PAYNE**

Davey Payne began writing seriously after submitting the winning entry for Blueprint 100's 'Burns Re-Imagined' contest in 2020. Since then he has collaborated with visual and performing artists to contribute to independent publications and perform at Big Burns Supper in his native Dumfries. He has also featured regularly in Lumpen : A Journal For Poor & Working Class Writers and has been published in The Common Breath's Online Poetry Blog. His debut collection 'Arrest & Wreckreation' will be published in the near future.

**JASMINE
MCMILLAN**

Jasmine is a senior student in high school who has not published any work before and is excited to see this project come to life and become something that the public can interact with in the town.

She specialises mainly in short stories and likes to write stories that are surreal and abstract.



**CAMERON
PHILLIPS**

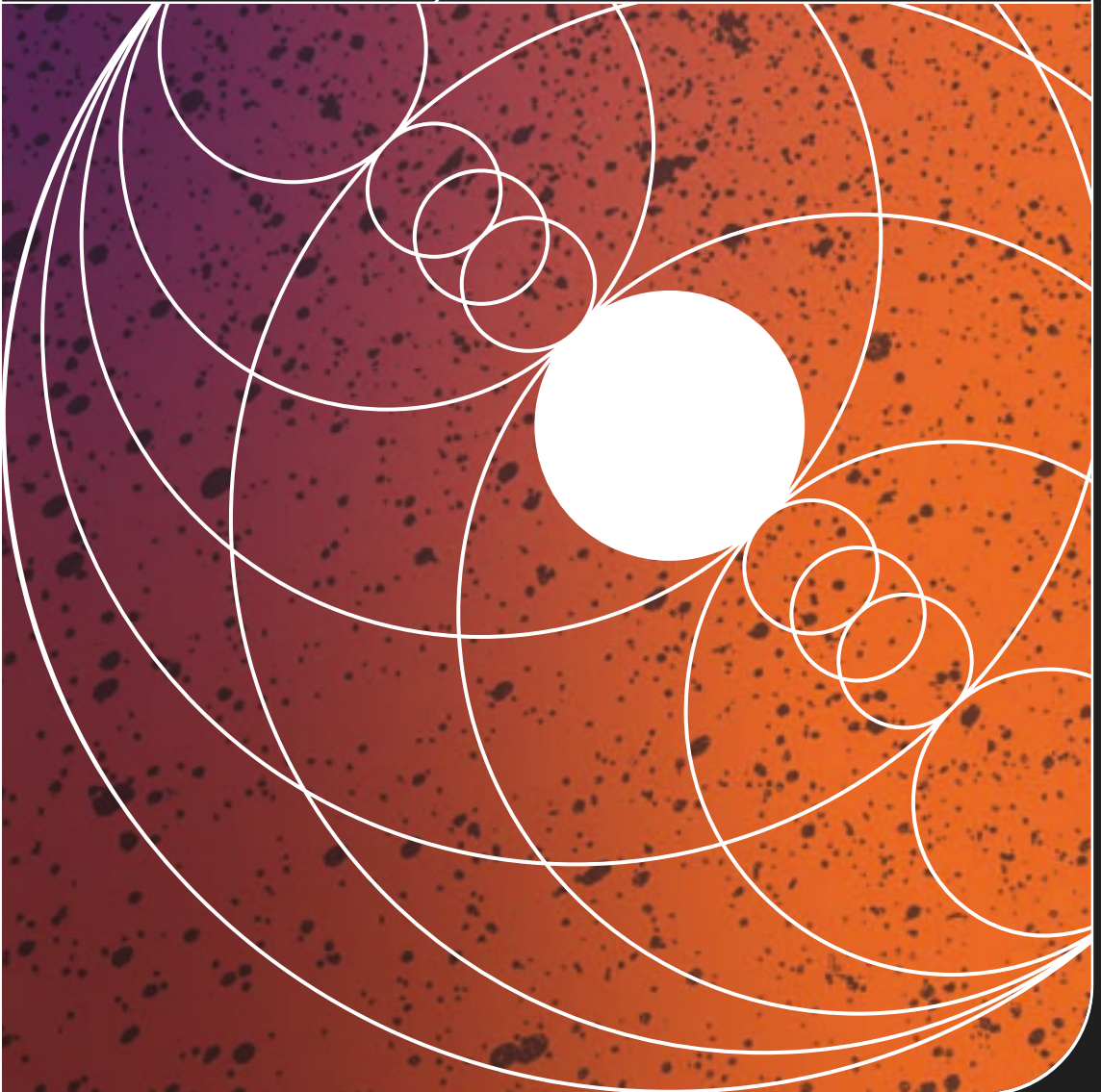
Cameron Phillips is a writer of science fiction with a Scottish flavour. He lives near Lockerbie with his wife, son, cat and dog.

CAROLYN HASHIMOTO



Pennies from Heaven

55.066743, -3.609463



The bus runs out of petrol and stops at Dumfries. On the High Street that is no longer the High Street, now the Multiverse. *This place is nothing but empty shops*, says the passenger beside you. As you step off the bus, the driver hands you a shopping trolley and wishes you luck.

Empty shop windows mirror back empty shops across the road. Reflecting you, now one, now two. Seeing your reflection, you deflect your attention. This place is so hushed. In the distance a car. Below you, your footsteps walking on pavements once well-travelled. A pigeon taking flight startles you.

There are lampposts without lamps. Cracked kintsugi walls. Signs that hold no meaning. Up high on the rooftops, what do the birds' eyes see that yours can't? Strung across these barren posts are lists – shopping lists. Remember those? They flap and flutter in the breeze, now falling all around you like ticker tape.

But where's the celebration, and why are you here? You buy your clothes online. Get Tesco to deliver. Zoom call your friends and you wonder why this place is so empty and hollowed out? You take pictures with your phone, post them on Twitter. The 'likes' begin to ping and permeate the silence that echoes around you.

And it's here on the ground – in this place with no sound – that you spot the scattered coins. Silver heptagons, circles of gold, muddied metal pennies. You pick them up. (No-one's looking). Finders' keepers. Losers' weepers. These pennies passed from hand to hand to purses to pockets to bank accounts to here. Exchanged for goods, for services, for escape.

