

# The Place of the Bridge

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Bristol Images

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*The Promise*  
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# The Place of the Bridge

## Part I.

### The Fall

Look up. A woman tumbles from the sky. The mud on the River Avon glistens silver in the light at low tide. Her skirts billow around her like a parachute as she spins over and over. Time, life, love is suspended as her fall slows, and she wonders what she is doing here, as she panics, as she hits the mud. The drop is more than 75 meters. She lives. She has hurled herself off the Clifton Suspension Bridge and over the next hundred years becomes one of only four to survive. Two of that number are children. They plummet over the side together a decade later.

The fallen woman might be the moral of the story. We could call her “moral”, a word here that could take in class, woman, city, bridge – the city identified with that bridge, like that river – perhaps representing shifting morals, certainly shifting values. We could also call her Sarah. Sarah Ann Henley. The year is 1885 and she’s had a lovers quarrel. She lives at 30 Twinnell Road, and she lives on. And on. She dies in 1948. A picture of the children who also survived the fall are in a locket she has when she dies. Tied together by not dying, they beat the odds and death – and a bridge.<sup>1</sup>



### A Ghost Story

Cities haunt me; they’re full of ghosts, not necessarily real ones, but the things we walk past everyday. Living in a city (surviving in a city) is about what you tune out. What I ask of you instead is to tune in. Walk a particular street and notice everything, the roots growing from the plane tree into the pavement, a hallucinatory bit of string wound round a metal fence and three cement traffic bollards lined up incongruously as if to stop cars driving down a lane that doesn’t exist. Everywhere these ghosts lurk: cracks in the sidewalk, patches of gum... all hint at other pasts, histories so seemingly insignificant they can be ignored.

### Love Sick

In hospital as Sarah, our fallen woman, is recovering, she gets proposals, marriage and otherwise. Her father is offered thousands to turn her into a popular entertainment, a freak show. She and her beau, a railway porter, perhaps reconcile; she begs for him. He tries to see her. The doctors keep them apart, but a quarter century later she marries someone else. Apparently she’d boasted to the porter that she could do better than him. Did she? The man she marries instead is employed at Bristol Wagon Works, but her story is full of holes. Me, I fill them up, dreaming of the life she gets marrying at nearly 40.

Perhaps it’s better though to respect the dead and the gaps, to ask a question about being a woman where love represents a path to a better life and marriage has value, and to ask this in a city founded by a merchant class, where money has always been at the forefront. For her and countless other women at the time marriage is about something more than love. A woman has an exchange value<sup>2</sup> and marriage a moral worth.

This is also an age when skirts hobble women, so to be saved by skirts and afterward face people’s scorn as they discuss your affairs in the newspaper.... To be a woman in 1885 and want better prospects, prospects that only come through marriage, and yet to be saved by your clothes, clothes designed to make it impossible to run, to jump, to escape.... To be poor or working class (about the same thing then) and want better.... To be the one woman who survives seems a profound irony.

### Most jumpers statistically are men. Why is that?

The two children are girls. They don’t jump. They are thrown. Their names? Elsie and Ruby Brown, ages three and twelve. Their father Charles Brown is bankrupt, perhaps insane. His grocery store is failing. He has five kids but only tries to kill two. We can deduce that the others are boys. The older daughter, Ruby, at her father’s trial talks of being soaked wet by the rain and crying, forced to walk up and back across the bridge: “Father caught hold of me and I began to scream. He lifted me up on the side of the bridge and put me over.” His business is going under; he pushes his daughters over.

The girls are saved by a boat captain and two police officers. Postcards are sold of the five of them together afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

### Enslaved to a Past

This is a ghost story with doublings and hauntings. I look at Bristol and feel the frisson of history, a cold breath at my back, as if something is always there over my shoulder. Perhaps it’s because, as one friend puts, a friend who doesn’t like Bristol, the city feels haunted by its past, though maybe *haunted* isn’t the word. Maybe it’s more inescapable than that. She calls it: “slavery”. The slave trade is the dark past that marks the city.

### Two Maps

In Bristol I’m a tourist. I have no past, only a present as I walk down the streets, but I read the past everywhere. It’s like an overlay to the city, two maps, two cities – past and present – and you can always switch your view, walk through the streets a ghost, with you as if you were a spectre.

Bristol, though, seems obsessed with its past, its far more glorious past as if it still keeps one foot dragging behind, maybe like a pirate’s peg leg. Or a slave’s manacles.

### The Lines Radiate

Cross Queen Square, that Georgian park built on a wetland with slave traders’ money and for a few short decades the fanciest address in town. The pebbles crunch underfoot, and the paths radiate out from the centre as if an order can be imposed on a swamp. As if order is possible, but this is the Age of Reason (not to mention stealing people from Africa and selling them to America).

I pause. How can you not stop? I think of the 1831 Riots, when dozens die demanding the right to vote. Crowds gather here to protest the knight, Tory, city alderman and judge Sir Charles Wetherell’s appearance in town. He’s come down from London at the end of October to open the magistrates’ court, the assizes. He opposed the reform bill that would modestly increase the number of voters in the country. That summer 20,000 Bristolians petitioned for enfranchisement,<sup>4</sup> this in a city where only 5% of the population – the male population,

<sup>1</sup> The Bridge is Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s Clifton Suspension Bridge, the first major project the engineer proposed and a wonder of the Victorian age, also renowned as a “Suicide Bridge”; the term for a bridge off which people are drawn to jump. To this day it has taken the lives of more than a thousand people.

<sup>2</sup> Men did offer to pay her father, after all, to sell her as a popular entertainment if not to the actual circus....

<sup>3</sup> The captain’s name, so it’s not lost, is James Hazell, and the police officers, P.C. Wise and Sgt. Willie, ran with the girls in their arms all the way to the infirmary to save their lives.

<sup>4</sup> That fact about the 20,000 petitioning comes from *Bristol Past and Present* by J.F. Nichols and John Taylor, published in 1882 and partially republished online by the Bristol Radical Historical Group. After the first Reform Bill was shut down that year, 60,000 marched in London to St James’ Palace in early October, others rioted in Derby, and in Nottingham the castle was burned. Riots happened elsewhere first, though they rip a hole through Bristol’s history.