You look up, blinded from the bling. Wipe your eyes and here before you...golden horses spinning round, organ music, multicoloured fairy lights...a carousel? You swear it wasn't there before.

The painted ponies gallop round, the lights above them draw you in. *Climb aboard. Climb on*, says the man whose bright red cheeks match his waistcoat. He doffs his cap as you give him your coin.

Your horse is called Amber, their saddle pink. The bells ring and you start to spin. Around and around and up and down. You hold on tight. And it's getting faster, speeding round, and the colours and the sounds swirl around and around.

Please let me off! You hold on tight. Please let me off! Please let it...

STOP!

It stops. The lights go low, you stagger off as the music fades. You steady yourself and walk on.

Ahead of you the fountain, where the water flows. You swear you never saw the water flow before. You walk towards it, cup your hands, and drink the ice-cold water.

In the fountain more pennies. Go on throw another in. Make a wish. Call the genie, speed dial your fairy godmother, invoke the spirit of the Salty Coo. Lights flicker from within the empty buildings. You see something in the distance, walking towards you. A man in boots, a cow in tow. You pinch yourself but they stand before you.

He says he wants to sell. You offer him your most precious coin, and he takes it. You think the cow looks thirsty and lead it to the water. But what is this? The cow's dissolving. Salt and water make a river of tears, but the ticker tape shopping lists clog the flow. *It's time to go. It's time to go.*

You grab your trolley and push it over the cobbled pedestrian road. Through the dismantled High Street. Beneath your feet, beneath the wheels, beneath the here and now.

CRASH!

Watch where you're going!

You stop and stare at the old woman with her trolley. Just like yours. Only not. For hers is full of greens and carrots and turnips – and is that a golden apple you see there?

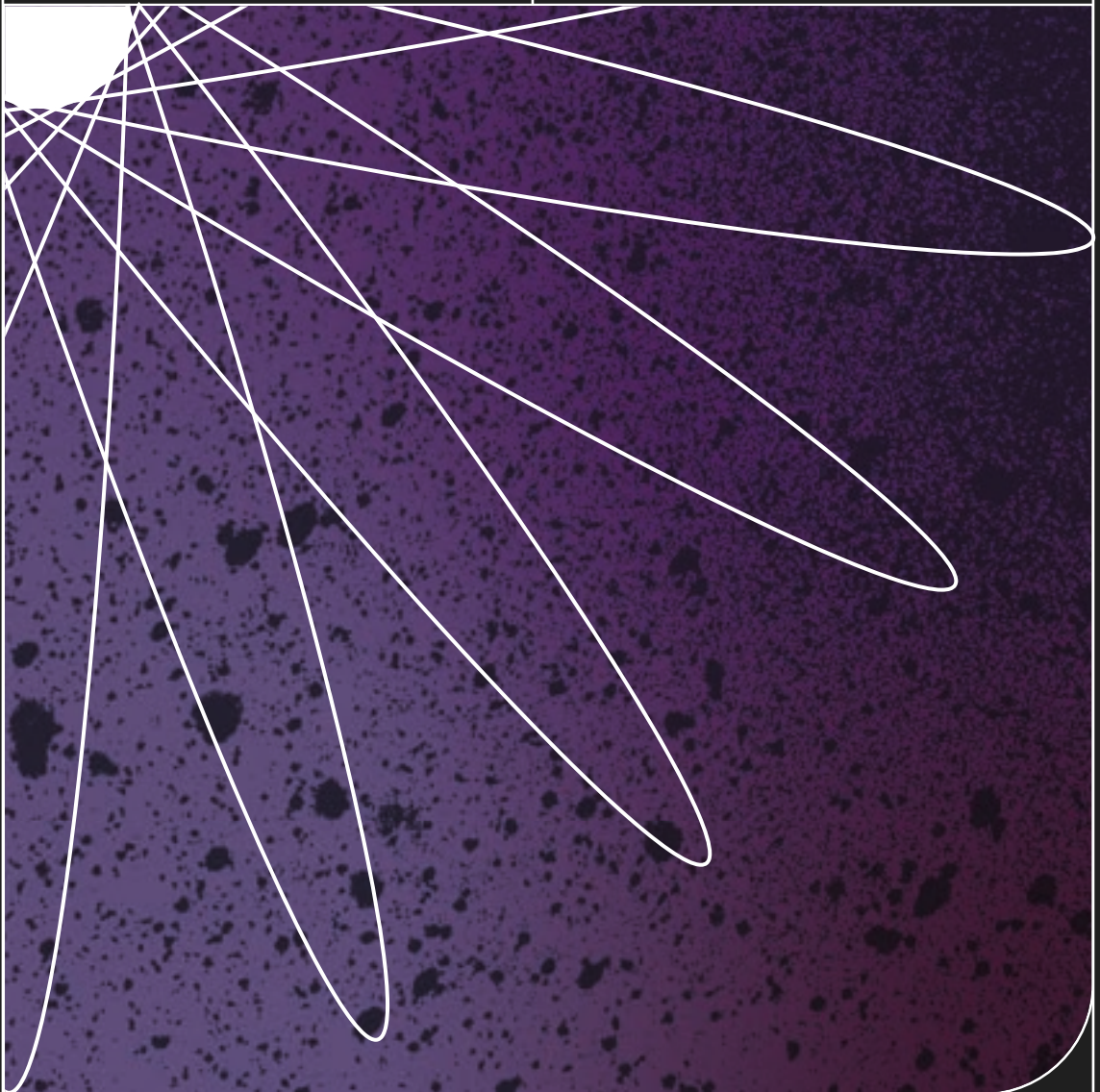
You offer her a penny but what does she say? *Away with you. I've no need of your charity. Suppose you'll want my thoughts for that penny of yours? Here, have a carrot if you must.* She lets you take a selfie, but she will not budge. It's her right of way. You back up and let her pass.

Something hits you on the head. You turn to say *Hey*, but the woman has gone, she's nowhere to be seen. And there it's again. *Plonk!* on your head. It's falling from above. A penny, another penny – pennies from heaven? But you're not dead. You catch one in your hand and walk on.

KRIS HADDOW

Reflections

55.068701, -3.610182



Turn roon. Aye, you. Turn roon and look behind you, back down the street. That's it. What do you see?

Do you see folk? Is it busy? Or are you standing here late on or early when it's quiet?

Look across the road. Naw, no that way. At the big winda. At the empty shop over there. Aye, there. That's the one. Look hard. Can you see yersel?

Why don't you gie yersel a wee wave just to check.

There you are!

Now, keep looking...

Because I've something to tell you. I don't want you to panic, mind. But...

My friend... that is not you.

There is another Dumfries. In fact, there are many. And that wee buddy you see o'er there in the winda is another version of You.

Your Nychburr, if you will, and a guid yin at that. Yin ye'd ken weel, that ye'd recognise in the street if ye passed them...

...for they're never really that far away.

I'll bet you've never questioned how the June fair got its name, have ye? Oh, you have? Well, don't believe everything you've been telt... for your Guid Nychburr is ken better...

The veil is thin here. Parallel lives lived in parallel universes, infinite potentials. Past, present, future, our ither selves walk amang us. As you walk here on the High Street, doon the Vennel, along the Sands, you can hear them pass amang us if you really, really listen... their echoes. A multiverse of Doonhamers, o' endless possibilities.

Look around you.

Find another window.

There's a version of You in there. They're the same as you, mostly, but they make pieces on a Saturday for the Queens Supporters club. A silly wee thing. They went to Canada for a while, said they'd emigrated, a new life, but something called them back. A longing, a melancholy. Saudade, as they say in Portuguese. Hiraeth, in Welsh. And now, here they are, looking back at you, looking like you. The same, but different. O, the things they have seen!

Have you seen the You in the Waterstones' windae? They look gie miserable if ye catch them on the richt day! Happiest toon in Scotland, Dumfries! But dearie me does that You look richt scunnert. Awa and hae a word wae yersel next time ye pass! I mean it, keek in and gie them a wee smile and a wave! Cheer them up!

But don't press your face too close to the glass...

...for there's a version of You from another era in there, trapped behind the pane o' yesteryear in the County Hotel, lang afore it became a fancy bit bookshop. Also a bit glum luckin, I hate to confess, drink in haun, forlornly surveying the world passing by. We've a'y been guid at that here. People watching. Observing. We've seen it a', and we forget nothing.

There's a Version of You round the corner on Great King Street. Big smile on Your face, all smeared in cream as they trough a huge bun at the Café Continental. A wee tardis o' a shop, preserved in time. And the shadow sat beside You... is that... aye! That's Your auld Nana you'd lang thocht departed.

Buttering her toasted teacake efter picking oot the sultanas. You's look fair happy, the twae o' ye's. Awa' in and take a seat, enjoy their company. Feel Their echo like a hug, an invisible embrace.

And Yoursel as You stand in the close at the Globe. That You's waiting on some buddy, I'm sure of it. There's nae reflections there to catch them, so it's quite hard tae tell. Which You it is, where they've been, and fae when. You'll hae tae go staun there and see what I mean. Don't be feart, tho. Just hae a quick look to be sure it's clear, and then pause by the close, and listen, and lean, and listen, and wait...

There's a You in the wee shop under the Midsteeple scribbling poems on used envelopes. But you'll need to walk fast and be lucky tae reveal them, jist snatch a wee glance as you quickly stride by.

There's a You doon the Sands in the windae on the left as you enter the market by the wrought iron gate. Their Nith is a permanent water feature, the lower reaches of toon two feet under since the Solway climbed and climbed. They should have listened tae Wee Greta, that You hinks as they wade aroon wearing great yella wellies that come up tae their waist, like Billy Connolly's big banana boots. A happy colour, at least, for it's still a happy wee toon, for aw' it's like Venice. And whit was it the Big Yin said? There's nae such hing as bad weather, jist the wrang claes! For a' things are hellish, that You secretly likes it when the walruses and polar bears swim richt up the Nith chasing salmon and trout — though that You laments all things the toon lost: nae mare Rood Fair, the Dock Park gang dry. They've put a wee beach on it. An actual sandy beach in Dumfries! And what did they cry it? Naw, no the Dock Beach, not JM Barrie Island, or Devorgilla Sands. Nane o' that, nowt sensible. Sandy McSandpit, I kid you not!

Here, hae you been stood in the one bit while I've told you about the You's? Aboot the versions of you?

If you have, hae another look across the street at the empty shop over there. Aye. There ye are again. Gie yersel another wee wave.