When Wetherell comes to town, 2000 people line the streets to jeer. Even the prostitutes protest, as Nichols and Taylor put it: ‘The female habitués of [Temple Street’s] alleys added shrill execrations to the din.’ Meanwhile Sir Charles who is lodging in the fancy Mansion House on Queen Square that night has to escape the protests in drag, it’s been said. The protesters are “read the Riot Act” [a fact I love, as here I learn the origin of the phrase. Enacted in 1715, it allowed authorities to declare a group of more than a dozen people gathered illegal].

Eventually the crowd throws stones at soldiers, who attack with shots and sabres. The next day the crowds return to the square looting wine cellars, taking “400 dozen choice wines” according to Taylor and Nichols. There’s “revelry” and “robbery” Bridewell Prison is stormed and burned, Mansion House burned, the Bishop’s Palace burned (the Church of England’s bishops also opposed voting rights). Wine cellars are raided again. The Riot Act read again. Houses surrounding Queen Square go up in flames, while a street away “Fry’s warehouse full of cocoa burned, with a fearful stench which lasted for weeks”. Bodies keep turning up in the smoking rubble; another twelve die in hospitals.

<sup>5</sup> The next year in 1832 a fancy party celebrating and wooing the new voters is to be held on Brandon Hill. Tickets are sold to 6,000 of the new electorate. Only 14,000 show up, storming the festivities. They run off with the wine and puddings, no doubt still incensed over the indignities of the year before.



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that is – is allowed to cast a ballot. When the bill is first overturned, speeches are made, opposition leaders elected, but those in power pay little attention to the concerns. So, just a few days before All Hallows Eve people clamour in the square, demanding to be heard. I think of how on the second day they roll expensive barrels of wine from the Mansion House’s cellars and get drunk. I think, more power to them. Nearly every history of the riots focuses on this detail. We get the unreasonable rioters: hooligans, thieves and drunkards, a crowd gone wild. But the point of the protest gets elided in these facts; men and women took to the streets to win the right to vote, to be heard, and a year later, the riots work. Parliament passes a bill to increase enfranchisement for men, middle-class men. Most of the rioters still can’t vote. They are too poor.<sup>5</sup>

Jane Caroline Crofs writes in 1877 to the Reverend Charles Davis about her memories of the protests and the dead: “I went with Mr. Crofs into the Square and saw the men gather skulls, legs, pieces of flesh and bone into baskets and throw them in large pits dug inside the square, [inside the rails and between the trees.] The effluvia was horrible and we were obliged to cover nose and mouth...”<sup>6</sup>

So these are the ghosts I walk on.



### One Way Streets

I come to Bristol armed with a quote from Walter Benjamin. German writer, historian, essayist, he’s the patron saint of city-walkers, of people who go the wrong way down one-way streets and search shopping arcades for greater truths about who we are. “Not to find one’s way in a city,” he wrote, “may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling.”

I clutch my map, however, and am terrified of getting lost – of *appearing* lost.

A woman, maybe crazy, maybe homeless, maybe just kind, says, “A tourist, are you?”

“Research,” I declare.

She’s pushing a shopping trolley. I’m taking a picture of a patch of gum. Who is the crazy one here?

### A List to Guide Me

Truth is I’m nervous not only about being lost, but also about finding my way among the ghosts.

Things I’ve consulted hoping for some orientation:

- A vellum lease from 1535. The oldest thing I’ve ever touched, the paper feels like skin, and unfolding it feels dangerous. It could tear in my bare hands. Inside, I can’t even decipher the words – 16th century legalese. What I can read says it’s “a grant to John A Sha”. I think it gives him Spyttyll Howse, a leper’s hospital on Redcliffe Hill.<sup>7</sup>

- An entire series of *Clifton House Mystery*, a 1970s children’s TV drama about ghosts from the 1831 Riots.

- A preacher’s pamphlet detailing the last letters of the four men sentenced to death for the riots. (The men are hung; each claim God and drink are an issue in their behaviour. Too little of the former, too much of latter).<sup>8</sup>

- Not to mention scientific literature on the life span of concrete, how eyesight functions and debates from the late 70s on the Bristol Hum attributing the low frequency noise to industry, microwaves, UFOs refueling from the national electrical grid and the sound of natural gas under pressure in the seabed. Pleas are sent to Members of Parliament hoping for help with the hum. Answers never turn up.

- In my quest to understand the city I try geology, hydrology, concrete, caves, politics and paranormals.

### Street Phantoms

“Suit yourself”, the woman says. Her trolley clangs on a kerb.

The homeless are ghosts too. We stare through them, and what are we scared of? After she goes, I tell myself I didn’t want her to see how lost I was. But, I never even gave her a chance.

### Cities also have eyes, language and maps

Our vision is an average of what our eye takes in, processed in fifteen-second delays. What we see is a composite, as scientists describe it.<sup>9</sup> Our brains also bundle information, so the things we expect to see, we don’t have to notice precisely. Same with our actions in a city. If you’ve walked up one street countless times, you stop observing the street and every step along it. Each step becomes an average of each past step, and the things we pass don’t scream for attention, don’t even beg for it. We just ignore them, probably not even conscious of the fact that we are.

To see every crack in the pavement or tack in a wall holding up a poster that may have been torn down last week is to invite yourself to get lost in a city. It’s to welcome in these ghosts. Only, if I were to describe everything I saw exactly, I’d be writing forever and no closer to capturing the thing in words. To take one city street and annotate each crack and fissure, the roots and weeds poking through the pavement and the names of the people who cast the kerbs and bollards is impossible. It’s like trying to map the city in a 1:1 ratio.

We’d end up with a map of madness, requiring every word in our vocabulary and more. Language inevitably fails. A chair is never a specific chair, even a metal chair or a wooden chair, or a wicker one with a braided seat. Likewise a “long jagged crack patched and filled with tar that shimmers with oil in the light” cannot fully describe the crack I see before me now. Trying leads me down a rabbit hole, and language, it just makes holes. As it tries to cover them up, it exposes blanks, gaps and questions. *What is it you mean, exactly?*

To get to *exactly*, to describe exactly, to see completely, is insanity, infinity, impossibility....