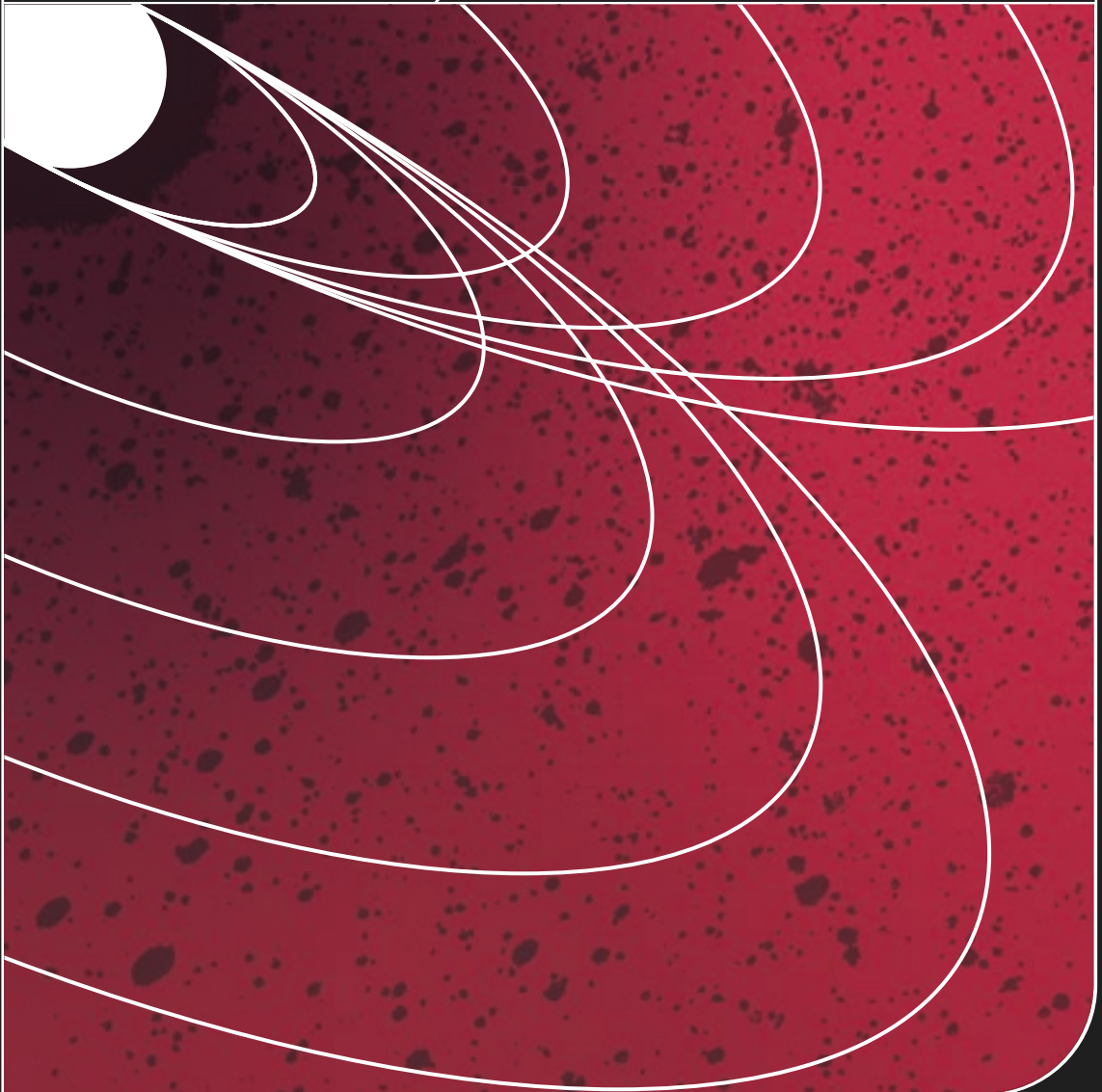
I could tell ye where a' the You's are. A' the hings they've seen, the hings they've done in Dumfrieses past, present, future. But I'll leave you tae go find them.

**DAVEY
PAYNE**



Stitched Up: A Thread Through Time

55.068816, -3.610626



I see everything that has ever happened here since time began. Hear every coo, cry and clamour resound through the ages. Feel everything : All your mortal emotions' both joyous and grave... On a covert street-level manoeuvre, I descend through the dusk onto Pilgrims Way and traverse the old ford on the Nith toward Dumfries. I look across the water, smile wryly at my image glaring back at me before salty, southerly winds slash my earthly senses. I reach the banking where I shudder as I hear your call to arms. I plough the asphalt of Nith Place to uncover this 'Lore Burne' where bold, able men and women rally to defend your weary-weathered burgh walls. Steadfast, staunch and toothy amidst the apathy of the pedestrians I walk amongst furtively. If the world can turn on a sixpence your lifetime could turn depending on which bridge you take home. In these estates and schemes there's a once fervent youth unwittingly subscribed to a drama of subdued ghettoization. Indolence and resignation clashes with your inherent pride and resilience. Hypnotised by the rise and slosh of the Nith, I avoid the gaze of whoever's path I cross as I obey the tide and head North. I am stricken, tonight, by this town's deafening silence.....

I am beguiled by the half-moons of Devorgilla's Auld Brig casting feathers of light across the Nith's blue steel. Six celestial portals or hellish chasms depending on which side of the river is to your advantage. Two loafers share a bench and a bottle at the Sandy Opening. They revel in the dark. Numbing their pain in tandem. Savouring the sanguine smoke of scavenged cigarettes : oblivious to the sizzling crackle of flame and flesh. Pleasure and punishment sit side by side where innocent, sage healers were choked and put to the stake. Their limp impotent mouths gutter pitch and tar in perpetuity. The faces in attendance of this burning, livid and luminous with approval, are licked and caressed by the fire and brimstone of Presbyterianism. Daughters and sisters scapegoated to death by men of the cloth in accordance with dogma. I walk on by.....in reverence.....

The Tourist Information plugs a gap in a shy thoroughfare's once proud smile. I see Broken faces on board the 920 for London and the same faces beaming on the 920 for Belfast, leaping from the coach like salmon into one of the Whitesands few remaining hostleries. Yet another generation's secrets and indiscretions are written on it's walls. People have always been pulled here by the anonymity proffered by Nithsdale's haunts and shadows.

A gravitational pull that even your bypass won't break. I am pulled left to where the ebb of the tide is barred by the Caul and I stand captivated by the elegant, uplit Observatory. Such refinement! A cultivated lot aren't you? The traces of the Auld Brig's three destroyed arches emerge like fractals. Stitches of light thread through the jet black of infinity. I see Traders and Pilgrims pay the toll to cross Devorgilla's earlier wooden bridge. The Alms being received by the Mendicant Greyfriars begging to live and living to preach. I smell the fruits of their labour lifted on a summer breeze, willed by honeybees and melodies of birds perched in their walled orchard trees. I am summoned by the ghostly French and Italian chants lilting down The Friars Vennel beyond the abandoned markets and spectres of cattle herded by cars parked on reclaimed land. 'Nae man can tether time nor tide', however and the downstream pushes to remind you of the folly of man's will versus nature's might. The Nith bursts her banks and I am pushed right onto Bank Street and into safety.....

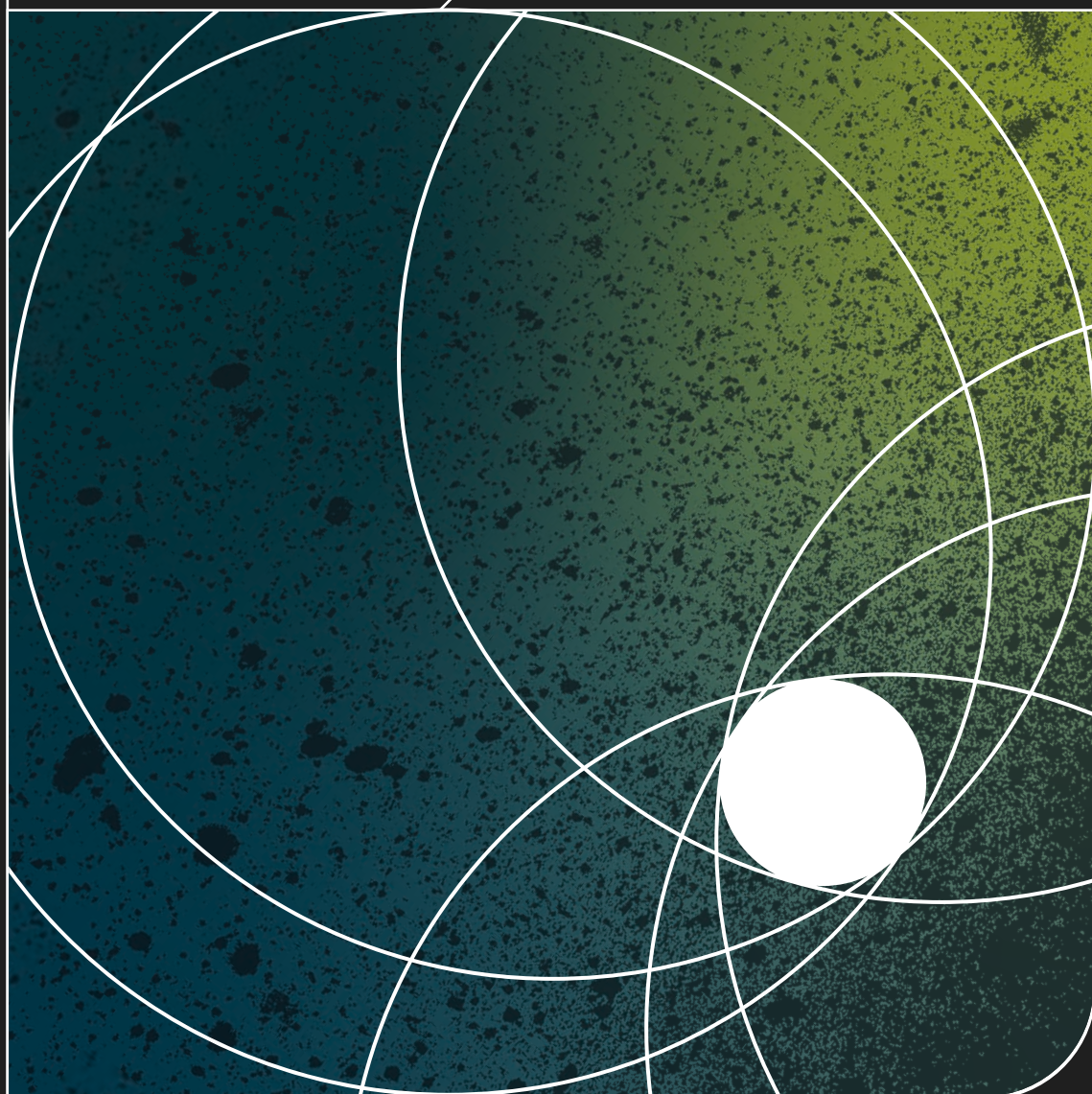
Such sober austerity in these buildings! Once great vaults of wealth lamenting the last flight of capital. The City of Dumfries : still has a good ring to it, doesn't it? The sweet strain of a fiddle bowed by work-heavy arms courses from 'The Sang Hoose of Scotland' and I wonder..... what if Burns had lived today? Imagine Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake all hooked up with him on Facebook! Held court in The Globe of a Friday evening? The first bastion of the International Romantic Movement! The poised and aloof Midsteeple chimes 'Auld Lang Syne' like a fanfare as I'm hunted onto the High Street by this tormenting flood. I am arrested by the vegetation sprouting from perfect rooftops over ruined shopfronts. I see a mob at The Merkat Cross. They burn the articles of Union of 1707 and I laugh at the irony of the Unionist majority Dumfries is known for today....Did you not know there's a rebel spirit percolating through the generations and sleep-staggering in the schemes?! The blushing glow of hand-painted signs point to the future - somewhere even I can't tread! Will the High Street be reclaimed by the people as the Whitesands is by the tide? My image glares back at me again as I begin my ascent on my way back home. I am St Michael. Patron saint of the warriors and the sick alike. Your patron Saint, Dumfries! Your heart still beats under your cobble-stoned breast, so do I really need to intervene here? Well .. that's up to you! But.... if Paradise HAS been lost then surely Utopia is in the post. We'll see.....

**JASMINE
McMILLAN**



The In-Between

55.069232, -3.610993



Do you see them? The cracks between your world and mine.

The breach of something so delicate. Isn't it beautiful?

You know I almost didn't see you there. I fell asleep last night in the undergrowth again. I was out too late and the grass was so tall and so wild and I was blind, all this green in my eyes, streaking across my vision. The grass looks so fragile when it's centimetres tall and you can crush it under your walking feet, but when it's taller than you it makes a very worthy opponent. I know what you're thinking, I need to stop staying out so late, now that it's getting darker, and especially now that the vines have crept round the streetlights and plunged us into darkness. But between me and you, I love the feeling of it, under my feet- the feeling of rough bark under my fingertips, the feeling that it's just me, for miles, alone, surrounded by green and brown and black, the blackness of the inky sky that blankets this green place.