### Buddleia

Hold a contemporary map of Bristol up to an older one, and it looks like the city today but oddly, phantasmagorically, different. Castle Park is named for the castle that by the 1640s was beyond repair. Would someone from the 14th century or the 17th recognise it today? How about in 100 years, could you? The Norwich Union and Bank of England buildings will be gone, no doubt, turned to waving stalks of purple Buddleia and grass. The bushes will reach for the sky and hide ghosts of a Brutalist past.

<sup>6</sup> Her letters about the riots can be found in the Bristol Record Office, penned in her careful hand. She spells her name “Crofs”, which following an older convention might be Cross, the lower case ‘f’ meaning ‘s’. The Cross/Crofs family also owned a distillery and her husband served as a solicitor at the trial of Bristol’s mayor Charles Pinney after the riots. Her letters detail how servants snuck out the plate to save it, and merchants and their families had to escape dressed in their servants’ uniforms.

<sup>7</sup> This can be found in the Bristol Record Office. Their citation for the document says Sha will pay “yearly for the tenement ‘goddess blessing’ and for the garden three shillings and four pence”.

<sup>8</sup> Five were originally sentenced to death; More than 10,000 people petitioned for clemency, and one man has his sentence commuted because according to Taylor and Nichols, “he was little better than an imbecile”. Seven more are transported to Australia, and nearly fifty sent to prison, including three women. One man Daniel Doyle is it’s noted in parentheses “to be privately whipped”. Which is I suppose better than publicly, but why whipped? Why privately? Why the parentheses, which read in print like a whisper.

<sup>9</sup> Meeri Kim, “What You’re Seeing Right Now Is a Composite of Images, Past and Present Researchers Find.” *Washington Post*, 5 April 2014. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-youre-seeing-right-now-is-a-composite-of-images-past-and-present-researchers-find/2014/04/05/accc2f38-bc32-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-youre-seeing-right-now-is-a-composite-of-images-past-and-present-researchers-find/2014/04/05/accc2f38-bc32-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> Valeria Luiselli writes of cities full of holes in her essay collection *Sidewalks* (Granta Books, 2013) to whose ideas, lucidity and humour I am indebted.

<sup>11</sup> The tidal river Avon is circumvented in the early 19th century with a “floating harbour” so ships of ever increasing size can continue to dock in Bristol. While the original river becomes the harbour, the tidal branch of the Avon runs along what’s called “The Cut”.

<sup>12</sup> When the mob stormed Bridewell Prison during the 1831 riots, the crowd tore off the gaol’s gates and threw them into the Frome. Not quite sewage, but something a tad more moving.

Sarah Henley witnesses the city's changes. Brunel's Clifton Bridge opens the year before she's born, and she dies just after the city has been cut full of craters in the war. It's a city full of holes,<sup>10</sup> each gap a reminder of a missing past. Perhaps those ghosts are more literal than I might think. On the Bristol.gov.uk website, the city council lists local paranormal organisations one can consult to deal with any ghosts that turn up.



### A Fearful Pitch

Another act of madness? Believing water can be tamed – or planning to concrete over the harbour as it was floated (get that? *floated*?) in the late 1960s. Crazy, no? A bit like putting concrete in the sky, with bridges and paths in the air (also ca. 1960s). Let us tame the elements. Can we now conquer fire? Meanwhile the River Frome is moved not just once or twice but three times; first it's diverted to encircle the castle in a moat. Next, to run along the Cathedral. Then the River Avon is made into a “cut”.<sup>11</sup> No longer tidal, the Frome becomes stagnant, an open sewer, and finally the river is hidden under concrete in culverts. Now a tamed representation of it emerges from a grid of fountains at the pedestrianised Centre, itself no Centre at all, not city centre, not historic centre, not harbour centre or even shopping centre. Truly there is no there there. And, in Celtic, Frome means fair or fine, hardly the name you'd give a river known for causing cholera epidemics.<sup>12,13</sup>

### A Question

What else are ghosts but hints of history, a connection? Or else a patch in the pavement?

### Longing

In Brutalism is an architecture of hope, ruined by a name. It was the idea that life could be better. What do we do with that dream now?

### The Afterlife

What I really want to know is what happens in those years after Sarah Ann Henley jumps? Her mother dies and her father remarries a woman five years older than Sarah herself. In 1890 and 91 two sisters are born. Her father gets a new family. So Sarah marries and moves from Twinnell Road to Croydon Street, less than a half mile away. Does she love her husband or just want to escape?

I picture her as practical, stoical, quiet. In that one moment of her fall all her fears are lost. All the foolishness of high-strung emotion drains away.

I look at pictures of Ruby and Elsie Brown posed with the boat captain and police who rescued them. The girls don't

smile. They're dressed in fashionable clothes, and Ruby already looks like a woman in her fur-trimmed coat with mutton sleeves. Elsie glances to the side warily, as if unsure what to make of the fur hat and ribbons she wears or perhaps of the fact that she is still alive.

At the time of her jump Sarah Henley worked in a pub. Did she and the railway porter talk of a better future together? Could they have walked the streets of Easton talking about new lives and better homes, not having to live with siblings in cramped houses? Maybe they took the train up to the Bristol Zoological Gardens with other pleasure seekers and walked through the cages and thought of what their own freedom might look like? Is this how he got the idea that she thought she could do better than him? This fact about their disagreement is reported in the papers, the information gleaned from a letter of his she has with her when she leaps. Only one quote, a mere two words, are included however. He says they should “dissolve partnership”, as if they were a business. We get the man's letter, but not his name. We have her name, but never her words.

Apparently Elsie Brown marries a Fred Morris in Bristol. Do they ever talk of her father or the bridge, or her father's business's failing?



## Part II.

### The Lifespan of Concrete

In maps of the city you can see dreams and their failures. You can find their remnants in cement walkways in the sky, now fenced off, or stairs that start and stop abruptly. They're the last fragments of a utopian future that was never completed. City planners had thought we would walk in the air, above the streets and traffic. Here the past can get covered in cement, while that cement even has a lifespan. Perhaps that lifespan might be that of a building from the 1960s torn down last autumn – the concrete stained, the building seen as “brutal” and an “eyesore” because the name of the movement that formed the building is *Brutalism*.