You know what I saw last night? You'll never believe me. I was exploring the tree canopies, carefully treading the twisting branches that usually tower above my head, and suddenly I was met with smooth, cold slates under my rough bare feet. I had walked from one rooftop to another across a jagged maze of branches without realising, and once I was there, on the second one, I just let myself fall backwards onto the mossy slates. It was cold and the moss prickled against my legs, but when I looked up, I swear I could see them. Stars. They were everywhere. They littered the inky face of the sky like a million burning freckles, stretching further than my eyes could ever see. Stars have to be the most beautiful things known to human beings, like us, they just have to be. Now that the lights have been suffocated, I can see them, even above here, even now. You can't tell when you're on the ground, with all the leaves covering your head like parasols, blotting out the sky. But I climbed so high that there weren't any branches to shade me anymore, and for a moment in time it felt like it was just me and the universe, staring at each other- an unending, indestructible face decorated with endless flaming diamonds, and a mossy girl, on a mossy rooftop, who could not believe how lucky she was to see something so beautiful.

My head was so giddy after climbing down that I completely lost my way in the shrubbery. I couldn't remember which direction I had come from or even where I was trying to go.

It was so dark, and so quiet, with nothing but the gentle leaves brushing against each other, and the sound of owls distantly crying, so I stopped here, unable to walk anymore. I didn't want to see anything else, I only wanted to remember- that precious moment of seeing the stars again, embedded in the night sky over my head. I saw the bench that we are both near now- so near, yet so far from the other- and I lay on its vines that splay out in every direction imaginable.

It's been like this for quite a long time- tall, and green. I can't remember when it first started. It all seemed to happen so quickly that I can barely remember the process of it. But I don't mind it now, though I quite miss the days when doors weren't blocked and when lights worked. I've gotten used to wading through the grassland every day. I used to have this dread about all of it, sitting in the pit of my stomach, unmoving- but in the tall grass, it feels like I am so very small, and so insignificant, and that makes me feel better about all of it.

I wonder how often you see the stars where you are. It must be difficult, with all the streetlights intact, but I'm sure if you were somewhere like I am, or even just a field, in the middle of nowhere in particular, staring upwards, you would see them just like I did last night. Do you think they are the most beautiful things you have ever seen, or have you seen something more beautiful? If you have, I can hardly believe you, even though I want to. I would ask you to prove it, but we are so far from each other. Shrubbyery may grow in the imperfections in the barrier between your world and mine, but it is so much stronger than I will ever be, I would never be able to break it.

Your world is as mine used to be, so ordinary, untouched by the wild forests that now grow here, insatiable, taking everything. Your world does not creep through the barrier to mine, it only stays still, as you do, listening. Do you not have anything to say? Any stories to tell? Any encounters with starry skies that are worth retelling?

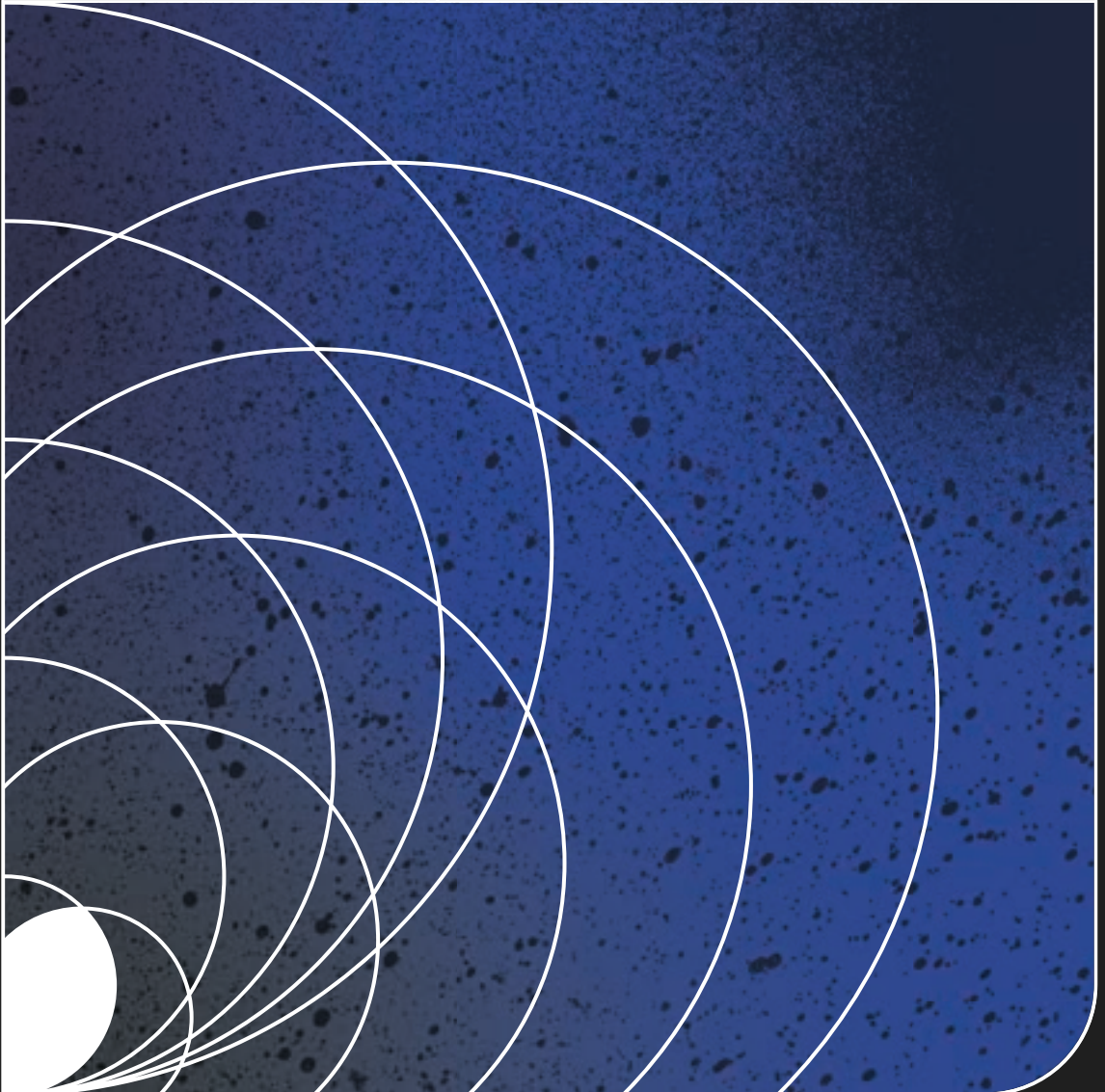
No, our worlds should stay apart from one another, you're right. There are already too many traces of mine creeping through the clean pavements of yours. I hope, though, for your sake, that you should take in the stars as I did last night- they are unwavering, unending, fragments of our stolen light.