Brutalism, though, was married to buildings that embodied social progress: housing, schools, government services and even parking. All the gaps of the war, the holes left by bombing – the poverty and the Depression – would be covered with concrete and a dream of a better future. Language fails that promise. It becomes the brute, and the disconnection between the name and the promise can be attributed to one British critic, Reyner Banham. He coins the term “Brutalism” as a pun on *beton brut*, or raw concrete in French. He conflates the terms and mixes a mistranslation with an entire style, hoping that Brutalism will be true to its materials. The brute will be raw and the concrete laid bare for all to see.<sup>14</sup> At the time he wrote his first essay on Brutalism,<sup>15</sup> only a few buildings that might fit his definition exist anywhere in the world, a fact he ignores as he creates

<sup>13</sup> In one of many letters to the local Board of Health about the Frome, on 15 February 1885, AC Rowley, minister of St Matthias' Church, writes, the river “flows through the heart of the city and into which the sewage from several thousand houses discharges itself. This so-called river is during the summer months nearly stagnant and... the stench that arises from it is positively intolerable. Whenever cholera has appeared in Bristol its virulence has been most evident along the course of this pestilential stream... My parishioners are particularly affected by it for not only does the open river or sewer run behind their houses obliging them to keep their windows closed during the summer but it runs in front of their church (the church of St Matthias Elias) so that the congregation often during the summer months been detained in large numbers from church in consequence of the offensive stench from the river... the evil has now risen to a fearful pitch.”

<sup>14</sup> There is another irony here. Many Brutalist buildings are “bush hammered,” that is a jackhammer is taken to the concrete's surface to rough it up. The concrete looks better when rain-stained but doesn't weather nearly so well. The hammering introduces cracks that with cold, wind, rain and ice start to degrade the material over time, so the concrete's life span is shorter.

<sup>15</sup> His essay “The New Brutalism” was first published in December 1955 in the *Architectural Review*.

<sup>16</sup> Brutalism's death throes started with the gas crisis and recession of the early-mid 70s as ambitious civic projects stalled. By 1980 the price of concrete had quadrupled from Brutalism's heyday in the 1960s.

<sup>17</sup> NCP, the National Car Parks, owe their existence to the war. Their first parking garage was built on a bomb site in London in Holborn, a valuable piece of real estate, which was only a hole. The founders saw its worth and on that built an empire, an empire of concrete and car parks.











24 hr

Prince Street Bridge

the name. It's as if Banham conjures up an entire movement by will of the written word.

The movement's day ends the moment Thatcher is elected,<sup>16</sup> as those brutal buildings are tied to a dream that society can provide for everyone. All of us will be housed and housed well, even if that housing soon comes to mean warehousing. Then, there is Mrs. Thatcher, and she sells off the estates. We enter an age of private ownership, the ethos of our current era with skyrocketing house prices. But, I think we're about to enter another age, and these pasts, these ghosts, will soon haunt the landscape too, but only if you look hard enough. The holes are getting filled in quickly. And, with what? *Student accommodation*.

### Rivers of Money

Looking at maps of Bristol, it's possible to observe capital coursing through the city, not just rivers and harbours. Or rather, on the rivers and harbours. The maps read like a history of money in Britain. You can decipher a dream of empire: the sea, a sea power, and add to that America, Africa and slavery. Now all that's left is a pretty relic of the past, a ghost of empire, perpetually haunted by those values.

### The Brutal Walking Tour

Start with diamonds in the sky in the Princes Street NCP.<sup>17</sup> Stare out its seven-sided windows, and from the top floor the harbour floats below, the clouds above. Here the very phrase "car park", strikes me as felicitous. In my US-English, the term should be "parking garage" but the doubling of park, here "car" and "park" creates a moment of possibility. The word has a double, haunted by meanings and etymology. Both "parks" hail from the same origin: *Parricus*, meaning enclosure and park *and* fencing.

With the river and clouds and sky out the window, the joining of the two meanings points to a stray experience of transcendence. Is this not truly a city park?

### One for Sorrow

Clutching my map I approach what is essentially a wasteland, though it is also a "park". Magpie Park. Not named for the bird, not for sorrow or joy, not three for a girl or four for a boy, but a newspaper whose offices in the 19th century stood across the street.<sup>18</sup> Now in the centre of this park, traffic streams around us, and here is something truly brutal, Edward Colston: slave merchant, trader, big man about town standing on stone.<sup>19</sup>

This is where the ghosts are. Bronze fish at his feet gulp at air, and reliefs around the sides show him giving money to the poor. Another seems to be of mermaids, but none show slaves on ships. Nothing portrays people being stolen from their homes or dying during the journey. There's no bronze relief for RAC – not the automobile club but the company name, the Royal African Company – that was branded on slaves' chests. There's no memorial in the park for the 20,000 who died on the boats or the third more who passed away within a few years of reaching America.<sup>20</sup> There is just this man in his wig. "One of the most virtuous and wise sons of this city", the inscription reads. His elbow rests on his walking stick as if he is weary.<sup>21</sup>

### Mind The Gap

Stop at a gap surrounded by black painted plywood protecting a yawning chasm from the street. The walls are not designed to hide the hole from pedestrians; crossing the road is perilous enough to discourage trying. But, get up close and the plywood exposes magical hints of knots and whorls in the black-painted wood, visible only in a certain light, only at certain angles. Beyond the walls orange cranes grasp at the gray clouds. Men stand at the canyon's edge in hard hats and high-vis jackets.

Not long ago the hole had been the Magistrates' Courts, a product of the Brutalist era, the age of empathy and utopia, social progress, possibility and promise. Along the building's sides were walkways to let you stride in the sky. Next, they were boarded up with blue walls and hazard signs. Now what of the hole? I ask one of the men in their high-vis jackets what they're building. The answer: "Student accommodation".

No doubt by the time you read this, the hole has been filled in.

### Frome, Fair or Fine

Metal gates block stairs to nowhere. Bridges in the sky cross four lanes of traffic and end suddenly. Soon they'll be gone, ghosts of a past, and the building they're attached to Froomsgate House, will be – what? *More Student accommodation*. The phrase is like the punch line to a joke, as if in this changing use, you can see a hallucination of Bristol's future, the industry that will carry the city forward.