CAMERON PHILLIPS



Through The Stars

55.069896, -3.612129



You can see Dumfries from the Moon. On trips to the observatory decks I would point the large lens telescope towards the Southern part of Scotland and have a better look at what we left over. Others who were crammed here in the living centres would use the time they bought to look at the parts of history they wished they had visited. My Grandfather and I would often study the old images of the town stored via projections from the company data packs. Grandfather would always show me the pictures he had saved of the place our family came from. We couldn't take them too far away from the Grid though, stray from the network and the company would delete them regardless of payment. The charge for reactivating any memory was too much for most, myself included. Most of the images stored in the Grid were constructed from various accounts and memories of those who had left us. The ones Grandfather and I had were real though, at least to me.

The first thing I always noticed about them was the sky. Sometimes it was a bright, radiant blue but mostly it seemed to settle on a dull grey. The main thing was that it was there. No glass above your head, no sealed domes to control the atmosphere, just an expansive sky you can look up to at any time. The people would walk places without the constant connection to the Grid to monitor everywhere they were going.

On the last visit to the observatory deck I asked my Grandfather about going back to Dumfries.

"Very dangerous" he replied.

Tourist routes to Earth had bypassed places like Dumfries. All the major cities could be visited for the day. The culture had been condensed down to a small section of what was there before, the only part they could keep safe for the visitors. Outside the walls were those who refused to leave on the carriers. Stories had come back from Earth saying they were living wild outside the cities, fighting over the remaining plant material. They had rejected the Grid and as a result the Grid had forgotten them.

Grandfather continued though.

"If I could though then I have an idea of a poet's statue called Burns. I'm not sure if it was real or just another made up story. I'd like to know either way before I am no more".

I told him I'd had an idea.

The automated system in the showroom asked us to select a destination from a long list of cities. Scrolling quickly to Glasgow and a tour

of 'The Sunken Treasure of Kelvingrove' soon gave us access to a small ship only three metres long. It had a few dents in the bodywork from the regular trips through the floating debris of Earth's atmosphere but it would do. On the side, in large letters scratched with years of space travel, was the name 'The Intrepid One'. It was unaware of how intrepid it was going to have to be.

With Grandfather in the seat alongside me I settled into the cabin and examined the touchscreen controls. A face slowly generated out of the code within, a copy of my appearance without the freckles and blemishes.

"We'll be off in no time and at Kelvingrove in around three hours, thirty-seven minutes" it said in a digital copy of my accent. The door shut tight with a defined thunk, the walls hummed as the power flowed through to the engine. After a few short seconds we were disengaged from the launch bay and weaving a predetermined route through the compressed traffic towards space beyond.

Earth itself, like a marble hanging in the darkness, grew larger by the minute. It soon became easier to pick out the cities with their enormous glass bubbles shielding them from the water levels and high winds. Culture had survived as long as you could afford the flight fee.

I waited for the moment.

"Not long until we land in Kelvingrove, part of the old city of Glasgow. For now please rate your journey" the system chimed.

It gleefully threw ten icons on screen, a sliding scale of faces from outrageous anger to unnaturally happy. The last few on the better end of the line bounced up and down to draw the eye. I jabbed my thumb directly onto the furious side. The code frowned. The ship slowed to a crawl and hung on the edge of the Earth's atmosphere. This had not been the software's plan. Clearing my throat I told the software that we should land further South as this would be much more to my satisfaction.

"Final destination Glasgow" it bleated.

I hammered the angry icon again.

"Glasgow"

Again.

"Glas..."

Once more.

"Are you sure you don't want me to try, I have more experience of these systems than you"

Grandfather asked.

I pressed again before it had a chance to respond further. In seconds I was jabbing the button, drumming a pattern on the screen as the software jolted to the rhythm. Icons flashed across the display, spinning around, smiling one second then frowning the next. Then came the opportunity of a forced reboot. The software searched for a new identity, ending up instead being a combination of the last few people it had seen. The hybrid spoke.

“Beginning descent”.

With that the ship plunged downwards with gathering pace. I held onto my Grandfather as much as I could as calm control gave way to wild velocity. The pathfinding programme scatter gunned and all the human junk of years of space travel clanked against the hull of our ever speeding can. Old satellites bounced off the glass of the view finder, discarded oxygen tanks dented the engine covers and floating dead solar panels rebounded off the outer shell. The clouds sped past too soon as the darkness of space was overthrown by a light grey sky. Scotland span into a blur through the viewfinder.

Safety measures finally came online as the ship jolted upwards again forcing my stomach to flip and stretch. We flew low into Dumfries clipping the roof of a building, tiles scattered through the air and churned through the turbines. Sparkes crackled off one wing as the ship leaned over to the side crippled by the impact. The software desperately tried to find the usual guide signal from the core programme modulator to bring it home safely. It failed to find one. Instead it chose the next course of action by planting the nose of the ship into the ground and pushing to a burrowing halt on the stone below. I took a few moments to regain my breath and get rid of the taste of adrenaline from my tongue. The software's lips moved silently, audio was the first thing to break when the Grid forgets you.

After I kicked the door outwards we ventured into the stillness of another time. My boots crunched into the dust cast down from the fallen buildings. The standing structures that remained had shards of inner metal that pointed skywards towards the persistent clouds above. Winds whipped around the place, gathering pace and playing out a forlorn melody in the wreckage. The sun had betrayed whatever plant life remained giving it a brown char on the leaves. Pools of water had claimed

the side streets with the occasional streetlamp visible above the murk. My nose filled with the smell of what I thought to be burning synthetic meat, far removed from the usual smell of antibacterial spray they sent through the air supply on the Moon. It gave me comfort until I noticed the lack of animal life around us.

“Further up the street?” questioned Grandfather. I began pulling my jacket collar up to protect against the biting wind, we walked upwards. The light on my data pack was fading, the grid reduced to a whisper.