Tracking the number of buildings that have been transformed into student housing in the last few years is to follow Tony Blair's mantra of "Education, education, education" into our new era, the education age. Now universities charge money, and there is money in this, in Bristol, in Froomsgate House. In its very name there remains a haunting memory of what lies beneath. Here Prince Rupert,<sup>22</sup> the one of Rupert Street on which we stand, battled with Dorothy Hazzard in July 1643. She and 200 other women roped themselves together at the Frome Gate in one of the first acts of civil disobedience, hoping to hold Bristol for the Roundheads and preserve religious freedom.<sup>23</sup> Her ghost can be found around the corner, in a Brutalist building, outside which the No. 40 bus idles. Above Princess Inaya Hair and Make-up and Café Mocha is the church she founded in 1640, Bristol's first dissenting church, Broadmead Baptist, rebuilt in 1968. Walk inside and the walls open like a jewel box carved in concrete. The ceilings are high; they crest in waves and the chapel is bathed in light. Now as you climb the stairs a rope hangs along the wall as a handrail, a ghost of the rope Dorothy Hazzard used to try and secure the city.



### The Aspirin Age

Pause a few feet away at the Rupert Street NCP. Look up at the ribbons of concrete and imagine the year is 1961 and two men in lab coats wave you in. Here Pathé filmed the car park for a newsreel. The voiceover is buoyant; this is the country's first "multi-deck parking garage". The narrator boasts of the views from the top across the city.

Public transportation is another casualty of war. City planners believed the car is the future, and hence make the car the future, widening roads and building garages. No one knows about global warming, and gas is cheap. We'd give city streets over to the automobile and climb those stairs hidden now by a fence to walk in the air.

"Better than the scenic (AKA slow) railway, for the man in a hurry", the voiceover says of the car park. As the car screeches out at the end of the film, he asks rhetorically, "Any wonder they call this the aspirin age?"

<sup>18</sup> And underneath Magpie Park? The Frome. When the drawbridge over it was replaced, the docks nearby were covered over in 1892 to produce the square.

<sup>19</sup> His statue was erected in 1895, two years before Cabot Tower, dedicated to John Cabot, supposed discoverer in 1497 of America (or, if nothing else, the first to bring word back to Europe of Newfoundland where he landed that year). Why did Bristol – or some Bristolians, not likely the Sarah Henleys of Bristol but its wealthy citizens – feel the need at the end of the 19th century to celebrate Cabot and Colston, one a dubious discoverer and the other a slave trader? In the US we credit Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci with the discovery of the Americas.

<sup>20</sup> For these facts I'm indebted to Mike Gardner's recent editorial in the Bristol Post: <http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Speaker-s-Corner-Mike-Gardner-Colston-evil-men/story-21229904-detail/story.html>

<sup>21</sup> Lest you think I'm picking on Bristol in particular, I hail from Alexandria, Virginia, a Southern city suffused with slavery's dark past. A statue of a Confederate soldier stands in the middle of the main street and two blocks away the country's largest slave pen stood, a tiny home that looks innocuous today. It doesn't even have a plaque. Running through town there's a Jeff Davis Highway named for the president of the Confederacy. Here the past is, if not unquestioned, then driven by daily and ignored. Its legacy seeps into consciousness, the subtle message from the names and statues being that these men are heroes. Meanwhile the statue of the soldier looks down, facing towards Appomattox, where the South surrendered. The South may have lost but its legacy lingers.

<sup>22</sup> Rupert of the Rhine (aka Rupert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Duke of Bavaria, 1st Duke of Cumberland, 1st Earl of Holderness) won and lost Bristol twice for Charles I, winning it in the summer of 1643 and losing it in 1645, the loss signaling the end of the line for the Royalist cause. After the war he was the first head of the Hudson's Bay Company, the oldest company in North America, which owns Saks Fifth Avenue and other department stores. H.B.C. started as fur traders.

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Hazzard's second husband was Matthew Hazzard, an Anglican minister with puritan leanings. His beliefs though still weren't reformed enough for her. After she decided she couldn't abide by the Church of England's dictates any longer, she declared she and Mr Hazzard could share a bed but not a faith. She also ran a grocery store, which she kept open on Christmas Day, believing faith should be practiced equally everywhere, every day.

The Pathé script in its entirety,<sup>24</sup> which reads something like a prose poem:

*Another sign of the times is Britain's architectural skyline, and structures like this, the first of its kind in this country, will soon, no doubt, almost be commonplace.*

[Cue: speedy, zippy Fantasia soundtrack.]

*If you haven't already identified it, it's a multi-deck garage in Bristol.*

[When does the name switch to car park?]

*Adapted from an American design, the garage has six decks, with room for 550 cars, all of which can be parked or taken away easily along the unbroken curved roadway. The idea is the car goes up the gradient and the driver goes down again by the lift.*

[A stout man in a suit gets out of his car. The ticket is on the wind screen, another stowed in his pocket. Why does he need two?]

*It's almost worth driving to the top just for the views.*

[Of the department store Primark and the cathedral.]

*And what could be better for the man in a hurry, better than the scenic railway?*

[The car speeds out and down, and the camera wheels around Hitchcock-like. The car circles, brakes squealing as the man in the lab coat waves it on urgently.]

*Any wonder they call this the aspirin age?*

### The Brutal Bridge

Those who see ghosts believe Isambard Brunel stands by his celebrated bridge<sup>25</sup> at the edge of the city on the cusp of Leigh Woods. I think if he is there, it's not for those who jumped, which was, in Sarah's day, 16 or 17 men; only one nearly survived. He gasped a few breaths and died. Brunel, I'm convinced is here for his own sadness, not others'. He needs to gaze upon his bridge, the project never completed in his lifetime.

He volunteered as a constable in the riots. The poor stood up for enfranchisement, for rights, for something better, and he volunteered to keep them down. So, maybe it's fitting that the riots prevented his bridge from being finished. There was no money, no investment, after the protests. No one believed in Bristol. Later, as the bridge was built, the design veered from his plans,<sup>26</sup> so he stands now on the banks to rue it. This man, who was cruel to his wife but upstanding to others, who comes in second in the 100 Greatest Britons poll, haunts his unfinished dream. Instead I stare at the mud 75 meters down and wonder how Sarah Ann Henley could survive.

She never returns to her job. She was a barmaid at the Rising Sun. What happens in those anonymous years, between her not-death and actual death? Between jumping for love's failure and her marriage? She has an ordinary life with one extraordinary instance, an hour – no more – and the facts of it will haunt her for the next 63 years. But I'm stuck on the fact of her living, the facts of the rest of her life. She marries at 37, has no children, and the one thing we know

about her is the fall, and this because she lived. The ones who died, we rarely hear their names.

Perhaps what I'm interested in aren't the holes, but the anonymous people who are the gaps in history. It's not the gash ripped in Sarah Ann Henley's life, not her jump, I want to understand but every other moment. To open up to all of these, maybe that's what haunts me? The gaps in people's stories get built into the historical narrative as holes we don't even miss in the retelling.

### A Photograph

In the sole image I find of her, she's dressed in black satin, a pin at her throat. Her long Modigliani face implores me; her brown eyes seem to beg a question. Her face is unlined. Any marks of age have been lost to the camera's blinding flash.

### "A Peculiar Story"<sup>27</sup>

The newspaper reports a letter was sent, and "when it reached the young woman on Thursday, its contents were of such a nature as to cause her to cry bitterly, and almost continuously, up to the hour she left home."

Imagine 24 hours of crying: the sore throat and dull exhaustion of sobbing, eyes dehydrated, because ironically tears have too much water and too little salt. They dry out the skin and eyes. Around them swollen rings like bruises appear. The rims become limned with red. She no longer looks 22. Crying has aged her: 42, 52... her life in that 24 hours passes before her eyes.

The paper calls the letter, "a remarkable epistle, and well put together for one in the position of the sweetheart, who, we believe, is a porter at the Joint Railway station." He writes, according to the *Bristol Times & Mirror*, "His faith in her had been shaken. He had heard that she had called him a rogue and a vagabond. She had told him frequently that she could get lots of husbands in a higher social class than he."

In the newsagent buying gum, I hear a lovers quarrel. A surly boy pushes a broom; a sullen girl drifts behind. She looks at me, looks down. "Sorry, lass," he says. "It's too late." Here's the porter's ghost.

He returns her photograph. "Her 'cadding' about him in the neighbourhood of her home seemed to have offended him, and especially at his being told that she had said he had never spent threepence upon her when he had been in her company." But, he writes, she need not return his gifts to her.

*Sorry lass, it's too late.*

In the photograph her brows are knit with worry. At least, that's what I see in her face. The paper hopes "her act of folly may be a lesson to her."

### Three Virgin Sisters

*Here rest in certain hopes of a glorious resurrection the bodies of Bridget, Mary and Sarah Lewis. Three virgin sisters, daughters of S William Lewis <sup>Knt</sup> late mayor and alderman of this city by Dame Bridget his wife. Bridget deceased the 28th day of Feb 1703 aged 18 years. Mary the 8th of September 1710 aged 21 years. Sarah the 10th of January 1710 aged 28 years. Also here interred in this vault John Davies, Gen. who died 31 Oct 1799. Aged 56 and Ann his wife who died 28 Sept 1799 aged 52.*

Nothing more is known of them other than their father was rich, wealthy enough that his unmarried daughters are buried together in the floor of St. Mary Redcliffe, a medieval parish church with gilt arches soaring overhead, paid for over the centuries by wealthy merchants and slave traders. The

<sup>24</sup> "Multi-Deck Garage," British Pathé, 1961 <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/multi-deck-garage/query/Rupert>

<sup>25</sup> A woman is said to have advised Brunel on the footings for the bridge. That woman is Sarah Guppy, the Jane Austen of engineering. Guppy got her first patent the year Austen anonymously penned her first novel. Guppy was rich; her son Thomas became Brunel's partner in the Great Western Railway, and her money came from slaves and sugar plantations.

<sup>26</sup> Jasper Copping, "Isambard Kingdom Brunel did not design Clifton Suspension Bridge, says historian," *The Telegraph*, 16 January 2011.

<sup>27</sup> This was part of the headline that ran in the *Bristol Times & Mirror* shortly after her jump.

<sup>28</sup> The former prison is not far from the gaping hole of the former Magistrates' Court, which will soon be student housing.

<sup>29</sup> Multiple versions of this story exist. In the first it's his dream, in others hers. She has it three times, dreaming of lead falling in perfect balls. Each time she wakes her husband telling him he must try this out. The first two times he rolls over, goes back to sleep and ignores her. The third time he finally agrees. He heats the lead; she climbs the stairs of their house and drops the molten metal (on his nose, apparently) thus developing patent shot. I like the version where he has the dream and she does the experimenting. Either way, she is key, she whose name is lost to me other than as Mrs Watts.

Whether either story is true, it's impossible to know. A version with her dream is first recorded in verse in *Dix's Local Legends and Rambling Rhymes*, where "Her husband followed, with a vague idea / Of a female plague, / And tried to laugh in vain." Pp. 8- 13 (1839). Other takes on the tale are told in *The Strand Magazine* in 1891. But William Watts was a plumber, and as a plumber would know something of how drops form and become spheres, also that water is needed to harden the lead at the end of the drop.

<sup>30</sup> *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, Saturday 2 December 1786.

<sup>31</sup> Notice placed in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* of Watts' bankruptcy, 1 March 1794.

<sup>32</sup> Lead shot and its poisoning easily move up the food chain. Shot that falls without hitting its target and hits the ground can easily be mistaken for seed, as birdshot is about the size of a seed. Meanwhile a bird who has ingested shot (or been shot through gunfire) can be eaten by something higher up the food chain, passing the lead up the chain as well. Tsolis Efstathios, "An Awkward Thing, Bristol's Lead Shot Tower" *University of Bristol paper*, 10 March 2007 p.16.

<sup>33</sup> "Up a Shot Tower," *The Strand*, A





girls share a grave with a woman, Ann and her husband, who must be in some way be related. Dying nearly a century apart though, they couldn't have known each other. To be buried with married strangers.... To be *Three virgin sisters*.... I want to lay my fingers in the grooves of the cool stone where their names are carved, as if that might tell me more about their lives.

### Three Virgin Sisters. Three Traffic Bollards.

Inexplicably the three girls get tied to three moulded concrete bollards nearby. I know the names of the former and nothing of the latter, which stand in a line not far from the girls' grave. Somehow in my mind they've become the representation of the other. I want the sisters to speak and to know who put in the bollards. The questions are urgent to me, one inseparable from the other, maybe because they're both stand-ins for all the unseen, unspoken and unknown in the city.