I looked up to a view of the sky free from the usual glass barriers. There were no ships flying above us, no noise of whirring engines through the atmosphere. The masses of people being allocated by the Grid were absent and I could walk wherever I wanted to be. The place had become dominated by a steady quiet that refused to let go.

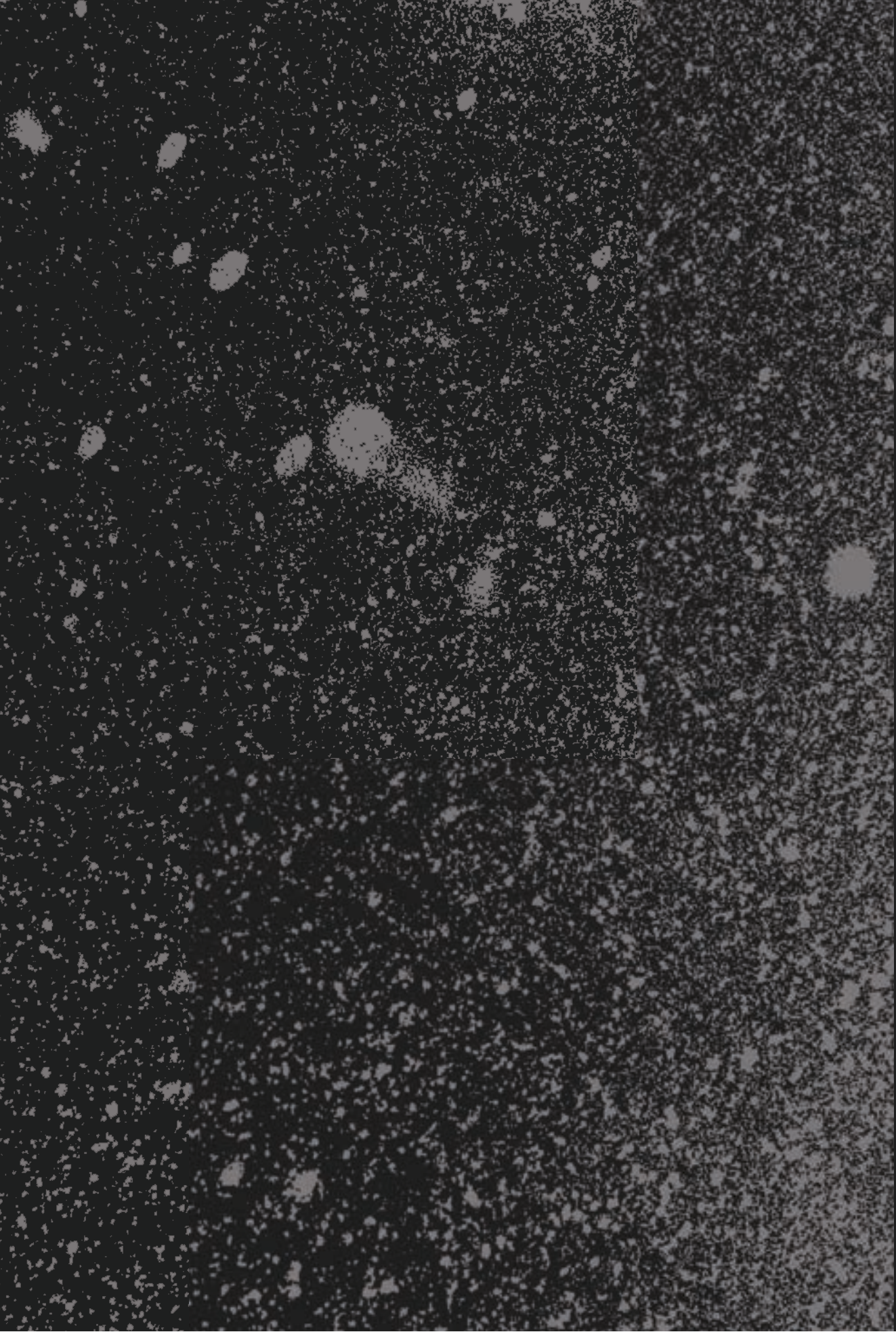
Then we saw him.

The surface of the Burns statue had dulled as small dents had been introduced over the years. The plant life below hauled themselves upwards towards his feet, wrapping around the plinth. The unstable fluctuations in the weather over time had taken something of a toll on the man yet he remained standing and watchful over what had remained. He looked thoughtful with an expression that suggested a disapproval of how vast numbers of mankind had finished off here, dropped everything and moved on.

Grandfather wanted to see so I carefully placed him down on the concrete. The data pack buzzed as the power rapidly drained away. The occasional rain droplet danced in the purple light, glitching the image which warped in and out of existence for those few short minutes. Amplifying the projection using the last of the battery gave Grandfather a better view. I asked if it was worth the journey.

The image smiled, built from an idea of what that would have looked like. He did not speak, the audio was the first to go. After a few more seconds he faded along with the light on the data pack. The Grid had lost us and Grandfather with it. All the stories I had heard about him and used in his design and development over the last decade had now gone.

He had been real though, at least to me.



THE MAKERS OF THE MULTIVERSE

Lead Artist:

Martin Joseph O'Neill

Writers:

Carolyn Hashimoto

Davey Payne

Cameron Philips

Kris Haddow

Jasmine McMillan

Sound Design:

John Dinning

Publication Design:

Alan Cameron

Recorded by:

Dave Miller of Circa 16 Sound Recording

Mentors:

Des Dillon

Karen Campbell

Karl Drinkwater

Voice Coach:

Ruth Urquhart



The Stove Network

The Stove Network is an award-winning arts and community project based in the heart of Dumfries High Street. We use creativity to bring together people and ideas, inspire and support new community-led projects, grow opportunities and celebrate our local places and people. We believe art, community and creativity are a gateway to help understand our world and empower us to make the changes necessary to support and grow the ideas and experiences we need to map a fairer future for us all.

Funders

Dumfries & Galloway Unlimited
A membership organisation that works with, and provides a voice for, Dumfries and Galloway's creative sector. DGU champions and advocates the vital role creative practitioners and organisations play in contributing to the wellbeing of our communities and economy.



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