### The Ghosts Sway

Haunting is emotional one paranormal tells me. She's talking about experiencing the ghost of a prostitute in the Llandoger Trow, a ye-olde pub with timber frames, waddle and daub and enough stories to it that it pops up on "Haunted Bristol" lists, not to mention myths about Bluebeard. On the second floor is a bust of the pirate. Grasp it and you'll rock as if at sea, apparently.

The woman explains that she didn't see the prostitute but sensed her. Her voice is level, logical, not what I'd expect talking to a "paranormal expert". I thought she'd spin a scheme, describe the ghost and what it wore and the many things it told her. Instead she talks haltingly about the experience, searching for words. The sensation, she says finally, was like being drunk – tipsy and swaying. I like the idea that a haunting could be simply a strong emotion. Another paranormal later describes it as sixth sense and learning to trust it.

He talks of Bridewell Prison<sup>28</sup> and the spot in the basement where suddenly he needed to throttle someone. He was overcome with anger. He's not an angry man. He's kind, funny, serious. He grips and ungrrips his hands as he talks. His name is Barry. He's jack-rabbit long and animated and went to art college but didn't like being told how to create artistic expression. "It should", he says, "be free". He still draws, has five kids, talks of meditation and tells me for years he was "blocked like a brick wall". Now, at times, rarely, he can see ghosts, even the one who made him want to kill.

I've not seen a ghost. I believe they might exist but I'm not sure I *believe* in them. There are two sorts of believes here, one kind of credo, but I give credence to ghosts. I prefer mine to be more metaphorical, to haunt the city through the concrete poured over rivers, the holes cut in, cut out, bombed, poured and layered and built over and dug up again now. Still I slow as I pass the Llandoger Trow and think of the giddy prostitute.

### Sarah

If I could talk to a ghost, it would be Sarah Ann Henley's. If a ghost is experiencing an overwhelming emotion, I would want to feel hers.

### The Promise

I pass the three bollards again, take their pictures, again, and wonder about how to live in a city. Doesn't civic life require attunement, awareness? How do we see *and* tune out? How can we hold both in relationship with each other? This is why I love Brutalism. It tried. Do we still try? Or is all housing now student housing?

So, the ghosts sway and get giddy.

## Part III.

### Silver Rain

Look up in the sky, a woman falls; a drop of lead plummets into a perfect sphere. There's a ball, a fall, bombs and missing walkways – bridges to nowhere, dreams descending, stairways and paths fenced off. Construction walls paste over the absence, hoping we won't notice it. Have you noticed it?

There's a perilous drop and the possibility of four different ways to die.

### England's Dreaming

1782, a man named William Watts has a dream. Well, first he has some ale and sleeps it off in the churchyard of St. Mary Redcliffe. He lies in the damp grass, under the church's truncated spire. Here where the rich and glorious of the city, shippers and slavers, merchants and men of means, have worshipped for centuries, Watts has visions of his wife dropping molten lead on him. It's rain. He's a plumber. It's easy to imagine a plumber dreaming of water, the drops turned to lead. As they fall, they transform into perfect spheres.

He goes home, soaked and sober, and tells his wife. She, the story goes, being practical and intelligent (vs. the man, a drinker who later gets a "folly" named for him) climbs the church's spire. Destroyed by lightning in 1446, it's the mere stump of a tower. She carries molten lead up. How? Where is it heated? There are holes in the story and holes in her pot, a frying pan, the tale goes, rusted through.<sup>29</sup>

She pours the lead through them, and it lands in water as round balls. I like the tale. The vision comes to him, but she brings it to reality. She will make lead fall, will turn it into perfect globes; she invents lead shot – Patent Shot – for which her husband, William Watts, gets a patent.

It is for: "Small Shot Solid throughout, perfectly globular in form, and without Dimples, Scratches and Imperfections."

Soon Watts converts a house just over the road from the church St. Mary Redcliffe, where my three virgin sisters are entombed. He builds up a tower and down into the red sandstone below, so he can drop the lead into balls. In the paper he claims the tower "will remind spectators of the prospect of Westminster Abbey". Instead the neighbours complain of the smell, and he prints this notice in the paper:

William Watts presents his compliments to the GENTLEMEN who united for the purpose of taking *legal measures* to procure *the removal* of his SMELTING and SHOT-WORKS, and begs leave to ask them, whether it is not as unreasonable, to expect he should knock down his SHOT-WORKS, because *some people* are offended with the smell occasion'd by that particular process, which may be conducted (with very little additional expense) as well on the heights of Mendip, as on Redclift-Hill—as it would be to require *Mr. Crofs* to demolish his great DISTILLERY, merely because those nauseous PIG-STIES, offend the *delicate NOSES* of a *few Individuals*? However, to obviate every cause of complain, as well as to disappoint that malignity which would be gratified by involving him in an expensive suit, WILLIAM WATTS will as soon as possible cause that process to be discontinued at Redclift-Backs, which alone can furnish the least cause of complaint.<sup>30</sup>

### Jennifer Kabat

Jennifer Kabat is an essayist and writer. Recently she was awarded a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant in support of her criticism, and her work has appeared in the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, *Wired*, *New York magazine* and *Salon*. She writes frequently for *Frieze* and *Metropolis*, where she's a contributing editor. Her essays and short fiction have been anthologised, included most recently in Kate Newby: *Let the Other Thing* (Sternberg Press), *The Record, Contemporary Art and Vinyl* (Duke University Press), and is in conversation with artist Rochelle Feinstein in the 2014 Whitney Biennial catalogue.

A co-founder of The Weeklings, dedicated to an essay a day, every day, her work often probes the formal possibilities of the essay, including hybrid non-fiction. She's currently working on a series of writing on cities and ghosts, from Bristol to Brixton and New York City's Lower East Side.

### Author's Note: Kate Newby

Throughout my essay are images of Kate Newby's work. Her interventions can look radically slight; they're pieces that appear and disappear, asking you to reconsider the space around you. Over the past year I've written much about her, and her work has shaped how I think about cities and ghosts, particularly things like cracks in pavements and carrier bags flapping in trees, (something she's noticed and photographed and described. One bag was, as she put it, "having the time of its life," a phrase that never fails to lift my heart).

I'm grateful to her calling attention to these things that are mostly ignored or walked past, and if noted at all seen as absences. They aren't. They're markers of presence and time and people. Included here is a series of her photographs, capturing ephemeral actions and moments in Bristol this summer. Hopefully they'll also draw you to those elements that are so easy to ignore. Open up to them, though, and there is the possibility of urban transcendence. Through walking city streets and noticing these things, I also think of Walt Whitman's line in *Song of Myself*, as he invites someone up from a doorstep to walk with him through the city at the end of the day: "I am large. I contain multitudes".

### Acknowledgements

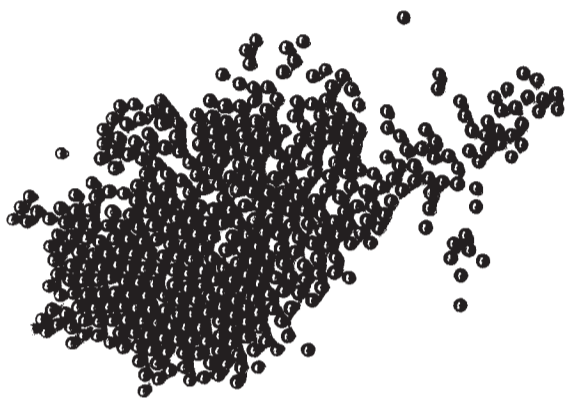
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## Brutal

The tower doesn't move – not until 1968, when it is lost to a road-widening scheme, when the planners are giving over the city to cars and the sky to pedestrians. But, shot is still made in the same way to this day. He does, however, leave Redcliffe for Clifton, where Bristol's wealthy are now settling, while his own Westminster Abbey is eventually replaced by Brutalist concrete.

## Monk Killer

The balls he drops from the sky give you four ways to die, the lead, the drop, the shot, and poison too. Arsenic and antimony are needed as alloys so the lead will form a ball. It's mere luck that Watts experimented with metal from the Mendip Hills, where just enough arsenic occurs naturally in the lead. After that supply is exhausted, workers add in arsenic, what the French call the *poudre de succession* – inheritance powder, and antimony, whose name comes from “monk killer”.



## Against Aloneness

Antimony also means “against aloneness” because it's never found unalloyed. The phrase seems apt for William Watts, alone as he fights his neighbours in Redcliffe and rails against his detractors in the paper. Instead of discontinuing the works, he abandons the pig sties and Mr. Crofs' distillery for the cliffs of Clifton and the Avon Gorge's fresh air. In the rock face he'll cleave another wall, another drop. He invests in real estate, but first must build a retaining wall in the cliff, only the process turns out to be more expensive than he'd reckoned.

Work stalls. Notices are published in the paper, trying to sell the half-finished project. A boom in real estate has turned to a bust, and two years later, another notice appears. He's bankrupt. His debtors are summoned to the Bush Tavern in Corn Street to divvy up his holdings.<sup>31</sup> Still this doesn't stop molten metal from dropping into spheres. The business carries on with different owners, and production continues until 1990. By then with lead, well, you can guess what happens. Lead shot is used in hunting, and come the 1980s people start to worry not necessarily for the workers in the tower but for the birds being stuffed full of lead shot. The fear isn't that they will die but rather live on, poisoned and poisoning.<sup>32</sup>

## The Promise

Now nearly a mile away from his original premises, I visit the Brutalist tower. I'm here for the dream of a drop of lead like a bead of water, like a leak from a pipe, like the silver sound of metal. “Silvery rain”, it's called in the 1890s, “falling into a tub of water.”<sup>33</sup> At the top 44 meters in the sky, not even as high as Sarah Henley's fall, the views are amazing of the hills surrounding Bristol. I listen for the silvery rain and maybe hear traffic. I think of King George III saying to William Watts: “I wish all the men in my army were so regular like

this shot.”

Perfectly round, true shot has no imperfections, no bumps or divots or ridges to slow it down. It needs the speed to kill. Fired from a rifle, the balls essentially fall, if not from on high then across a distance. Eventually the trajectory is the ground. But perfect shot has little drag to slow it or steer it off course, and with a perfect sphere, your aim can be true. Death can be fast and final.

## The Place of the Bridge

At the top of the tower clouds scudder in the wind. The sky is blue with ache, and it's nearly 129 years to the day since Sarah's fall. My heart rises as Bristol spreads out before me. I think of her last day, which became her first day, and I picture her skirts and laced boots, tight and pinched, worn in the soles. She leaves home early, promising her father she's off to work at the pub, off to the Rising Sun. Somehow she ends up in Clifton instead.

She walks the streets like a sylph. No one notices her, or if they do, not enough to think of her later. She crosses the city, the drawbridge over the Frome to College Green and up Brandon Hill. Her feet are sore, and her sadness has its own gravity, as if she no longer has a choice, as if her sadness has claimed its own decisions, as if decisions can still be made. The breeze is brisk on the park's slopes. Her skirts whip against her legs. In her pocket, she fingers the leaves of her fiancé's letter.

She doesn't have a plan, not as such, but knows there is no future for her, not in her father's home, not in her life, not without marrying. It's nearly impossible today to imagine the tragedy of being a woman with so few options. She trudges on, an inevitability in her step. To jump is to lose that weight, to float free, to drop, to have her own gravity and break through the sphere, the film between her and the world's order. To leap is to say I do not need these rules. This is the woman I see, the one I want her to become, free, self possessed – independent. I want her fall to give her that, but that is also a myth.

Higher and higher she goes, to the bridge soaring over the river. On the banks below the trees are in leaf, the green bold against the cerulean sky, and the river has shrunk to a narrow rivulet in the mud. It's a Friday just gone noon. Light glistens off the surface winking at her. Drops are seductive, that fall from on high to pull you in. Everything descends inevitably. Time, history, longing....

To walk the city streets is to open up to the stories, to fall into their weight and pry open the holes and risk drowning in them. As concrete covers the gaps, those holes and collective memory disappear. To write about a city is to recross those streets and imagine its pasts, to let them all live at once – the voices, the people, the stories, the ghosts.... It's to walk with Sarah Henley to the bridge.

Can you pass those buildings as they disappear and see the dream that they were? Can you let them fall into you, and feel haunted by the city's fallen? Can you witness a dream of a future and risk seeing those dreams fail – or even be fulfilled? Can you see a city change as Sarah did, a city once named The Place of the Bridge.

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